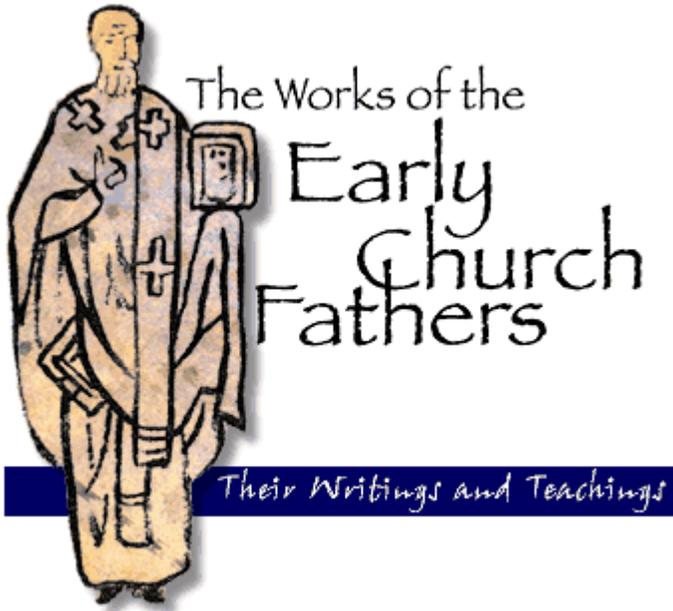


# Infant Baptism: The Testimony of the Early Church



Infant baptism was the virtually unanimous practice of the early Christian Church. The early Christians believed not only that infants should be baptized, but also that baptism worked regeneration (rebirth). Many people who oppose the baptism of infants do not realize that it has been the practice of the Church from early on. From the very first century of the New Testament Church, while the apostles were still alive, infants were being baptized. This is not surprising since Christianity grew out of Judaism. And the Jews circumcised on the eighth day. Moreover, the Jews baptized the whole household of proselytes.

## Justin Martyr (A.D. 100?-165?)

Justin Martyr was a philosopher, theologian, and one of the earliest apologists of the Christian church. He sought to reconcile Christian doctrine and pagan culture. He was born in Flavia Neapolis (now Nablus, West Bank), a Roman city built on the site of the ancient biblical Shechem. His parents were pagans. As a young man, Justin devoted himself to the study of Greek philosophy, notably the writings of Plato and the Stoic philosophers. He first encountered Christianity in Ephesus. After his conversion to the faith, he went to Rome, where he established a school. He died in Rome as a martyr during the reign of Emperor Marcus Aurelius.



### **Equates Baptism to Spiritual Circumcision.**

Considering that Jewish male infants were circumcised on the eighth day after birth, Justin strongly implies that baptism is also intended for infants. He writes:

And we, who have approached God through Him [Christ], have received not carnal, but spiritual circumcision, which Enoch and those like him observed. And we have received it through baptism, since we were sinners, by God's mercy; and all men may equally obtain it.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>*Dialogue of Justin, Philosopher and Martyr, with Trypho, a Jew*, 43:1. The larger context in which the passage quoted appears, reads:

As, then, circumcision began with Abraham, and the Sabbath and sacrifices and offerings and feasts with Moses, and it has been proved they were enjoined on account of the hardness of your people's heart, so it was necessary, in accordance with the Father's will, that they should have an end in Him who was born of a virgin, of the family of Abraham and tribe of Judah, and

## Disciples from Childhood

In his First Apology, addressed to the Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius, Justin mentions that many Christians have been so since their earliest years. They could have become so only by baptism at an early age. He says:

And many, both men and women, who have been Christ's disciples *from childhood* [*ek paidon*], remain pure at the age of sixty or seventy years.<sup>2</sup>

This means that infant baptism was practiced during Justin's lifetime and, surely, before. This puts us back to the time when the apostle John was still living.

## Irenaeus of Lyons (A.D. 120-202)

Born in the Roman province of Asia, he was instructed in the faith by Polycarp (bishop of Smyrna), who was himself a disciple of the apostle John. As a priest, Irenaeus was sent to Rome (177 AD) and eventually was made Bishop of Lyons. His works include: *Against Heresies* (written against gnostic teachings), *Proofs of Apostolic Preaching*, and *Fragments*. He was martyred in Lyons.



Irenaeus of Lyons

Irenaeus, showing that salvation is for infants and elderly alike, wrote:

. . . not despising or evading any condition of humanity . . . but sanctifying every age. . . He [Christ] came to save all through means of Himself--all, I say, who through Him are born again to God--infants, and children, and boys, and youths, and old men. He therefore passed through every age, becoming an infant for infants, thus sanctifying infants; a child for children. Thus sanctifying those who are of this age, being at the same time made to them an example of piety, righteousness, and submission; a youth for youths, becoming an example to youths, and thus sanctifying them for the Lord.<sup>3</sup>

In a similar manner he wrote of baptismal regeneration, saying:

As we are lepers in sin, we are made clean from our old transgressions by means of the sacred water and the invocation of the Lord. We are thus spiritually regenerated as newborn infants, even as the Lord has declared: "Except a man be born again through water and the Spirit, he shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven."<sup>4</sup>

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of David; in Christ the Son of God, who was proclaimed as about to come to all the world, to be the everlasting law and the everlasting covenant, even as the forementioned prophecies show. And we, who have approached God through Him, have received not carnal, but spiritual circumcision, which Enoch and those like him observed. And we have received it through baptism, since we were sinners, by God's mercy; and all men may equally obtain it.

<sup>2</sup>Apology I, Chapter 15 in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. I, ed. By Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., n.d.) p.167

<sup>3</sup>*Against Heresies*, Book II, 22:4, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. I, p. 391. Estimated date of writing, A.D. 189. Emphasis mine.

<sup>4</sup>Irenaeus, "Fragments From Lost Writings", no. 34, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, pg. 574).

## Hippolytus (A.D. 186-236)

Not much is known about his early life. After the death of Pope Zephyrinus, he secured “election” as Pope in opposition to Callistus I, with whom he had a dispute. He was, in fact, an “anti-pope” (one not regarded as the rightful pope) and banished to Sardinia, where he reconciled with the Church. In spite of this odd situation, he was a prolific writer and an orthodox theologian. His works include: *The Refutation of All Heresies*, *Apostolic Tradition*, and *On the Anti-Christ*. He was martyred for his faith. Regarding baptism, he writes:

At cockcrow prayer shall be made over the water. The stream shall flow through the baptismal tank or pour into it from above when there is no scarcity of water; but if there is a scarcity, whether constant or sudden, then use whatever water you can find.

They shall remove their clothing. And first baptize the little ones; if they can speak for themselves, they shall do so; if not, their parents or other relatives shall speak for them. Then baptize the men, and last of the women.<sup>5</sup>

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**Baptize first the children, and if they can speak for themselves let them do so. Otherwise let their parents or other relatives speak for them.**

Hippolytus (circa 215)

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## Origen (A.D. 185-254)

Biblical Scholar and Christian Philosopher



**Origen of  
Alexandria**

Origen taught in Alexandria for 28 years. The most influential theologian of the early church, he wrote prolifically and was possibly the most accomplished scriptural scholar of his day. He produced his *Hexapla*, a massive work of Old Testament textual analysis. It was a parallel edition of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament with a transliteration and four different translations into Greek. At times his theology tended to be too speculative. This does not detract, however, from his stature as a towering intellect and first-degree scholar who very ably defended the faith against false charges by pagan writers (i.e. Celsus). His works include: *Contra Celsus*, and *De Principiis* as well as more than 100 of his discourses preserved by his students. Though he made some errors, his contribution was inestimable. The great church father Gregory of Nazianzus, aptly summed him up as “the stone that sharpens us all.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>*The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus* 21:1-5, trans. Burton Scott Easton (London: The Cambridge University Press, 1934) p. 45. Note also the lack of the necessity for baptism by immersion.

<sup>6</sup>The quotation of Nazianzus is cited in “Origen: Gifted, Devout, Condemned: The Stone That Sharpens Us All,” *Glimpses*, Issue No. 54, Published by Christian History Institute, 1993.

### **Affirms Original Sin and Infant Baptism as its Remedy**

Origen clearly taught the doctrine of hereditary depravity. He holds to baptismal regeneration and teaches that infant baptism is for the remission of sins.

Every soul that is born into flesh is soiled by the filth of wickedness and sin . . . In the Church baptism is given for the remission of sins, and, according to the usage of the Church, baptism is given even to infants. If there were nothing in infants which required the remission of sins and nothing in them pertinent to forgiveness, the grace of baptism would seem superfluous.<sup>7</sup> (A.D. 248)

### **Infant Baptism Was Received from the Apostles**

Origen is very explicit in affirming that baptism of infants was the teaching of Christ's own apostles. This being the case, it means that infant baptism was practiced from the earliest beginnings of the New Testament Church. Opponents of infant baptism are often taught (and falsely so) that the baptism of infants didn't come about until the fourth century. But Origen notes:

The Church received from the apostles the tradition of giving baptism even to infants. The apostles, to whom were committed the secrets of divine sacraments, knew there is in everyone innate strains of [original] sin, which must be washed away through water and the Spirit.<sup>8</sup> (A.D. 248)

## **Cyprian of Carthage (A.D. 200-258)**

Bishop and Theologian

Cyprian converted to Christianity late in life. He became Bishop of Carthage during the persecution by the Roman Emperor Decius (reigned from A.D. 249-251). He became entangled in the dispute over readmitting to the Church those who had renounced the faith during the persecution. At first opposing this, he later

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. . . no one ought to be hindered from baptism and from the grace of God . . . we think [it] is to be even more observed in respect of infants and newly-born persons, who on this very account deserve more from our help and from the divine mercy, . .

**Cyprian (A. D. 253)**

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upheld their readmission. During a new wave of persecution, conducted under the Roman emperor Valerian, Cyprian was tried and martyred by beheading. He is regarded as one of the most authoritative of church fathers, especially because of the doctrine in his *De Catholicae Ecclesiae Unitate* [*On the Unity of the Catholic Church*], an exposition of the hierarchical organization of the church. Several of his other works and about 65 of his letters remain.

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<sup>7</sup>*Homilies on Leviticus 8:3* (A.D. 248).

<sup>8</sup>*Commentaries on Romans 5:9* (A.D. 248).

Cyprian rebuked a presbyter in Numidia, Fidus by name, who taught that children should not be baptized until after their eighth day--in keeping with the Jewish practice of circumcision. Cyprian's remarks to Fidus show that infant baptism was the common practice of the third century Church--and, by inference, of the Church since the earliest of times. Infants are especially to be baptized, says Cyprian:

But in respect of the case of the infants, which you [Fidus] say ought not to be baptized within the second or third day after their birth, and that the law of ancient circumcision should be regarded, so that you think that one who is just born should not be baptized and sanctified within the eighth day, we all [the 66 presbyters assembled to consider this matter] thought very differently [from you] in our council. For in this course which you thought was to be taken, no one agreed [with you, Fidus]; but we all rather judge that the mercy and grace of God is not to be refused to any one born of man. . . .

For which reason we think that no one is to be hindered from obtaining grace by that law which was already ordained, and that spiritual circumcision ought not to be hindered by carnal circumcision, but that absolutely every man is to be admitted to the grace of Christ, . . . But again, if even to the greatest sinners, and to those who had sinned much against God, when they subsequently believed, remission of sins is granted--and nobody is hindered from baptism and from grace--how much rather ought we to shrink from hindering an infant, who, being lately born, has not sinned, except in that, being born after the flesh according to Adam, he has contracted the contagion of the ancient death [i.e., original sin] at its earliest birth, who approaches the more easily on this very account to the reception of the forgiveness of sins--that to him are remitted, not his own sins, but the sins of another [i.e., the sins of Adam].

And therefore, dearest brother, this was our opinion in council, that by us no one ought to be hindered from baptism and from the grace of God, who is merciful and kind and loving to all. Which, since it is to be observed and maintained in respect of all, we think is to be even more observed in respect of infants and newly-born persons, who on this very account deserve more from our help and from the divine mercy, . . .<sup>9</sup>

Clearly, Cyprian gives one of the most direct testimonies concerning the all-pervasive practice of infant baptism. Christian baptism should not even be delayed to the eighth day. The sooner, the better!

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## Tertullian (A.D. 150-229)

Often Cited as an Opponent of Infant Baptism



Tertullian was born in Carthage. He lived in Rome where he practiced law until his conversion. He returned to North Africa and applied himself vigorously to defending the faith against false charges by the pagans and false understanding by heretics. He was the pacesetter as the church expanded its teaching and influence into the Latin speaking world, breaking new and fertile ground in theological understanding. Towards the end of his life he embraced Montanism, a sect later declared heretical. He wrote profusely. Among his works are: *Apologeticus*, *On the Claims of Heretics*, and *On Baptism*.

Tertullian does, indeed, prefer to have children delay baptism. The reason, however, is not that infant baptism wasn't being practiced. It was. His reason for delaying was due to his belief that

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<sup>9</sup>Epistle LVIII: 2, 5, 6 "To Fidus, On The Baptism of Infants," *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. V, p. 354 (at the Third Council of Carthage under Cyprian, A.D. 253.

post-baptismal sins were far more blameworthy than pre-baptismal sins. He believes in baptismal regeneration, for he says, “Why does the innocent period of life hasten to the ‘remission of sins’” (see quotation below). He also denies that babies inherit the sin of Adam, that is, he denies original sin. Regarding baptism, he writes:

... And so, according to the circumstances and disposition, and even age, of each individual, the delay of baptism is preferable; principally, however, in the case of little children. For why is it necessary--if (baptism itself) is not so necessary--that the sponsors likewise should be thrust into danger? Who both themselves, by reason of mortality, may fail to fulfil their promises, and may be disappointed by the development of an evil disposition, in those for whom they stood? The Lord does indeed say, “Forbid them not to come unto me.” Let them “come,” then, while they are growing up; let them “come” while they are learning, while they are learning whither to come; let them become Christians when they have become able to know Christ. Why does the innocent period of life hasten to the “remission of sins?” More caution will be exercised in worldly matters: so that one who is not trusted with earthly substance is trusted with divine! Let them know how to “ask” for salvation, that you may seem (at least) to have given “to him that asketh.” For no less cause must the unwedded also be deferred--in whom the ground of temptation is prepared, alike in such as never were wedded by means of their maturity, and in the widowed by means of their freedom--until they either marry, or else be more fully strengthened for continence. If any understand the weighty import of baptism, they will fear its reception more than its delay . . .<sup>10</sup>

A. Andrew Das further explains Tertullian’s position.

... He opposes the baptism of the infants of new converts. Tertullian affirms Matthew 19:14 (‘Forbid them not to come to me’) as the basis for infant baptism. Except when in an emergency, infant baptism placed too much of a burden on the godparents. They might die or have bad tendencies. Tertullian did not believe in original sin. So he had no objection if in these cases the infant baptisms were delayed. He just wondered how wise it is to baptize the children of pagans joining the church. But in the case of the children of Christians, Tertullian argues *for* infant baptism. He writes in regard to 1 Corinthians 7:14 that these children are “holy.” And one cannot be holy, for Tertullian, unless born of water and the spirit. Baptism cleanses the infant’s soul. Here Tertullian affirms infant baptism. And he attested that the baptism of babies was the standard practice at that time and *not* an innovation.

**Tertullian never once argued against infant baptism in favor of a believer’s baptism. For him, Baptized infants were regenerated, i.e., they became believers by baptism.**

What makes Tertullian so critical is that those who oppose infant baptism place a high value on his testimony. Tertullian is the only one in the first three centuries of the church who expressed any problems with infant baptism (though only in certain cases). . . .

While Tertullian opposed it [infant baptism] in certain cases, he never even hinted at the possibility of infant baptism being of later origin. This clearly shows that infant baptism was the historic practice of the Christian church from the apostolic age..<sup>11</sup>

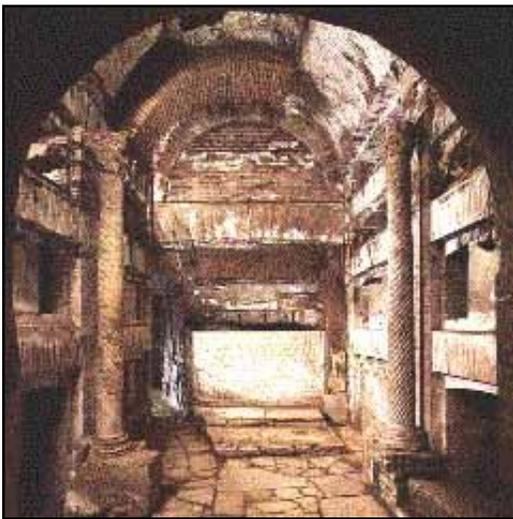
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<sup>10</sup>*On Baptism*, Chapter XVIII

<sup>11</sup>A. Andrew Das, *Baptized Into God’s Family: The Doctrine of Infant Baptism for Today* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1991), pp. 101-102.

When all is said and done, Tertullian did not oppose baptism of infants per se. He simply opposed the baptizing of infants of recently converted pagans. To do so, he felt, would put an undue strain on the godparents if the parents fell from the faith or did not take their responsibilities seriously. He had no problem with committed Christian parents baptizing their children. What needs to be emphasized is that Tertullian had a high view of Christian baptism no matter what the age. Baptism was *not* a symbolic rite. It actually worked regeneration! He would not, in all probability, be a friend of those who advocate a so-called “believer’s baptism” in our day.

Tertullian also believed that the baptism of unmarried persons should be delayed (because of the temptations to sinful lust). So he not only questioned infant baptism, but also the baptism of certain believing adults.

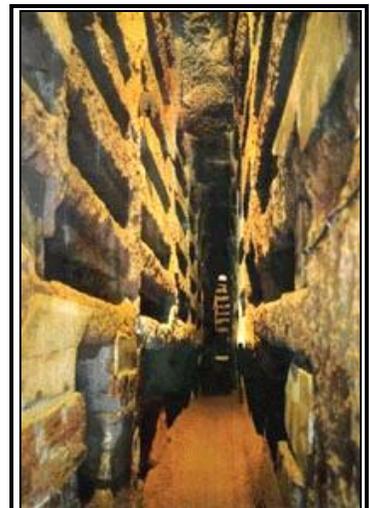


## The Witness of the Catacombs

The testimony of the writings of the early church fathers for the practice of infant baptism is irrefutable. There is, however, more evidence of a different kind. In the catacombs and cemeteries of the early Christians are many epitaphs. Some of the epitaphs reveal additional evidence for the early practice of infant baptism.

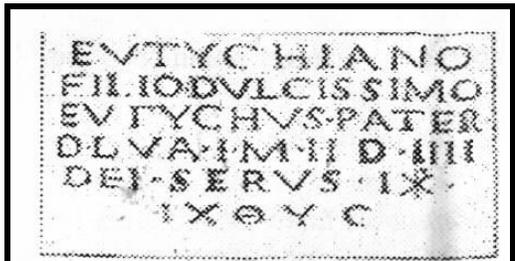
In the first century Rome's Christians did not have their own cemeteries. If they owned land, they buried their relatives there, otherwise they resorted to common cemeteries, where pagans too were buried. That is how Saint Peter came to be buried in the great public “necropolis” (“city of the dead”) on Vatican Hill, available to everybody. Likewise Saint Paul was buried in a necropolis along the Via Ostiense.

In the first half of the second century, as a result of various grants and donations, the Christians started burying their dead underground. That is how the catacombs were founded. Many of them began and developed around family tombs, whose owners, newly converted Christians, did not reserve them to the members of the family, but opened them to their brethren in the faith.



**View of a Roman  
Catacomb**

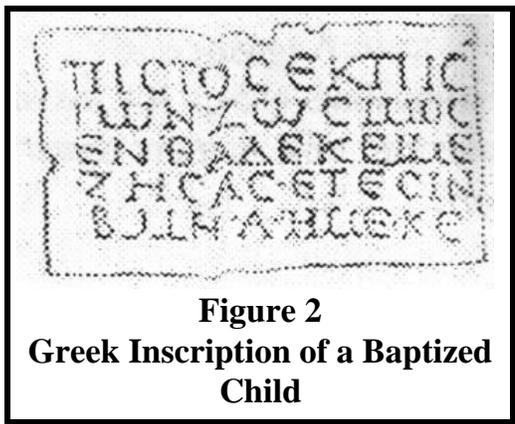
The inscription at the left (Figure 1) is as early as 200 A.D. or shortly thereafter. The words and symbols mark the deceased child as a one-year, two-month, and four-day old baptized Christian. In the second-last line is the phrase *Dei Serus* which means slave of God. It is followed by the familiar Chi Rho, a symbol for Christ.



**Figure 1**  
**Latin Catacomb Inscription of an Infant**

The bottom line is the Greek word IXΘΥΣ which spells fish. It is an anagram meaning “Jesus Christ God’s Son Savior.

The inscription in Figure 2 also comes from the 200s. Located today in Rome’s Lateran Museum, this Greek epitaph gives information about the religious practices and theological understandings of the time.



**Figure 2**  
**Greek Inscription of a Baptized Child**

The inscription reads: “I Zosimus, a believer from believers, lie here having lived 2 years, 1 month, and 25 days.”<sup>12</sup>

Opponents of infant baptism often assert that infant baptism was not practiced in the primitive Church. Jesus once said that “the stones will cry out” (Luke 19:40), and the very stones of the Catacombs do indeed cry out in testimony to

infant baptism in the primitive Church. In addition to the examples above, there are many others. W. H. Withrow writes:

There are numerous epitaphs of neophytes--a term applied only to newly baptized persons--which indicate that this Christian rite was administered at all ages from tender infancy to adult years . . . One of many examples is: “CANDIDIS NEOF Q.VXT. M.XXI--'Candidis, a neophyte, who lived twenty-one months”<sup>13</sup>

There is also much other archaeological evidence which overwhelmingly testifies to the practice of infant baptism in the early Church. For example, there is a fragment of a tombstone for a child who died very young, likely less than a month old, which describes the child as “*dulcissime nate*,” literally, “The Most Blessedly Bathed.”<sup>14</sup>

Another example is from about 260 A.D. in a North African tombstone inscription from Hadrumetum. It reads:

<sup>12</sup>Both of the inscriptions are taken from *Issues, Etc. Journal* vol. 2, Spring 1997, p. 16.

<sup>13</sup>W. H. Withrow, *The Catacombs of Rome and Their Testimony Relative to Primitive Christianity*, 6th ed. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1895), pp. 532-533.

<sup>14</sup>*Inscriptiones Latinae Christianae Veteres*, I:1520

Arisus in pace  
natus ora sexta  
bixit supra scriptas VIII

This Latin inscription indicates that this infant child, who died nine hours after birth, had been baptized.<sup>15</sup> Such was the practice of baptism within the first few days of life. In cases where death was imminent, the sick infant was baptized on the day of birth. This practice continues to be the regular convention for Roman Catholics, the Eastern Orthodox, Lutherans, and many others to this day.

## Conclusion

Infant Baptism was clearly the practice of early Christians. If the practice had not come directly from the apostles, we would be left to explain how it came into being. If the apostles taught and practiced a “believers’ baptism,” we must explain how and why the shift to infant baptism took place--and took place without objection--in so short a period of time. The testimony of the early Church is that infants were baptized because:

1. Infants were born with the contagion of original sin. They were, therefore, in need of Divine forgiveness from birth.
2. Baptism was held to be a “washing of regeneration” in which saving faith was engendered and forgiveness bestowed.



**Soli Deo Gloria!**

David A. Grassley  
©1997  
Pentecost

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<sup>15</sup>*Inscriptiones Latinae Christianae Veteres*, II:4429-A.

# Miscellanea



Roman soldiers seize the leader of a Christian service in the catacombs. The use of these subterranean burial chambers for secret Christian gatherings probably has been over magnified. However, Roman law regarded cemeteries as sacrosanct, so in times of persecution Christians did worship in them. Under Emperor Valerian, however, believers were forbidden even to use their cemeteries. Thus, in 258, Pope Sixtus II was apprehended while leading a service in the Catacomb of Praetetestatus. He and all seven of his deacons were killed.



The great church Father, Gregory of Nazianzus (330-390) was active in the Arian controversy which culminated in the adoption of the Nicene Creed. Regarding infant baptism, he said:

Do you have an infant child? Allow sin no opportunity; rather, let the infant be sanctified from childhood. From his most tender age let him be consecrated by the Spirit. Do you fear the seal [of baptism] because of the weakness of nature? Oh, what a pusillanimous mother and of how little faith!<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>*Oration on Holy Baptism* 40:7, A.D. 388.