

Babies, Baptism, and Original Sin:

Augustine's Understanding of the Theological Implications of Infant Baptism

By
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The rite of infant baptism as practiced in the church before Augustine has been appropriately called “a practice in search of a theology.”¹ Although solid evidence exists for the practice of paedobaptism from the time of Tertullian, and the preponderance of evidence suggests that it was the custom from Apostolic times,² nevertheless, to say that there was no consensus of opinion concerning the theological rationale for the sacramental rite would be an understatement. *That* the ritual of paedobaptism was practiced universally from about 200 A.D. till the time of Augustine is almost certain; *what* theological significance it had, and *why* it was administered to babies remained open to theological development. In response to errant Pelagian theology, Augustine developed a catholic theology of infant baptism from the meaning and implications of the rite itself in conjunction with his understanding of the

¹David F. Wright, “How Controversial Was the Development of Infant Baptism in the Early Church,” *Church, Word, and Spirit: Historical and Theological Essays in Honor of Geoffrey W. Bromiley*, eds. James E Bradley and Richard A. Muller (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987) 50, 51.

²Tertullian’s polemic against infant and young child baptism does not necessarily imply the novelty of the practice (as Pelikan asserts, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*, vol. 1 of *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971], 290); rather, Tertullian’s opposition is best understood as directed against an existing custom. See Joachim Jeremias, *The Origins of Infant Baptism* (London: SCM Press, 1963) 64ff. About the same time as Tertullian, Origen in the East firmly argues that infant baptism was a “tradition of the church from the apostles” (*Commentary on Romans* 5.9). Although it has been fashionable since Karl Barth’s repudiation of infant baptism to question the antiquity of the practice, the preponderance of evidence favors the Apostolic origin of paedobaptism. Joachim Jeremias marshals the evidence in *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*, trans. David Cairns (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962) and *The Origins of Infant Baptism*, trans. Dorothy M. Barton (London: SCM Press, 1963).

scriptural data bearing upon original sin. When Augustine linked baptism with transmitted original sin, he was able to put theological flesh and bones on the what and why of the rite of paedobaptism. Because infants contract the contagion of Adam's guilt and pollution from their parents, they need the laver of regeneration in order to inherit eternal life. By means of the sacrament of Holy Baptism, infants receive the remission of the guilt of original sin and are thereby saved from the eternal condemnation they justly deserved in view of their share in the guilt of Adam's sin. In this essay we will explore both the development of Augustine's theology of infant baptism as well as its more mature statement in his anti-Pelagian writings.

Even though all the elements of Augustine's theology of infant baptism are present in his first polemic against the Pelagians (*De peccatorum meritis et remissione*, A.D. 411-412), he steadily clarified his own views throughout the controversy, and transmitted to future generations of Christians a carefully nuanced theological rationale for the baptism of infants. Throughout his defense of grace against the Pelagians, the subject of infant baptism comes up over and over again. Even in the later 420's he is still expounding its soteriological significance in *De correptione et gratia* (427), *De praedestinatione sanctorum* (428-429), *De dono perseverantiae* (428-429), and in his unfinished writings against Julian. Clearly, then, for Augustine, the question of infant baptism had tremendous implications for the theology of salvation; he ascribed fundamental soteriological significance to paedobaptism. He never wearied of unpacking its theological significance. I think we can safely say that in Augustine's mind the rite of infant baptism, more than adult/believer baptism, better pictured the nature of salvation as a work of God's unconditional, electing grace which operates on an essentially helpless, sinful creature.

The Theology of Infant Baptism Before Augustine

Prior to Augustine the theology of *infant* baptism can only be described as inchoate. Like so many aspects of Patristic theology, the positive development of the theology of

paedobaptism awaited a suitable controversy. With the exception of Tertullian's brief comments (*De Baptismo*, c. 200) and Cyprian's controversy with Fidus (*Epistle 64*, c. A.D. 253), infant baptism was simply not a *theological* issue in the pre-Augustine tradition. We find abundant evidence from the time of Tertullian for the *practice* of infant baptism, but a consistent theological *rationale* does not appear to emerge until the later fourth century.³ Here and there, we do find a speculation or two on the meaning of infant baptism. David Wright has argued for the strong possibility that infants in the pre-Augustine church were baptized as believers,⁴ and Everett Ferguson suggests that baptism viewed as "spiritual circumcision" (as in Col. 2:11) served as a theological rationale for baptizing infants.⁵ Nevertheless, no universal consensus emerged in the pre-Augustine church. The universally confessed creedal affirmation that Holy Baptism was administered "for the remission of sins" awaited theological unpacking. The question is: do we find evidence in the pre-Augustinian church that the theological rationale for the rite of infant baptism was the doctrine of original sin? Augustine is convinced that the bulk of ecclesiastical antiquity is on his side. In *Contra Julian* much of the book one is given over to citing catholic witnesses (1.6-36); but he sometimes appears to be milking the evidence for more than it's worth.⁶

³Jeremias provides a helpful list of pre-430 A.D. texts which expressly mention infant baptism in his *Infant Baptism*, 11-18. He also provides a brief exposition of the theology of infant baptism in the pre-Augustine church in *The Origins of Infant Baptism*, 76-85, which is a response to Kurt Aland, *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants*, trans. G.R. Beasley-Murray (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963).

⁴David F. Wright, "The Origins of Infant Baptism—Child Believers' Baptism?" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 40 (1985): 1-23. Augustine himself seems to have adhered to a similar view. Wright attempts to follow through on the implications for "believer's infant baptism" in his "Recovering Baptism for a New Age of Mission," in *Doing Theology for the People of God: Studies in Honor of J. I. Packer*, Donald Lewis & Alister McGrath, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), pp. 51-66.

⁵Everett Ferguson, "Spiritual Circumcision in Early Christianity," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 41 (1986): 485-497. See also his "Inscriptions and the Origin of Infant Baptism," *Journal of Theological Studies* 30.1 (1979): 37-46.

⁶In his *Homily to Neophytes* Chrysostom states explicitly that little children (τά παιδιά) are baptized "although they have not sin." Augustine reasons that Chrysostom cannot possibly

Origen, who believed the practice of infant baptism to be of Apostolic origin, struggled with the meaning of the rite for children: “Infants are baptized ‘for the remission of sins.’ Of which sins? Or at what time have they sinned? Or how can there exist in infants that reason for washing, unless in accordance with the idea that one is clean of filth, not even if his life on earth has only been for one day? And because the filth of birth is removed by the sacrament of Holy Baptism, for that reason, too, infants are baptized; for ‘unless one is born again of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.’” (*Homilies on the Gospel of Luke*, 14.5)⁷ Removing the “filth of birth” may refer to the guilt of original sin contracted at birth, but, then again, it may not.

That Holy Baptism confers the forgiveness of sins goes back to the Apostolic Scriptures (Mark 1:4; Acts 16:22; 1 Pet. 3:21; 2 Pet. 2:9); so it shouldn’t surprise us to see the two connected in the theology of the Fathers of the second and third century. Tertullian discusses the four gifts of Holy Baptism as the remission of sins, deliverance from death, new life, and presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit (*Against Marcion* 1.28.2; see also *On Baptism*, 10.5-6). Irenaeus theologizes that we are cleansed from the leprosy of our sin at the laver of rebirth (*Fragments*, 33). According to Clement of Alexandria, “This work [of Holy Baptism] is variously called grace, and illumination, and perfection, and washing: washing by which we cleanse our sins; grace by which the penalties accruing to transgressions are remitted. . .”(The

have meant something that was at odds with “so many statements of his colleagues” among the Eastern theologians. What Chrysostom intended was that infants have no sin of their own, so that they are innocent because of they have not the capacity to commit willful sins (*C. Jul. Pel.* 1.6.21-22). This may be a possible explanation of this particular text in Chrysostom, but Augustine cannot find unambiguous evidence of original sin as the theological rationale for paedobaptism in Chrysostom. It’s not entirely beside the point that the Pelagian Annianus of Celeda translates the sermons of John Chrysostom.

⁷Cited by Pelikan, *The Emergence*, 291. Laporte notes that Origen did not understand man’s inherited sinful condition in the same way as Augustine (Jean Laporte, “Models from Philo in Origen’s Teaching on Original Sin,” in *Living Water, Sealing Spirit: Readings on Christian Initiation*, Maxwell E. Johnson, ed. [Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995], pp. 101-117).

Instructor 1.6). Hippolytus speaks of the filth of sins being removed and the reception of the Holy Spirit at baptism (*Exposition on Daniel* 4.59.4). Cyprian says that the nations who are baptized by the church, following the command of Christ, have their past sins cleansed (*Ep.* 27.3). Even if, however, the pre-Augustinian church recognized this clear connection between forgiveness and Holy Baptism, it nevertheless did not draw out its implications for infants.

No doubt a major contributing factor to this underdeveloped state of the theology of infant baptism is the curious near silence of the pre-Augustine church, especially the Eastern Fathers, on the question of original sin.⁸ The pre-Augustine Fathers in their struggle against the determinism of Gnosticism tended to minimize original sin and emphasize the freedom of fallen man. Alister McGrath summarizes well the pre-Augustine tendencies:

Far from recognizing the limitations of man's free will, many early fathers enthusiastically proclaimed its freedom (ἐλευθερία) and self-determination (αὐτεξουσία): ἐλεύθερον γὰρ καὶ αὐτεξούσιον ἐποίησεν = θεοῦ ἰσχυρῶν [Theophilus of Antioch, *Epist. ad Autol.* 2.27]. The introduction of the secular concept of self-determination (αὐτεξουσία) into the theological vocabulary of Christendom is of particular significance, particularly in view of its later application in the Macarian homilies. There man's self-determination is proclaimed to be such that he can apply himself either to good or evil. God cannot be said to force the free will, but merely to influence it. While God does not wish man to do evil, he cannot compel him to do good. John Chrysostom's defense of the power of the human free will was so convincing that it was taken up by many Pelagian writers: "good and evil do not originate from man's nature itself, but from the will and choice alone" [*In epist. ad Rom., Hom.* 19.6]. This localization of the origin of sin in the misuse of the human free will was a theological commonplace by the fourth century.⁹

⁸The Pelagians readily appeal to earlier Fathers in order to defend their views (*De nat. et gr.* 61:71-65:78; *De grat. Chr.* 1:42-50), but these appeals are to the problem of the transmission of sin, not to the question of infant baptism or the theological rationale for infant baptism. And yet they are not entirely beside the point, since without a well-defined and universally acknowledged doctrine of original sin the theological rationale for paedobaptism would continue to remain up for grabs.

⁹Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification: The Beginnings to the Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 21.

Under these theological circumstances it is no wonder that the development of infant baptism remained retarded. Given the strong connection between Holy Baptism and the forgiveness of sins and the equally strong insistence that the guilt of sin is only contracted through the misuse of human free will (something which infants have not the ability to misuse!), infant baptism, although practiced, must have remained a theological enigma to many. What was needed was a controversy that would force fresh speculation on the relevant biblical data, particularly on the question, “Why do infants need the sacrament of the remission of sins applied to them before they are able to willfully commit personal sins?”

In the West, Tertullian argues for the delay of the baby’s baptism on the grounds that the child has not consciously committed any sin, and so they do not benefit as much from the sacrament as one more advanced in years and, therefore, in personal sins. This does not imply that Tertullian denied the reality of original sin, merely that he did not link the efficacy of Holy Baptism with the removal of the guilt of the child’s depraved nature.¹⁰ It appears, then, that Tertullian did not link infant baptism with the remission and cleansing of inherited, original sin; or if he did, it was a weak association that played very little part in his theology of the rite, which was overshadowed by the massive benefits that accrue to one who receives the remission of sins committed as a responsible free agent. After all, Tertullian was (unfortunately) more concerned with the colossal risks involved in a premature administration of the rite, than in the relatively minor benefits that might accrue to babies! (*De baptismo* 18:6).

The latter Western tradition (late in the fourth century), however, appears to have moved very close to Augustine’s position. Jerome assumes throughout his letter to Paulinus of Nola that without the grace of Holy Baptism even the children of believing parents cannot be saved (*Ep.* 85.2,5), but he does not explicitly connect Holy Baptism with the remission of

¹⁰Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 176; Ernest Evans, ed. and trans., *Tertullian’s Homily on Baptism* (London: SPCK, 1964) 100ff. See also *De Anima* 40.1. Of course, Tertullian’s understanding of original sin lacks the precision of later formulations.

original sin. Neither does Jerome deny that 1 Cor. 7:14 refers to a “holiness” not mediated by baptism (as Paulinus had wondered). Jerome does not associate this “sacred status” with the reason why infants of believing parents ought to be baptized, but neither does he deny it. The point is that his theological grounding of infant baptism remains ambiguous. Although some have understood Jerome in Epistle 107 to be charging infants with the guilt of sin if they are not baptized, he is more likely referring to the culpability of those parents who refuse to baptize their infants (*Ep.* 107.6).

Augustine appeals to Cyprian as the origin of his doctrine of baptismal grace. Augustine continually turns to Cyprian’s *Epistle* 64, where Cyprian reports on a council of African bishops who met to discuss the proper time of infant baptism. A certain African bishop named Fidus argued that Christian baptism must follow the analogy of circumcision and be administered on the eighth day. In the process of answering Fidus, Cyprian insists that no hindrance should be made to an earlier administration of the “grace and mercy of God” to the infant, for even though the child is free from personal sin, nevertheless, the newborn “being born after the flesh according to Adam, has contracted the contagion of the ancient death at his earliest birth [*secundum Adam carnaliter natus contagium mortis antiquae prima natiuitate contraxit*]” (*Ep.* 64:2-3). Throughout the letter Cyprian assumes that in being baptized the baby receives the remission of sin, not his own, but that of Adam. Wright argues that Cyprian’s letter seems also to be a response to Tertullian’s argument for the delay of baptism, “otherwise Cyprian must appear to be wielding a theological sledgehammer to crack a minor procedural nut.”¹¹ Since there is no evidence that Fidus denied the doctrine of original sin, nor the efficacy of Holy Baptism in removing its pollution and guilt, it is possible that Cyprian’s polemic is directed at Tertullian’s idea of an *innocens aetas* (*De Bapt.* 18:5). Augustine, who referred to Cyprian’s epistle *Ad Fidum* as his “book on the baptism of infants” (*De nupt. et conc.* 2.29.51), cites Cyprian as evidence that holding infants liable for sin was not an

¹¹Wright, “Infant Baptism,” 52.

innovation. The evidence of Cyprian's theology leads Pelikan to assert: "The achievement of a correlation between the practice of infant baptism and the doctrine of Original Sin was *first made visible* in Cyprian."¹² Cyprian, therefore, seems to be a major source for Augustine's doctrine of original sin. The doctrine is not fully articulated even in Cyprian, but Augustine is able to tease out of Cyprian the rudiments of a theology of original sin and Holy Baptism as the cure for it in infants.¹³

Ambrose was by far the most important contributor towards Augustine's theology as a whole, but exploring Ambrose's comments on the practice of infant baptism does not yield a consistent theological rationale. Ambrose's contribution consisted not so much in his theologizing about infant baptism, but in his articulating a well-defined doctrine of Adam's sin and its effects upon all humanity. Ambrose sees Holy Baptism as a "spiritual circumcision," linking it with John 3:5 such that *infantes* who die without baptism do not partake of the heavenly kingdom (*De Abraham* 2.11.79-84). Ambrose, then, appears to accept the fact that unbaptized infants are culpable in some sense since their inheritance of the kingdom of heaven is doubtful apart from Holy Baptism. According to Wright, Ambrose "makes no distinction between infants and adults in talking about sin as constituting the need for Holy Baptism. Yet even Ambrose falls far short of the decisive sharpness of Augustine's refutation of Pelagian teachings. The bishop of Milan disappoints us if we are looking for an unambiguous declaration that infants are baptized for the forgiveness of original *guilt*, although he certainly taught this doctrine."¹⁴

The pre-Augustine ecclesiastical tradition, therefore, is by all accounts ambiguous in its understanding of the reason for infant baptism. Augustine appears to overstate the case when

¹²Pelikan, *The Emergence*, 291.

¹³Augustine mentions the works of Cyprian that particularly influenced him in *Contra duas epistulas Pelagianorum* 4.8.21ff. For a summary Cyprian's views see TeSelle, *Augustine the Theologian* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970) 262-3.

¹⁴Wright, "Infant Baptism," 58.

he argues that Holy Baptism secures the remission of the sins of infants has been embraced by “the universal church from the earliest times” (*De pecc. mer.* 3.4.9).¹⁵ His letter to Jerome (*Ep.* 166; A.D. 415) contains a clear statement of Augustine’s conviction concerning the antiquity of the practice of infant baptism. Augustine clearly considered ancient, the doctrine that infants are remitted of the guilt of original sin. He writes to Jerome : “You are not one of those who have begun to babble new doctrines, saying that there is no guilt inherited from Adam, which has to be remitted in the infant by baptism.” He calls this doctrine “consonant with the foundations of catholic faith” (*Ep.* 166.6).¹⁶ Of course, what Augustine is doing here is *interpreting* the ancient *lex orandi* of the church. To Augustine, the *lex credendi* implied in the *lex orandi* seemed transparent enough. The fact that the sacrament of remission of sins has been applied to infants necessarily implies that they have something to be forgiven; and since they have committed no personal sin, it must be for the guilt of original sin that they are washed in the laver of regeneration.¹⁷ Augustine argues that Pelagius knows full well that his

¹⁵All translations of *De Peccatorum meritis et remissione, et de baptismo parvulorum ad Marcellinum*, unless otherwise noted, are from Philip Schaff, ed., *Saint Augustine: Anti-Pelagian Writings*, trans. Peter Holmes and Robert Ernest Wallis, vol 5 of *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (1887; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971). The Latin text is found in J.-P. Migne, ed., *Patrologiae crusus completus . . . , Series prima (Latina)*, (Paris: Garnier Freres, 1841-1902), vol. 44, pp. 109-199 (hereafter = MPL).

¹⁶*Letters 165-203*, trans. Wilfrid Parsons, vol. 30 of *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1955) 12.

¹⁷This is how Augustine’s student Prosper of Auquitaine (fl. 425-460) understands Augustine’s theological move. See Prosper’s *Official Pronouncements of the Apostolic See on Divine Grace and Free Will*, in *Prosper of Auquitaine: Defense of St. Augustine*, trans. P. De Letter, vol. 32 of the *Ancient Christian Writers* (New York: Newman Press, 1963), pp. 183, 234. Prosper follows in Augustine’s footsteps when he uses the liturgy as a theological source in his defense of his mentor. When Prosper undertook to defend Augustine’s views on sin and grace, he couldn’t appeal to any ecumenical conciliar or creedal formulations, since neither the councils of Nicea, Constantinople, or Ephesus dealt directly with these questions. Prosper’s comment, *legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi* (“let the law of prayer establish the law of belief”) is an appeal to the existing liturgical customs and practices to prove the antiquity of Augustine’s views. This is how the church has always prayed and worshipped (*lex orandi*), Prosper argued, therefore, the doctrinal formulations (*lex credendi*) of Augustine should not surprise anyone as novel.

position is a *novelty* asserted “against the ancient ingrafted opinion of the church [*contra antiquam ecclesiae insitam opinionem*]” (*De pecc. mer.* 3.3.6).¹⁸ What does he mean by “*ingrafted opinion*”? This is probably a reference to the theology implicit in the ancient rite of infant baptism.

That the doctrine is “consonant” with the practice and theology of the ancient church cannot be denied, but that original sin constituted the *explicit* theological rationale for infant baptism cannot be proven. The pre-Augustine church does *not* clearly *articulate* Augustine’s reason for baptizing babies—to secure the forgiveness and cleansing of their inherited original sin so as to deliver them from damnation to eternal life. It remains “ingrafted” (*insitus*) in Holy Baptism’s liturgy. The *meaning* of the rite of infant baptism remained *implicit* until Augustine unpacked it’s theological significance. Even the meaning of the creedal article, “baptism for the remission of sins,” remained implicit with reference to infants.

Augustine’s Views Before the Pelagian Controversy

Moreover, Augustine’s own views on infant baptism before the outbreak of the Pelagian controversy can only be described as occasional and ill-defined.¹⁹ Early on in his theological pilgrimage, Augustine’s attitude toward the problem of infant baptism can best be described as

¹⁸MPL 44.188.

¹⁹If he was unsure about the meaning and theology of paedobaptism, he nonetheless never wavered in his assertion of its *antiquity*. Augustine was convinced that the rite of infant baptism could be traced back to the time of the apostles. In *De baptismo* he insists that “what the universal church holds on to, although it has not been defined by the councils but has always been kept intact, is rightly believed to have been handed down by the authority of the apostles” (4.24.31). “The custom of our mother the Church in the matter of infant baptism is by no means to be scorned, nor to be considered at all superfluous, nor to be believed except on the ground that it is a tradition from the apostles” (*De Gen. ad litt.* 10.23.39). He tells his congregation (*Serm.* 176.2): “This is what the church has always done, always held; this is what it has received from the faith of our ancestors; this is what it will persevere in maintaining to the end,” *Sermon 176*, trans. Edmund Hill, in *The Works of St. Augustine*, ed. John E. Rotelle (New Rochelle, New York: New City Press, 1992) 273.

indifferent. Shortly after his baptism, in 388, he makes the following comments at the conclusion of his book *De magnitudo anima* “. . . a very difficult question is: What advantage is there in consecrating infants? We must believe that it accomplishes some good. Reason will discover this when the right time comes for investigating that question” (*De quan. an.* 36.80).²⁰ When he speaks of “consecrating infants” he may be referring to paedobaptism or to the rite of the catechumenate administered to infants (*Conf.* 1.11.17). In either case, he appears to place very little importance on the theological purpose and effects of such a “consecration” of infants.

In his anti-Manichaean *De libero arbitrio* (c. 395), Augustine says that infants often die before they acquire any merit, even if they are baptized—but their parents faith may be imputed to them (*De lib. arb.* 3.23.66-68):

At this point men are wont to ask what good the sacrament of Christ’s Baptism can do to infants, seeing that many of them die after having been baptized before they can know anything about it. In this case it is pious and right to believe that the infant is benefited by the faith of those who bring him to be consecrated. This is commended by the salutary authority of the Church, so that everyone may realize how beneficial to him is his faith, seeing that one man’s faith can be made beneficial for another who has no faith of his own. . . . the faith of another benefit[s] an infant seeing that no faithfulness of its own can be imputed to it.²¹

Augustine goes on to answer the objection of those who are appalled that infants sometimes suffer horribly and even die despite the fact that they have committed no sin; but he answers this without any reference to original guilt or sin. His reply focuses on the possible good that may accrue to others because of their innocent suffering. These statements of a

²⁰*On the Magnitude of the Soul*, trans. John J. McMahon, vol. 2 of *The Fathers of the Church*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1947.

²¹Augustine, *On Free Will*, trans. John H. S. Burleigh, in *Augustine: Earlier Writings* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953) 111, 210-211.

young theologian will later be used against him by the Pelagians. It's not so much what he said, but what he has left unsaid.

Augustine's *Confessions* yields some interesting speculation regarding babies, baptism, and depravity.²² Recall that it was the *Confessions* that so outraged Pelagius, particularly Augustine's words in Book Ten, "Command what You will: give what You command" (10.29.40) Augustine's strong ideas about the inherent depravity of man are already evident in A.D. 397. The views of the Augustine of the *Confessions* will play a very important role in Augustine's future theologizing about babies, baptism, and grace. The helpless and ignorant baby, who needs to be carried to the font by another, is a beautiful picture of God's prevenient grace.

If we take Augustine's words at face value, not only does he believe that babies are guilty through the inheritance of original sin, but they also, according to their limited capacity, sin willfully. Augustine does not see babies as "little innocents," nor infancy as "the age of innocence" (*innocens aetas*), Tertullian's famous phrase (*Baptism* 18:5).²³ His description of his own behavior as a covetous, angry baby serves well to illustrate his view of the "innocence" of babies. Seeing in every little child what he cannot remember of his own infancy, Augustine writes, "It is clear, indeed, that infants are harmless because of physical weakness, not because of any innocence of mind. I myself have seen and known a baby who was envious; it could not yet speak, but it turned pale and looked bitterly at another baby sharing its milk" (*Conf.* 1.7). Thus, even suckling babies are not free from willful personal sins, according to Augustine. Clearly, the lack of size, strength, and intellectual capacity do not insure innocence for Augustine: "I was so small a boy and so great a sinner" (*Conf.* 1.12). It ought to be noted, however, that the later Augustine does not choose to incorporate this "willful sinning of babies"

²²Cf. Colin Starnes, "Saint Augustine on Infancy and Childhood: Commentary on the First Book of Augustine's *Confessions*," *Augustinian Studies* 6 (1975): 45-64.

²³Tertullian, *Homily on Baptism*, trans. Ernest Evans (London: SPCK, 1964) 101.

into his theology of Holy Baptism. Possibly we should understand these statements in the *Confessions* as literary hyperbole.²⁴ Early on in the Pelagian controversy he argues that an infant is too weak and ignorant to commit willful sins (*De pecc. mer.* 1.35.65), but that “when it grows stronger, as it very soon does, it strikes its mother in its little passion, and often her very breasts which it sucks when it is hungry” (*De pecc. mer.* 1.35.66). Here he makes an important distinction, which must be seen to control Augustine’s earlier statements in the *Confessions*: there are newborn infants who are almost completely without the resources to willfully commit any sin whatsoever, and there are infants who have acquired some strength and are able to sin according to their limited capacity. It is clear, however, that the mature Augustine did not believe that newborn infants were capable of committing personal sins. “As for those who say that even babies commit actual sins through free will, we are tired of listening to them and disgusted at having to mention them” (*Ep.* 186).²⁵ Infants have done nothing good or bad, and unless infected with the disease of original sin, are innocent and cannot be condemned (*De Gen. ad litt.* 10.12.19).

It is clear at least from the *Confessions* that Augustine saw great value in infant baptism, since he does not agree with the conventional arguments for delaying baptism.

How is it that even now one is constantly and everywhere hearing it said of one person or another: ‘Leave him alone; let him do as he likes; he is not baptized yet’? How much better, therefore, would it have been, if I had been made well at once and then, by my own care and that of my friends, had managed to bring it about that the recovered health of my soul had been preserved in your keeping, who gave it to me!

²⁴In Epistle 5*2 Augustine appears to advocate the idea that evil thoughts might even disturb the minds of newly baptized infants, such that the traditional recitations made by their sponsors (parents) are not wholly inappropriate. The parents pray “forgive us our debts as we forgive others” for the newly baptized child “because of those things which so easily steal into human thoughts” (*Ep.* 5*. 2), apparently even the thoughts of infant Christians! Statements like this are difficult because Augustine gives us no clue as to the age of the infant under discussion. See *Letters 5*-29**, trans. Robert B. Eno, vol. 81 of *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1989) 46.

²⁵Augustine, *Letters 165-203*, 201.

Surely this would have been better. Yet wave after wave of temptation seemed to be hanging over me after my boyhood. My mother could see them coming and preferred to expose to them the mere clay out of which I might afterward be reshaped, rather than the express image itself (*Conf.* 1.11).

The importance of Holy Baptism for Augustine can be seen in his insistence that even faith without baptism does not benefit the individual. In his *Confessions*, Augustine notes in passing, after a brief reference to his initiation as an infant into the catechumenate and his mother's decision to delay his baptism, that "I was already a *believer*, as were my mother and the entire household, except my father alone" (*Conf.* 1.11.17). O'Donnell comments on Augustine's furtive confession of pre-baptism "faith" are surely accurate: "The observation is almost casual—for to Augustine, without baptism, 'faith' was of little value."²⁶

Continuing our survey of Augustine's pre-Pelagian works, we find that in his treatise against the Donatists, *De baptismo* (c. 400), Augustine expressed uncertainty with regard to "the precise value of the sanctification of the sacrament . . . and what is its effect on a man of its material application." Infants, who cannot exercise faith, nevertheless are baptized, but to what end Augustine does not say, other than asserting that "no Christian will say that they are baptized to no purpose" (*De bapt.* 4.23.31).²⁷ Conspicuous for its absence is any mention of original sin in his ant-Donatist discussion of infant baptism. Baptism, in the case of infants, is explained in terms of the symbolism of regeneration: "In infants, who are baptized, the sacrament of regeneration is given first, and if they maintain a Christian piety, conversion also in the heart will follow, of which the mysterious sign had gone before in the outward body" (*De bapt.* 4.24.32).

²⁶James J. O'Donnell, *Augustine Confessions: Commentary on Books 1-7*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) 69.

²⁷St. Augustine, *On Baptism*, trans. J. R. King, in *The Writings Against the Manichaeans and the Donatists*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol 4 of *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (1887; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979) 461.

Interestingly enough, however, prior to the outbreak of the Pelagian controversy Augustine appears to have come to some preliminary conclusions on the subject of the transmission of original sin to the entire human race. TeSelle argues that it took place sometime around 406 after Augustine had had time to read Cyprian's books and when Augustine received a large quantity of Ambrose's works from Paulinus, a deacon of Milan, Ambrose's former secretary, who visited Hippo in 405.²⁸ Cyprian seems to be the major source of Augustine's doctrine of original sin. The doctrine is not fully articulated even in Cyprian, but Augustine is able to glean from Cyprian the rudiments of a theology of original sin, and baptism as the cure for it in infants.²⁹ Thus, Augustine appears to have developed his new understanding of original sin and of baptism in a non-polemical context. It would appear to be incorrect to refer to the Augustinian concept of original sin as merely a reaction against Pelagianism. When Julian accuses Augustine's doctrine of original sin as being *novel*, Augustine responded, "My instructor is Cyprian, . . . my instructor is Ambrose, whose books I have read, and whose words I have heard from his own lips, and through whom I received the washing of regeneration" (*C. Jul. op. imp.* 6.21).³⁰

²⁸Eugene TeSelle, *Augustine*, 262-266. TeSelle argues that "a decisive change in Augustine's career as a theologian occurred at this point, about the year 406. Until then his views had been shaped chiefly by the spirit of Greek philosophy as conveyed through Plotinus and Porphyry and some exegetical works of Origen." Parenthetically, this may help to explain why Augustine was not able to develop a theology of original sin, being absorbed as he was in the language and categories of "freedom" so prevalent in the East. TeSelle goes on: "Now he turned against some of the most characteristic doctrines of the Platonists and looked to the writers of the Church. The circumstances, as we have seen, were complex, and it is difficult to say what relative weight the different factors might have had. But they conspired to cast doubt on the views that had been dear to Augustine the philosopher, and as he reflected on the problem he came steadily closer to the position that would be characteristic of Augustine the teacher of the Church."

²⁹Augustine mentions the works of Cyprian that particularly influenced him in *Contra duas epistulas Pelagianorum* 4.8.21ff.

³⁰Cited in TeSelle, *Augustine*, 265.

Evidence of Augustine's shift can be found in his early *Tractates on the Gospel of John* (tr. 1-16), delivered in the years 406-407. Man is born with a *tradux peccati et mortis*, which, having been communicated to the infant through the act of concupiscence, is therefore characterized by concupiscence (*Tr. in Joann. ev.* 3.12; 4.10).³¹ At least three years before the Pelagian controversy Augustine makes his famous statement: "No one has anything of what belongs to himself, except falsehood and sin" (*Tr. in Joann. ev.* 5.1). And in his sermons on First John, delivered about the same time, he says, "Adam was created by God, but when he consented to the devil he was born of the devil, and all whom he begot were like himself. We are born with desire, and even before we add our own guilt we are born of that damnation . . . Therefore, there are two births, that of Adam and that of Christ, the one casting us down to earth, the other raising us up to life; the one bearing with it sin, the other freeing us from sin" (*Tr. in Joann. ep.* 4.11).³²

We also have evidence of this theological paradigm shift in Augustine from a letter written in 408, three years before the Pelagian controversy. Augustine, in responding to Bishop Boniface's question as to how the faith of parents is beneficial to their children when they are baptized, speaks of the infant's "taint" which is contracted from his parents being washed away by baptism (*Ep.* 98). The most significant thing to notice about this passage is that here Augustine articulates a theology of infant baptism whereby the rite washes away "the taint [of original sin] contracted from them [the parents]."³³ He also clearly distinguishes between the infant's guilt which is washed away *by* baptism and any personal sins that occur *after* the baptism. Here, then, is evidence of Augustine's theological shift suggested by TeSelle, which took place in 406—two years before this letter to Boniface.

³¹*Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 1-10, trans. John W. Rettig, vol. 78 of *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1988) 85, 101.

³²Cited in TeSelle, *Augustine*, 258.

³³*Letters 83-130*, trans. Wilfrid Parsons, vol. 18 of *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1953) 129-131.

These initial statements of Augustine on the theological rationale for paedobaptism, though pregnant with significance, nevertheless, remain inchoate. His initial inexactitude and naïveté on the question reflects the absence of a controversy which would force fresh theological speculation and in-depth research into the biblical data. His nonchalant dismissal of the problem in *On the Magnitude of the Soul* almost appears prophetic: “Reason will discover this [i.e. the meaning and effects of baptism] when the right time comes for investigating that question” (36.80).

That Holy Baptism was administered to remedy the guilt of original sin in infants was not a novel doctrine introduced by Augustine in response to the Pelagian controversy (as Pagels erroneously maintains³⁴) finds additional proof in the fact that Rufinus circulated his *Libellus de fide*, which denied that infants are baptized for the remission of sins, before Augustine’s first clear statement of such a view in his *De peccatorum meritis et remissione* (A.D. 411-12). The views of Cyprian and Ambrose were gaining ground. TeSelle argues that “Rufinus and Pelagius and their followers were trying to defend what they believed to be the authentic catholic teaching against what appeared to them to a dangerous trend in certain circles of the Church. Probably the germ of the controversy was the now undisputed fact that differing explanations of infant baptism were held in the East and in the West.”³⁵

Augustine Against the Pelagians on Infant Baptism

Augustine, now 58 years old, entered the Pelagian controversy in 411-12, with his *De peccatorum meritis et remissione* at the request of his friend, the Carthaginian government official Marcellinus. It is likely that Augustine began responding in sermons to the views of

³⁴Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (New York: Random House, 1988). Pagels consistently misinterprets Augustine’s doctrine of original sin as sexual passion, linking his preoccupation with original sin to Augustine’s guilt-ridden past.

³⁵TeSelle, *Augustine*, 280.

Celestius about the same time he began this work.³⁶ Celestius was one of Pelagius's disciples. Pelagius and Celestius had fled Rome shortly after Alaric sacked the city on August 24, 410. Along with many prominent citizens of Rome they fled to Carthage. On their way to Carthage they stopped at Hippo, but Augustine was away, so they moved on to Carthage. Pelagius does not appear to have stayed in Carthage very long. He traveled to Palestine. Celestius remained in Carthage and became a belligerent advocate of Pelagius' views, and even went beyond Pelagius pressing his theology along paths that Pelagius had not himself addressed. Soon after his arrival, Celestius sought ordination and was promptly accused of heresy by Paulinus of Milan. Celestius was examined at a synod in Carthage in 411, and was accused of teachings six errant theological propositions:

1. That Adam was created mortal, and whether he had sinned or not, he would have been going to die.
2. That the sin of Adam injured only himself and not the human race.
3. That infants at the time of birth are in the same condition in which Adam was before his transgression.
4. That the race of man as a whole does not die through the death or transgression of Adam, nor does the race of man as a whole rise again through the resurrection of Christ.
5. That the Law leads people to the kingdom of heaven in the same way as the Gospel.
6. That even before the coming of Christ there were men without sin.³⁷

Augustine was not present for this synod, but the bishops condemned these propositions, none of which Celestius would abjure, and upheld an "Augustinian" theology of original sin.³⁸ In the meantime, Augustine began responding to Celestius in sermons, and

³⁶*Retr.* 2.59.1.

³⁷William J. Collinge, "Introduction," *Four Anti-Pelagian Writings*, trans. John A. Mourant and William J. Collinge, vol. 86 of *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1992) 12,13.

³⁸For thorough discussions on the views of Pelagius and Celestius, and their roles in the early stages in the controversy, see Gerald Bonner, *St. Augustine of Hippo: Life and Controversies* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963); *Augustine and Modern Research on Pelagianism* (Villanova, PA: Villanova University Press, 1972); "Pelagianism and Augustine,"

eventually went into print with his two books *De peccatorum meritis et remissione*.³⁹ Many scholars now think that the ideas Augustine attacks in this his first work against the “Pelagians” probably belonged to Rufinus the Syrian.⁴⁰ Shortly after finishing the first two books, Augustine got a hold of Pelagius’s *Commentary on Paul’s Epistles*. These contained opinions that Augustine could not imagine anyone ever holding, so, as a supplement and conclusion to the first two, he wrote a third book (called *De Baptismo Parvulorum*, since it opposed Pelagius’ teaching “especially on the subject of the baptism of infants,” 3.1.1). These three books are Augustine’s first polemical work directed against what was to become known as “Pelagianism,” and together all three books are called *De peccatorum meritis et remissione, et de baptismo parvulorum*. They contain in seed form Augustine’s theology of infant baptism.

It was the circulation of the teaching “that infants are baptized not for the purpose of receiving remission of sin, but that they may be sanctified in Christ” (*De pecc. mer.* 3.6.12) and that “infants are to be baptized in order that they may be with Christ in the kingdom of God” (*De pecc. mer.* 1.30.58) which caused Augustine to take a second look at what the “Pelagians” (whether Rufinus, Celestius, or Pelagius) were saying about the theological rationale for infant baptism, particularly their understanding of original sin. What exactly did these teachers think

Augustinian Studies 23 (1992): 33-52 and 24 (1994): 27-48; Peter Brown, “Pelagius and His Supporters,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 19 (1968): 93-114; “The Patrons of Pelagius,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 21 (1970): 56-72; *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967) 340-375; Robert F Evans, *Pelagius: Inquiries and Reappraisals* (New York: Seabury, 1968); John Ferguson, *Pelagius: A Historical and Theological Study* (Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons, 1956); R.B. Rees, *Pelagius: A Reluctant Heretic* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1988); and Eugene TeSelle, “Rufinus the Syrian, Caelestius, Pelagius: Explorations in the Prehistory of the Pelagian Controversy,” *Augustinian Studies* 3 (1972): 61-95.

³⁹*Retr.* 2.23.

⁴⁰TeSelle, *Augustine*, 279, notes: “Refoulé has demonstrated that Augustine’s very first attack on the “Pelagian” heresy, the first thirty-four chapters of the first book of *On the Merits and the Remission of Sins*, consists of a refutation of the *Libellus de fide* of Rufinus the Syrian.” TeSelle refers to F. Refoulé, “La datation du premier concile de Carthage contre les Pélagiens et du *Libellus fidei* de Rufin,” *Revue des études augustiniennes* 11 (1963): 41-49.

Holy Baptism did for infants? Why were infants baptized? Augustine's frustration throughout the controversy was their denial of the propagation of original sin to infants and the need they had, even fresh out of the womb, for the remission of the guilt of sin (*De pecc. or.* 19.21). Ultimately, however, Augustine's difficulty with Pelagius and Celestius mainly concerns their denigration of the grace of God; for if an instance of human nature exists anywhere, of whatever age or circumstance, that is not corrupted by the first Adam, it therefore does not require the work of the second Adam, which necessarily implies that there is no universal need for the grace of Jesus Christ (*De pecc. Or.* 29).⁴¹

Appropriately, the first book of *De pecc. mer.* is an argument for original sin. Augustine argues for the universality of original sin from the universal reign of death in the world (1.2.2-8.8). Pelagians⁴² speculated that "Adam was so formed that he would even without any demerit of sin have died, not as the penalty of sin, but from the necessity of his being" (1.2.2). In response, Augustine argues from Scripture passages like Genesis 3:19; Romans 5:12; 8:10, 11; 7:24; 1 Corinthians 15:21, 52, 53; and 2 Corinthians 5:2-4 that death is a judicial penalty inflicted upon all humanity because of Adam's sin. He delves deeply into Romans 5:12-21 in order to refute "those who contend that no such original sin exists at all in people by birth," but that men become sinners through the *imitation* of Adam's sin rather than through the *propagation* of Adam's sin (1.9.9-15.20).

The remaining chapters of the first book argue for original sin from the universal and ancient rite of paedobaptism (*De pecc. mer.* 1.16.21-39.70). Augustine first asserts "that such infants as quit the body without being baptized will be involved in the mildest condemnation of all [*exeuntes in damnatione omnium mitissima futuros*]. That person, therefore, greatly deceives

⁴¹Augustine, *On Original Sin*, in *Anti-Pelagian Writings*, Philip Schaff, ed., 249.

⁴²I use this title realizing that at this point in the controversy it is a bit anachronistic. But it is rather cumbersome to qualify every reference to Augustine's opponents by reminding the reader that Augustine was responding to either Rufinus, Celestius, Pelagius, or some other disciples of Pelagius.

himself and others, who teaches that they will not be involved in condemnation” at all (1.16.21).⁴³ Infants, therefore, are baptized to save them from damnation.

Hence men are both [simul] born in the flesh subject to [*obnoxii*] sin and death from the first man, and also [simul] are reborn in baptism in union with [*sociati*] righteousness and eternal life of the second Man (1.16.21).⁴⁴

But why are newborn infants condemned? Surely they have acquired no guilt through personal sins (1.17.22). Augustine agrees. Those who argue for some nebulous rationale for the baptism of infants such as “they receive baptism to become partakers of the kingdom of heaven” must answer the question: are they outside of the kingdom of heaven at birth? If so, why? Surely not because they have committed personal sins. But if they are born innocent then how can it be said that they are outside of the kingdom of heaven? Or is the “kingdom of heaven” something other than salvation and eternal life? (1.20.26). All this is a Pelagian subterfuge designed to escape the incontestable truth that if infants are to be saved from eternal death they must receive the washing of the laver or regeneration as well as feed on the flesh of Christ in the eucharist (1.20.27). No other way of salvation is possible. Those infants who “have lacked the sacrament must be classed with those who do not believe on the Son, and therefore, if they shall depart this life without grace, they will have to encounter what is written concerning such—they shall not have life, but the wrath of God abideth on them” (1.20.28). Augustine recognizes that an objection could be raised at this point regarding the apparent arbitrariness with which some infants are baptized and some are not. “The reason why this grace comes upon one man and not on another may be hidden, but it cannot be unjust” (1.21.29). God’s “gratuitous grace” is responsible for this. And the enigma is no more knotty than the similar problem of why some baptized infants die young and why others survive, or

⁴³MPL 44:121.

⁴⁴MPL 44:121. *Simul itaque peccato et morti primi hominis obnoxii nascuntur in carne, et simul iustitiae vitaeque aeternae secundi hominis sociati renascuntur in Baptismo.*

why some baptized infants persevere until death and why others fall away and become impious (1.21.30).⁴⁵

After all, Jesus came to save not the righteous, but sinners; not the well, but the sick. And infants are among those whom Christ has come to save. Nor are infants baptized for the remission of sins committed in some previous state of existence (*De pecc. mer.* 1.22.31-23.33). However difficult it may be to conceptualize, infants are sinners. “For who would dare say that Christ is not the Savior and Redeemer of infants? But from what does he save them, if there is no malady of original sin within them?” (1.23.33). And how is one saved, but through the sacraments of Holy Baptism and the Body of Christ? This explains why the Christians of Carthage call the baptism and the eucharist “salvation” and “life” respectively. After citing biblical passages to prove this, Augustine asserts, “If, therefore, as so many and such divine witnesses agree, neither salvation nor eternal life can be hoped for by any man without baptism and the Lord’s body and blood, it is vain to promise these blessings to infants without them” (1.24.34).⁴⁶ This means that until infants receive the sacraments they remain in darkness

⁴⁵The fact that infants die proves that they are guilty of sin. “So why do infants die? I mean, if I said, ‘Why do adults die?’ you would say to me, ‘They have sinned.’ So I won’t argue about people who have come of age; I will summon to testify against you the infancy of babies. They can’t talk, and they convict you; they are silent, and they prove what I am saying. Here we have infants, obviously innocent in their actions, having nothing sinful about them apart from what they have contracted from the first man. The reason they need the grace of Christ is to be made alive in Christ, after having died in Adam; after being defiled by being born, to be purified by being reborn” (Serm. 165.7); from *Sermons 148-183*, trans. Edmund Hill, vol. 5 of *The Works of Saint Augustine* (New Rochelle, New York: New City Press, 1992) 205.

⁴⁶Augustine tells the story of a nurse who took the infant child in her care to idolatrous rites and afterward, as though nothing were amiss, carried the child into church to partake of the Eucharist (*Ep.* 98.4). The fact that the infant communed was not unusual; what was unconscionable was that the nurse allowed the child to partake of the table of demons and of the Lord as if it were of no concern (cf. 1 Cor. 10:20). Infants need not only baptism but also the Eucharist in order to obtain eternal life. In his *De Sancta Virginitate* 6 Augustine says that parents “hasten that their offspring may be initiated into the sacraments (*sacramenta*), and may become members of Christ, for they know what they have borne,” in Augustine, *Holy Virginitate*, trans. John McQuade, in vol. 27 of *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1955) 149, 150.

(1.24.35-25.38). Summarizing his position thus far, Augustine reminds his opponents that “baptism is unnecessary for them, who have no need of the benefit of that forgiveness and reconciliation which is acquired through a Mediator.” And if his opponents admit the necessity of infant baptism, they cannot avoid the conclusion that infants are in need of the benefits of the Mediator by which they are “saved and delivered and redeemed and enlightened. But from what, if not from death, and the vices, and guilt, and thralldom, and darkness of sin? And, inasmuch as they do not commit any sin in the tender age of infancy by their actual transgression, original sin only is left” (1.26.39).

The next 15 chapters survey the relevant biblical data bearing upon the truth that infants are baptized for the remission of sins and thereby saved from death and damnation (*De pecc. mer.* 1.27.40-27.54). Matthew 12:30 is proof that every person, including infants, are either “for” or “against” Christ—there is no middle condition. Every man is separated from God until baptized. He must again expose the Pelagian subterfuge whereby the necessity of infant baptism is affirmed, while denying original sin in infants, especially their argument from John 3 (1.30.58-33.62).

Augustine moves on to the ritual itself and argues that the form in which the rite of paedobaptism is administered implies that the infants receive the remission of sin (*De pecc. mer.* 1.34.63). Consider the exorcism. What does such accomplish in an infant but the expulsion of Satan and his demons? “What does my exorcism work in that babe, if he be not held in the devil’s family?” The sponsor who speaks for the infant, renouncing the devil, must do so on the assumption that the devil is in him. Augustine wonders what a Pelagian sponser would think about the exorcism. “For my one part, if I thought that his opinions were opposed to this faith, I could not permit him to bring the infant to the sacraments.”⁴⁷

⁴⁷In *De gratia Christi, et de peccato originali* Augustine cites Pelagius as declaring that “infants ought to be baptized with the same formula of sacramental words as adults” (2.1.1).

Finally, Augustine finishes his first book by arguing that infants do not have the ability to commit personal sins of their own. In *this sense* they are innocent. But their weakness and ignorance are evidence of the judgment of God. Their infirmity is a penal condition inflicted upon them by God because of Adam's sin (1.35.65-39.70). They are free from the guilt of personal sins not so much because they do not have evil, bent wills, but because they do not as yet possess the knowledge or ability to accomplish the evil intents. But, as Augustine reminds us, "when it grows stronger, as it very soon does, it strikes its mother in its little passion, and often her very breasts which it sucks when it is hungry" (1.35.66).

In Book Two Augustine's primary concern is to explore the question "Whether there lives in this world, or has yet lived, or ever will live, any one without any sin whatever, except 'the one Mediator between God and man, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all.'" He is quite sure that he has discussed infant baptism sufficiently in his first book, but "should there occasionally arise in this discussion, either inevitably or casually from the argument, any question about the baptism or the sin of infants, I must neither be surprised nor must I shrink from giving the best answer I can" (*De pecc. mer.* 2.1.1). Almost immediately, after commencing his discussion on the will and its inherent and penal limitations, and of the absolute necessity for grace (2.2.2-5.6), he does add something that he had only hinted at in his former book concerning the effects of Holy Baptism on infants. Baptism does not remove concupiscence: "In baptized infants, it is deprived of guilt, is left for the struggle, but pursues with no condemnation, such as die before the struggle" (2.4.4).⁴⁸

⁴⁸Against the Pelagians, Augustine argues from Scriptures such as Romans 5:12ff that the guilt of Adam's first sin, as well as the corruption that God judicially inflicted upon human nature as a result of that sin, are transmitted on to all of Adam's posterity. Man is born with a *tradux peccati et mortis*, which, having been communicated to the infant through the act of concupiscence, is therefore characterized by concupiscence (*In Joann. ev.* 3.12; 4.10). Augustine's doctrine that sin is transmitted through the illicit desire that always attends sexual intercourse comes from Ambrose (TeSelle, *Augustine*, 266). The occasion for the transmission of original sin from parents to child is the carnal excitement that always attends post-fall intercourse (*De nupt. et concup.* 2.12.25; 2.35.59), even in baptized Christians (*De pecc. mer.* 2.9.11). "Seeing that believing parents, who have been both carnally born and spiritually born

The rest of book two is devoted to answer the four questions concerning the possibility of perfection in this life. First, he says that it is *possible* for one to attain a condition of sinless perfection in this life, but only by God's grace (2.6.7). Nevertheless, his answer to the second question, whether anyone has ever reached a state of sinlessness, is "no." According to the Scriptures, this has never happened, even though it is theoretically possible (2.7.8-21.25). Thirdly, Augustine asks why, since it is possible, has no one ever attained to such perfection? The answer is simple: "Because men are unwilling." He spends a number of chapters explaining this (2.17.26-19.33). The last question regards the possibility of any man existing without sin, personal or original (2.20.34). Could anyone exist in such a state? No. Even infants are polluted with the guilt of sin.

again, have themselves begotten children in a *carnal manner*, how could their children by any possibility, previous to their first birth, have been born again" (*De pecc. mer.* 2.28.45). Such a carnal means of begetting children is the unavoidable means by which sin is propagated from Adam to all of humanity. However the soul of an infant comes into existence, whether by being somehow inherited from the parents (traducianism) or by the direct creative act of God (creationism), in either case the soul becomes soiled by the carnal act of intercourse as it is united with the body in the womb of the mother (*C. Jul. Pel.* 5.17; Augustine, *Against Julian*, trans. Matthew A. Schumacher, vol. 35 of *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1957), 261ff.). Whatever view one takes on the "obscure question" of the origin of the soul or how it comes to become liable to sin, it ought not to be allowed to affect one's view of reality of original sin. Baptism for the remission of sins as performed on infants presupposes the presence of original sin, quite apart from the question of *how* the soul came into existence or even *how* the soul came to be tainted with sin (*De pecc. mer.* 3.10.18). Infants are baptized to save them from damnation. But they could not be damned if they really had no sin. And if they are too weak to contract sin on their own, they must have inherited it. Augustine is ready to allow for mystery: "it remains for us, even if we are yet unable to understand, at least to believe that infants inherit original sin" (3.4.7). Augustine is not sure *when* or *how* the soul of an infant contracts that guilt from which it needs deliverance (*Ep.* 166.6). In the process of examining the question of the origin of the soul, Augustine argues from the Catholic Church's practice of infant baptism against the notion that the souls of infants are free from sin and therefore have no need of the remission of sins. "But since the universal Church holds to the custom of rushing to the sacrament with the living infants to provide for them, fearing that when they die nothing can be done to help them, there is only one explanation, namely, each child is Adam in body and soul, and therefore the grace of Christ is necessary for him" (*De Gen. ad litt.* 10.12.19). Cf. Peter Brown's discussion of Augustine's theological views of sexuality in *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 387ff.

Augustine then takes a fresh look at the whole subject of original sin. He outlines mankind's pre-lapsarian state of existence (*De pecc. mer.* 2.21.35-22-36), the post-lapsarian corruption of man's nature (2.23.37), and how the incarnation of our Lord was accomplished apart from the taint of original sin (2.24.38). The remainder of book two is devoted to answering Pelagian objections (2.25.39-36.58). It is not necessary to list all the arguments, but in the process of answering these objections Augustine make some pertinent comments about paedobaptism. First, he argues from 1 Corinthians 7:14 that the infants of believers are "holy," but that does not mean they possess eternal life; nor does it mean that they are without sin. In some sense they are set apart, but Augustine does not pursue the connection between this passage and infant baptism, nor does he use this passage as a theological rationale for baptizing the infants of believers.⁴⁹ In Book III Augustine comes back to 1 Cor. 7 and Pelagius' comments on those verses. He will not allow this verse to contradict the clear teaching of other Scriptures. Even though "some particular sanctification is to be here understood, by which an unbelieving husband or wife was sanctified by the believing partner, and by which the children of the believing partner were sanctified. . . . Nevertheless, whatever be the sanctification meant, this must be steadily held: that there is no other valid means of making Christians and remitting sins, except by men becoming believers through the sacrament according to the institution of Christ and the Church. For neither are unbelieving husbands and wives, notwithstanding their intimate union with holy and righteous spouses, cleansed of the sin which separates men from the kingdom of God and drives them into condemnation, nor are the children who are born of

⁴⁹Original sin explains well the need for infant baptism, but as a comprehensive rationale it falls short. The presence of the guilt of Adam's sin in infants provides a sound reason for their need for baptism, but by itself it proves too much: since all babies are born in such a state, then all babies, whether born to believers or pagans, ought to be baptized. Augustine answers the question "why the children of the baptized should be baptized" (*De pecc. mer.* 2.27), but does not answer "why the children of the unbaptized shouldn't be baptized." Maybe his concept of the imputed faith of the parents serves to limit baptism to the parents of believers. But even so, might we not assign sponsors or godparents to pagan infants and baptize them all indiscriminately? What theological principle serves to discriminate the legitimate objects of infant baptism for Augustine?

parents, however just and holy, absolved from the guilt of original sin, unless they have been baptized into Christ. . .” (3.12.21).

Second, he asserts again that even if Holy Baptism removes the guilt of original sin, “our old carnal nature” still remains. “Although the law of sin remains with it’s concupiscence, the guilt thereof is done away through the grace of the sacrament” (2.28.46). Third, neither is death itself abolished for baptized believers. It remains to provide a context for the struggle of faith. If the Pelagians object that the punishment should not remain if the sin has been forgiven, Augustine responds that *death is no longer penal for believers*, but corrective and disciplinary. “It is bequeathed to us for an exercise of discipline, in order that our great fear of it may be overcome by us as we advance in holiness” (2.34.54). Fourth, Augustine reminds us that both the infant’s flesh and soul require the redemption of Jesus Christ (2.36.59).

In book three Augustine answers some of Pelagius’ comments in his *Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul*, especially those that pertain to infant baptism.⁵⁰ Pelagius is not willing to refer in any way to man’s sin as his possession by inheritance from Adam; he will only grant that mankind “imitates” Adam’s example. His commentary on Paul contains many references to adult baptism and the effects of baptism for sinners: the cleansing and remission of *personal* sins. Baptism cancels actual sins and no more. Original sin does not enter into the sacramental equation. So when Pelagius attempts to offer an intelligible rationalization for paedobaptism, he was faced with a monumental theological problem. Infants enter the kingdom of God, are incorporated into the church, and are sanctified in Christ (*De. pecc. mer.* 3.2.2-6.8), but this, according to the special pleading of Pelagius, does not imply that they make any transition from wrath to grace through the forgiveness of sins. Although he used the language of redemption to describe the necessity of baptizing infants, Augustine is quick to point out that Pelagius made a mockery of Holy Baptism and also of the work of Christ. If infants may claim salvation as

⁵⁰Pelagius wrote these commentaries sometime between 405/6 and 409, drawing extensively on Rufinus’s translation of Origen’s commentary on Romans. See Rees, *Pelagius*, 2

their due because of the purity of their nature and the absence of personal guilt, then they possess such salvation apart from the work of Christ. Such a doctrine belittles and trivializes the Savior and Mediator of all men. According to the Scriptures and the creeds of the church, baptism was “for the remission of sins.” Bonner makes this telling comment that seems to put the whole controversy into perspective: “Perhaps, indeed, the clue to Pelagius’ orthodoxy or unorthodoxy lies not so much in his concept of grace as in that other, vehemently debated topic, the baptism of infants *in remissionem peccatorum*.”⁵¹ If infants are baptized, it can be for no other reason than the remission of sin.⁵² Pelagius and Celestius in denying this, do not merely challenge one of Augustine’s pet theories, nor are they primarily offering an alternate viewpoint on the precise nature of the relation between Adam and his posterity;⁵³ rather, Pelagius and his followers call into question the *regula fidei* of the ancient church. Could this be why Pelagius, in his *Commentary* puts his own unorthodox speculations in the mouths of others? Is this literary cowardice? Does he know full well “the novelty of this unheard-of doctrine, which is now beginning to raise its voice against the ancient ingrafted opinion of the church” (3.3.6)?

What does Holy Baptism mean?

⁵¹Cited in Rees, *Pelagius*, 78.

⁵²Celestius argued that infants were baptized to make them fit for the kingdom of Heaven, but they needed no remission of the guilt of original sin. (*Ep.* 157.22). The Synod of Diospolis condemned the opinion (attributed to Celestius) that infants who die unbaptized have eternal life (*De. gest. pel.* 11.23-24).

⁵³Pelagius argued that disputations about original sin and baptismal grace concerned areas not essential to the Christian faith. There was freedom on these doctrines such that no one should be called a heretic simply because he held a contrary opinion on the meaning of infant baptism. As Celestius observed at the council of Carthage: “As touching the transmission of sin, I have already said that I have heard many persons of acknowledged position in the catholic Church deny it, and on the other hand many affirm it; it may fairly, indeed, be deemed a matter for inquiry, but not a heresy” (*De Pecc. Or.* 23).

What, then, is God doing for the infant in Holy Baptism? What precisely does God accomplish for the infant? How does Augustine understand Holy Baptism's salvific efficacy? To understand this we must first come to grips with Augustine's view of original sin. Simply put, original sin involves both the guilt of Adam's first sin as well as the corruption of human nature. Romans 5:14 places every man "in Adam" when he fell, and so the essence of original sin consists in our co-responsibility for Adam's willful disobedience. "By the Evil will of that one man all sinned in him, since all were that one man, from whom, therefore, they individually derived original sin" (*De nupt. et concup.* 2.5.15). This is the guilt that makes infants liable to judgment and which Baptism is designed to remove (*C. Jul. Pel.* 6.49). Infants do not inherit either the sin or the righteousness of parents, only the guilt of their first father, Adam (*De Gen. ad litt.* 10.13.23).

In addition to being culpable for Adam's ancient sin, the newborn child receives from his parents a corrupt human nature. "Every son who is born in this old and infirm condition of his father's nature, must needs himself partake of the same old and infirm condition" (*De pecc. mer.* 2.9.11). Augustine denies that baptism removes "all his old infirmity." If Paul says that the Christian's "outward man perishes," then "however entire and full be the remission of sins in baptism" there cannot be "wrought by it at once, and entire and full change of man into his everlasting newness" (*De pecc. mer.* 2.7.9). As for Julian's statement, "If concupiscence were an evil, he who is baptized would lose it," Augustine responds by claiming that a baptized person loses every sin, but not every evil. More plainly, he loses all guilt for all evils, but not all evils. "Does he lose bodily corruption? . . . Does he lose the evil of ignorance? . . . Therefore, they did not lose this great evil of ignorance in the laver of regeneration, where they unquestionably lost all sins. . . All past guilts of these evils, then, are washed away in the sacred font" (*C. Jul. Pel.* 6.16.49-50). Thus, Augustine makes a distinction between the corruption of our nature, which remains after baptism, and the guilt accompanying the corruption of our nature, which is remitted in Holy Baptism. All evil and pollution are not

removed, but all sin and guilt are remitted by baptism. The guilt (*reatus*) attached to the pollution of the transmitted human nature is removed by the sacrament, while the actuality remains in our fleshy members (*C. duas epp. Pelag.* 1.13.27). This holds true for adults as well as children.

Thus, the remission of sins in Holy Baptism is “entire and full” (*De pecc. mer.* 2.7.9), removing both the guilt of our corrupt nature as well as the responsibility for our participation in Adam’s ancient choice of evil “in him.” “Baptism washes away all, absolutely all, our sins, whether of deed, word or thought, whether sins original or added, whether knowingly or unknowingly contracted”(C. duas epp. Pelag. 3.3.5). Therefore, the newly baptized infant receives the remission of “all sins” and “comes up spotless and pure from the laver of regeneration” (*De g. pel.* 28), while the renovation of his vitiated and infirm nature proceeds by a process of sanctification that will never be complete until the life hereafter. Even though infants are freed from the guilt of Adam’s sin, they still must suffer through life with the misery that attends fallen human nature. “No one is exempted from this misery until after death. . . not even baptized children, from whom that which they have contracted solely from the accursed human stock, original sin, is washed away and cleansed through the washing of rebirth, are found to be immune from this sentence” (*Ep.* 2*).⁵⁴

For Augustine, the rite of Holy Baptism marks the transition from wrath to grace for the infant. This necessarily implies that before baptism, babies, even those born of believers, are subject to the wrath of God. Augustine’s belief in the damnation of unbaptized infants is quite clear and does not seem to have undergone much modification throughout the Pelagian controversy. His doctrine is easily summarized. Infants who “are not baptized are compelled to undergo the judgment of the second death” for no other reason than original sin (*C. duas epp. Pel.* 1.22.40). Infants are condemned because they belong to the mass of humanity which has in fact inherited the guilt of Adam’s sin. Those who die without having been “absolved

⁵⁴Augustine, *Letters* 5*-29*, 27.

from original sin” by the bath of regeneration “fall under condemnation. . . . for we ought to understand that no one can be singled out of that lost mass for which Adam was responsible, except one who has this gift; and he who has it, has it by the grace of the Savior.” (*De corr. et gr.* 7.12).⁵⁵ Babies, because they partake of generic human nature inherited from Adam, share in the dreadful punishment upon human nature; for from the moment of Adam’s transgression, “the entire mass of our nature was ruined beyond doubt, and fell into the possession of the destroyer” (*De pecc. Or.* 29). “That person, therefore, greatly deceives both himself and others, who teaches that they will not be involved in condemnation. . . .” (*De pecc. mer.* 1:16:21).

Early on in his theological career, Augustine had left the fate of unbaptized infants open, for example in his early work, *De libero arbitrio* (*Ep.* 226.8; see *De lib. arb.* 3.18, 3.20, 3.23). He discusses this inconsistency, however, at length though in his later work *De dono perseverantiae* (chpts. 30-32).

Therefore, although in the third book of *On the Free Choice of the Will* I spoke of little children in such a way that, even if what the Pelagians say were true, that ignorance and difficulty, without which no man is born, are conditions of our nature and not punishments, still the Manichaeans would be vanquished, who wish to maintain that there are two co-eternal natures, one of good and one of evil. Is the faith on that account to be called into question or abandoned—that faith which the Church defends against these same Pelagians, which asserts that there is original sin, the guilt of which is contracted by generation and washed away by regeneration? And since our brothers also admit this truth with us, so that together on this issue we destroy the error of Pelagians, why do they think it is to be doubted that God delivers from the power of darkness and transfers into the kingdom of his beloved Son even infants, to whom he gives his grace through the sacrament of baptism? And therefore, in that he gives grace to some but not to others, why will they not sing mercy and judgment to the Lord? But why it should be given to these rather than to those— “Who has known the mind of the Lord.” Who can comprehend the incomprehensible? Who can search out the unsearchable? It is settled, then, that God’s grace is not given according to the merits of

⁵⁵*Admonition and Grace*, trans. John Courtney Murray, in vol. 2 of *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1947) 235.

those who would receive it, but according to the pleasure of his will. . .” (*De dono pers.* 27, 28)⁵⁶

But why should an infant be punished so severely? How can this be just since a baby has yet to commit willful sins? Here is where the Pelagians have no answer. They must either deny that infants really do face such a punishment or reevaluate their own insistence on the innocence of babies. An infant is justly punished with such ruin, Augustine argues, “because he belongs to the mass of perdition, and is properly regarded as born of Adam, condemned under the bond of the ancient debt [incurred by Adam’s sin]” (*De Pecc. Or.* 31). And if any be released from the guilt of Adam’s sin, it will not be because they are naturally free from it, but because by grace they have been liberated. If Pelagius seems to admit that only those who have been baptized possess eternal life, then it follows that those who die unbaptized incur eternal death. Why then should an unbaptized infant who has never willfully sinned be punished with everlasting death? It must be because that infant has contracted the sin of Adam for which he is culpable (*De Pecc. Or.* 19). But if there is nothing in infants to be cleansed by the washing of regeneration, as Pelagius claims, then there is no reason for them to be *punished* with everlasting punishment.

One who desires to avoid this conclusion finds himself on the horns of a very difficult dilemma. “We do not think he will say that God will condemn to eternal death an innocent soul, without original sin, before the age at which it could commit actual sin; he is therefore forced to answer as Pelagius did at the Episcopal trial, when, in order to be considered some kind of Christian, he was forced to repudiate the doctrine that infants, even though unbaptized, possess eternal life. And when this has been denied, what will remain but eternal death?” (Ep.

⁵⁶All translations of *De dono perseverantiae*, *De gestis Pelagii*, and *De praedestinatione sanctorum*, unless otherwise noted, are from Saint Augustine, *Four Anti-Pelagian Writings*, trans. John A. Mourant and William J. Collinge, vol. 86 of *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1992).

186).⁵⁷ Later on he says, “. . . no one who remembers that he is a Christian of the catholic faith denies or doubts that children who have not received the grace of regeneration in Christ, who have not eaten His flesh or drunk His blood, have no life in them and are consequently subject to the penalty of everlasting death, and it certainly remains true that though they themselves have done neither good nor evil, the penalty of their death is just because they die in him in whom all have sinned. . .” (Ep. 186; see also *De an. et or.* 3.9.12; and *De Gen. ad litt.* 10.12.19).⁵⁸

Writing to Prosper and Hilary *On the Gift of Perseverance*, Augustine uses Matt. 11:21-22 in a brilliant argument against the idea that infants will be judged according to the merits that they would have accumulated had they lived. For even though our Lord says that Tyre and Sidon would have believed had the magnitude of miracles been performed there that were done in Corozain and Bethsaida, nevertheless, for that reason, the inhabitants of these pagan cities *are not saved* from the wrath to come, but rather, *their punishment will be mitigated*. The one who argues for the foreknown hypothetical merits of deceased infants might seize upon this passage as proof that since the inhabitants of Tyre and Sidon would have believed had they seen the miracles, therefore, they certainly ought not to be punished. But our Lord argues that they will be punished, albeit not with the same severity as the unbelieving Jewish cities where his miracles were performed. Augustine presses the point:

. . . therefore it is false that the dead will be judged even for those things which they would have done if the Gospel had come to them while they were living. And if this is false, then there is no reason for saying of those infants who perish because they die without baptism that this has happened to them because of merit: that God foreknew that if they had lived and the Gospel had been preached to them, they would have heard it without faith. It remains, therefore, that *they are held in bondage to original sin*

⁵⁷Augustine, *Letters 165-203*, 210. Pope Innocent wrote to St. Augustine (*Ep.* 182 in the letters of Augustine) protesting the idea that children can attain the reward of eternal life without baptism “very foolish” and a “new dogma.”

⁵⁸Augustine, *Letters 165-203*, 212.

alone, and because of this alone go into damnation. And we see that in others in the same situation this sin is not remitted save by regeneration through the gratuitous grace of God, and that be God's hidden yet just judgment, for there is no injustice with God. . . . For no dead person is judged by the good or evil things which he would have done had he not died. Otherwise, the inhabitants of Tyre and Sidon would not have suffered punishment for what they did, but rather, according to what they would have done if those miracles of the Gospel had been done among them, they would have obtained salvation through their great repentance and their faith in Christ" (*De dono pers.* 23).⁵⁹

Augustine pursues this idea of mitigated punishment and applies it to unbaptized infants. In his correspondence with Paulinus he argues that the punishment that unbaptized infants will undergo will be *mitigated but not set aside* (*Ep.* 186:29). Furthermore, Augustine contends against any conception of a third state between heaven and hell where unbaptized infants go upon death. Pelagius had asserted, according to Augustine (*De pecc. or.* 21.23), that "infants who die unbaptized, I know indeed whither they do not go [heaven], yet whither they go, I know not." Augustine argues against Pelagius' view that infants have a place of salvation outside of the kingdom of heaven or some third option apart from heaven or hell by quoting Mark 16:16, "He that believes and is baptized shall be saved." All others must suffer eternal punishment. There is no other possibility. He castigates the belief in some "vague and indefinite middle condition, which some would provide for unbaptized infants—as if, by reason of their innocence, they were embraced in eternal life, but were not, because of their unbaptized state, with Christ in his kingdom" (*De pecc. mer.* 1.28.55). He then refers to Matt. 12:30 and argues that everyone, including infants, are either "with" Christ or "against" Him. No middle ground is possible. Therefore, no middle state is possible. "And surely the gentlest punishment will be for those who added no sin to that which they brought with them originally, while each among those who have committed additional sins will suffer a more endurable damnation in

⁵⁹Augustine, *Four Anti-Pelagian Writings*, 289-90.

proportion to the slightness of his iniquity” (*Ench.* 93).⁶⁰ “It may therefore be correctly affirmed, that such infants as quit the body without being baptized will be involved in the mildest condemnation” (*De pecc. mer.* 1:16:21). Thus, Augustine, while affirming the damnation of unbaptized infants, nevertheless, calls it the “gentlest punishment” and the “lightest condemnation” (*C. Jul. Pel.* 5.11.44).

Augustine resolves the objection against the apparent arbitrariness of the salvation of those infants who are baptized and the condemnation of those who are not by referring the matter to God’s inscrutable predestination.

Who is not quite overcome with wonder at this? . . . I mean the fact that God excludes from his kingdom some of the children of His friends, the faithful, reborn and virtuous, who die without baptism while still infants (although surely He in whose power all things lie, could, if He wished, procure for them the grace of baptism), and at the same time He admits to His kingdom their parents. I mean, too, the fact that God brings it about that some of the children of His enemies come into the hands of Christians, and by the laver of baptism are admitted to His kingdom, from which their parents are excluded. Yet of their own personal wills, these latter children have merited no good, and the former no evil” (*De corr. et gr.* 8.18, 19).⁶¹

Augustine admits that it is within God’s power to regenerate and save an infant who dies before being baptized, whether it be born of pagan or Christian parents; but he mentions this only hypothetically and gives no evidence that he believes that this is in fact what God does. God’s work of choosing one and passing by another is accomplished in history as God

⁶⁰Augustine, *Faith, Hope, and Charity*, trans. Bernard M. Peebles, in vol. 2 of *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1947) 446. Prosper faithfully maintained his mentor’s doctrine that unbaptized infants who die in infancy are lost though “*damnatione mitissima*.” See Prosper’s *Letter to Rufinus*, in *Prosper of Aquitaine: Defense of St. Augustine*, trans. P. De Letter, vol. 32 of the *Ancient Christian Writers* (New York: Newman Press, 1963) 31. Later theologians standardized an anti-Augustinian, pro-Pelagian doctrine of limbo, (St. Thomas, *Summa*, 3.69.4-6) in direct contradiction to Augustine and the Council of Carthage in A.D. 418.

⁶¹Augustine, *Admonition and Grace*, 266.

separates his children out of the mass of sinful humanity in Holy Baptism. This much we must affirm, even if the reasons why one is passed by and another chosen remain inscrutable to us (*De pecc. mer.* 1.21.29-30).

As for the objection of some that the struggle of Jacob and Esau in their mother's womb proves that even unborn infants act according to the freedom of their will in godliness or ungodliness, Augustine has a ready answer. The struggle was not evidence of the operation of free will but of the miraculous power of God in giving us a prophetic sign. Furthermore, the Apostle himself speaks of the election of Jacob and the reprobation of Esau while still in their mother's wombs as being accomplished apart from them having done "any good or evil" (Rom. 9:11-13; Augustine, *Ep.* 186).

Augustine argues very strongly that if infants inherit the kingdom of heaven, it is not because of their own merits or innocence, but because of the grace of God freely bestowed upon them through Holy Baptism (*Ep.* 186). For if "babies are not able to think anything, either good or bad," they can neither be guilty of actual sins, nor of actual righteousness. Therefore, they are saved through the grace of baptism apart from conscious faith involving any movement of their wills or minds, just as they are condemned by Adam's sin apart from the guilt of actual sins (*Ep.* 186).⁶² For Augustine, infants provide a marvelous instance of God's free predestination (*De praed. sanct.* 23-29).

Nevertheless, this does not mean that baptized infants inherit eternal life *apart* from faith. They may not have the capacity to exercise their own faith, but they are still considered "believers." The idea that the faith of the parents is imputed to their children, used as a theological rationale for infant baptism shows up occasionally in Augustine. We discover it first in his early work *De libero Arbitrio* (3.23.66-68, c. A.D. 395). The Scriptures are clear, only believers are saved.

⁶²Augustine, *Letters 165-203*, 200.

For which reason, in the Church of the Savior, infants believe by means of other people, even as they have derived those sins which are remitted them in baptism from other people” (*C. duas epp. Pel.* 1.22.40).

In what class do we place baptized infants but amongst believers [*Ubi ergo parvulos ponimus baptizatos, nisi inter fideles*], as the authority of the catholic Church everywhere asserts? They belong, therefore, among those who have believed; for this is obtained for them by virtue of the sacrament and the answer of their sponsors” (*De pecc. mer.* 1.33.62).⁶³

For Augustine, baptized infants and adults are counted as *believers*. Infants “are rightly called believers, because they in a certain sense profess faith by the words of their parents. . . the whole of this is done in hope, in the strength of the sacrament and of the divine grace which the Lord has bestowed upon the church” (*De pecc. mer.* 1.19.25). That infants make the transition from darkness to light, from blindness to illumination “through the sacrament of baptism is not doubted by mother Church, which uses for them the heart and mouth of a mother, that they may be imbued with the sacred mysteries, seeing that they cannot as yet with their own heart ‘believe unto righteousness,’ nor with their own mouth make ‘confession unto salvation.’ There is not indeed a man among the faithful, who would hesitate to call such infants believers merely from the circumstance that such a designation is derived from the act of believing; for although incapable of such an act themselves, yet others are sponsors for them in the sacraments” (*De pecc. mer.* 1.25.38).

This is as far as Augustine takes the matter in *De peccatorum meritis et remissione*. In *Epistle* 186, however, he seeks an explanation for the fact that troubling empirical reality that infants are not in themselves conscious believers, that is they do not have the capacity to exercise faith. Babies are “not conscious” of receiving the gift of eternal life.

⁶³MPL 44.144.

It is certain that, if they depart from the body at this tender age, they receive eternal life and the kingdom of heaven, knowing that it is by His gift, *although here they did not know it* when it was beneficial to them. . . . and in giving them the grace of God He operates in such wise that the will of the recipients is not previously stirred or assisted, nor does it follow after, since, in fact, this great benefit is conferred on them not only without their willing it, but often in spite of their fighting against it, which would be imputed to them as a great sacrilege if the freedom of the will had any effect in them.” (*Ep.* 186).

To those who argue that Christ’s salvation is incapable of benefiting those who are not believers, Augustine agrees, and argues that we ought rather

to class baptized infants in the number of believers, and to assent to the authority of the Holy Universal Church, which does not account those unworthy of the name of believers, to whom the righteousness of Christ could be. . . of no use except as believers. As, therefore, by the answer of those, through whose agency they are born again, the Spirit of righteousness transfers to them that faith which, of their own will, they could not yet have; so the sinful flesh of those, through whose agency they are born, transfers to them that injury, which they have not yet contracted in their own life. And even as the Spirit of life regenerates them in Christ as believers, so also the body of death had generated them in Adam as sinners” (*De pecc. mer.* 3.2.3).

Augustine argues that at baptism the infant is “reborn once through the spiritual will of others.” How can this be?

It is one Spirit that makes it possible for a man to be reborn through the agency of another’s will when he is offered for baptism, and through Him the one offered is reborn. For it is not written: ‘Unless a man be born again through the will of his parents’ or: ‘through the faith of his godparents or the ministers,’ but: ‘Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Spirit’ [John 3:5]. The water, therefore, manifesting the sacrament of grace exteriorly, and the Spirit, effecting the benefit of grace interiorly, loosing the bond of guilt, restoring good to his nature, both regenerate in one Christ the man who was begotten of one Adam. The regenerating Spirit then is equally present in the elders offering and in the child offered and reborn; therefore, through this sharing of one and the same Spirit, the will of those offering is beneficial to the child offered for

baptism. . . Guilt is not communicated by the will of another, as grace is communicated by the unity of the Holy Spirit. . . It follows that a child born of his parents' flesh can be born again of the Spirit of God, so that the taint contracted from them is washed away. Therefore, the child does not lose the grace of Christ once conferred, except by his own sinful act, if he turns out badly as he grows older. Then, indeed, he will begin to have his own personal sins which are not taken away in baptism, but may be healed by another remedy (*Ep.* 98).

Notice that Augustine's answer assumes a *community* of the Holy Spirit between parents and infants. Augustine appears to believe that the Holy Spirit is shared by parents and infant in a kind of community of souls so that the faith of the parents or sponsors can be beneficial to the soul of the infant. Since the Holy Spirit become common property between the infant and the parents/sponsors, the baptized baby can be said to possess faith. This is a fascinating argument which Augustine will refer to again. "And even as the Spirit of life regenerates them in Christ as believers, so also the body of death had generated them in Adam as sinners. The one generation is carnal, the other Spiritual; the one makes children of the flesh, the other children of the Spirit" (*De pecc. mer.* 3.2.2). Thus, for Augustine, infants of believing parents receive the faith of their parents (or sponsors) by means of the community of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

Here, then, in Augustine's first polemic against Pelagianism we have all the elements of Augustine's theology of infant baptism, elements that, as we have seen, are later expanded and refined throughout the course of the next 18 years of controversy. Peter Brown assigns the fundamental difference between Augustine and Pelagius to "two radically different views on the relation between man and God." These two views are summed up succinctly in their respective theologies of infant baptism. "Augustine had long been fascinated by babies: the extent of their helplessness had grown upon him ever since he wrote the *Confessions*. . ." Even

as a full-grown man Augustine can characterize himself as “an infant sucking the milk you give and feeding upon you” (*Conf.* 4.1). For Augustine, infant baptism was of fundamental soteriological significance. Infant-like helplessness and dependence best sums up every man’s relationship to God. But for Pelagius, who according to Jerome was contemptuous of babies (*Ep.* 32.3), it is the freedom and autonomy of a mature adult set free from the tutelage of his parents that best captures the essence of Pelagian theological anthropology. “The Pelagian man was essentially a separate individual: the man of Augustine is always about to be engulfed in vast, mysterious solidarities. For Pelagius, men simply had to imitate Adam, the first sinner: for Augustine, they received their basic weakness in the most intimate and irreversible manner possible; they were born into it by the mere fact of physical descent from this, the common father of the race.”⁶⁴

Even so, the controversy between Augustine and Pelagius cannot be reduced to each man’s feelings about babies. What was at stake was the church’s understanding of Holy Baptism’s liturgy applied to infants? It was a battle over the interpretation of the *lex orandi* of the Apostolic *regula fidei*. Jaroslav Pelikan cites this “shocking” passage from an appendix to Adolf von Harnack’s *History of Dogma*: “the history of dogma in the first three centuries is not mirrored in the liturgy, as far as we know it, nor is the liturgy a clearly emerging basis of the dogmatics.” Harnack misses something essential here, according to Pelikan, who insists that this bold assertion “needs to be offset by a far greater recognition of the role that liturgy and the *lex orandi* of Christian worship have played in the development of doctrine as the *lex credendi*”⁶⁵ Precisely so.

It is not surprising that Augustine first crossed swords with nascent “Pelagianism” over the meaning and significance of infant baptism. The Pelagian *credendi* concerning the

⁶⁴Brown, *Augustine*, 352, 365, 366.

⁶⁵Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Melody of Theology: A Philosophical Dictionary* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 113.

sinlessness of infants was in direct contradiction to the *lex orandi* of the catholic Church which faithfully baptized infants “for the remission of sins.” This basic ritual datum dominates and controls Augustine’s theologizing. If sinlessness (*impeccantia*) truly characterizes infants, then why does the church pass such innocent beings through the bath of regeneration? The meaning of Holy Baptism is one, whether for infants or adults. The church’s rites of exorcism and baptism cannot be explained except on the supposition that infants are defiled and guilty (*De pecc. mer.* 1.34.63; *De nupt. et concup.* 1.22).⁶⁶ For Augustine the simple *datum* of an infant washed with water in Holy Baptism was of monumental theological significance.

In conclusion, however, we must ask a few questions that naturally arise from our discussion of Augustine’s emphasis on the remission of the guilt of original sin in baptism. First, what place does the gift of the Holy Spirit have in Augustine’s theology of infant

⁶⁶One of the questions raised by Augustine’s emphasis on the remission of the guilt of original sin is: what place does the gift of the Holy Spirit have in Augustine’s theology of infant baptism. Pelikan notes that “for Origen, as for church doctrine generally [circa. A.D. 200], the most distinctive gift of baptism was the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Pelikan, *Emergence*, 165). See also *De pecc. mer.* 1.9.10 where Augustine refers to the infusion of grace in infants by the Holy Spirit at their baptism. He says that the baptized infant is made a temple of the Holy Spirit, even though unconscious of his tremendous new status (*Ep.* 187). But for Augustine, the most distinguished gift conferred by paedobaptism is the remission of the guilt of original sin. Another question remains: has Augustine, in his preoccupation with original sin, lost some of the richness of the meaning of baptism? Does he understand it merely as effecting expiation alone? Surely he is in line with the credal explanation of the effect of baptism, but does he not miss some of the riches of baptism symbolism and typology developed by the pre-Augustine church? See Jean Daniélou, *The Bible and the Liturgy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1956) 19-113; and his *From Shadows to Reality: Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers*, trans. Wulstan Hibberd (London: Burns and Oates, 1960) 69-114, 153-226, 261-275. Maybe the loss of the fullness of the meaning of baptism was inevitable when the subjects of the rite ceased to be primarily pagan adult converts, but the infants of believing parents. Furthermore, it might be argued that this parring back of all the symbolism attached to baptism in the development of Holy Baptism’s liturgy had the salutary effect of focusing the attention on the most important gift bestowed—the forgiveness of sins. After all, as Luther was later to exclaim in his Small Catechism with reference to the Lord’s Supper: “By these words [‘for you’ and ‘for the forgiveness of sins’] the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given to us in the sacrament, for where there is forgiveness of sins, there are also life and salvation” (SC 6.6).

baptism. Pelikan notes that “for Origen, as for church doctrine generally [circa. A.D. 200], the most distinctive gift of baptism was the gift of the Holy Spirit.”⁶⁷ In *De pecc. mer.* 1.9.10 Augustine does refer to the infusion of grace in infants by the Holy Spirit at their baptism. He says that the baptized infant is made a temple of the Holy Spirit, even though unconscious of his tremendous new status (*Ep.* 187). Even so, for Augustine, the most distinguished gift conferred upon the infant in baptism is the remission of the guilt of original sin.

Another question remains: has Augustine, in his preoccupation with original sin, lost some of the richness of the meaning of baptism? Does he understand it merely as effecting expiation alone? Surely he is in line with the creedal explanation of the effect of baptism, but does he not miss some of the riches of baptism symbolism and typology developed by the pre-Augustine church?⁶⁸ Maybe the loss of the fullness of the meaning of baptism was inevitable when the subjects of the rite ceased to be primarily pagan adult converts, but the infants of believing parents. Furthermore, it might be argued that this paring back of all the symbolism attached to baptism in the development of Holy Baptism’s liturgy had the salutary effect of focusing the attention on the most important gift bestowed—the forgiveness of sins. After all, as Luther was later to exclaim in his Small Catechism with reference to the Lord’s Supper: “By these words [‘for you’ and ‘for the forgiveness of sins’] the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given to us in the sacrament, for where there is forgiveness of sins, there are also life and salvation” (SC 6.6).

⁶⁷ Pelikan, *Emergence*, 165

⁶⁸ See Jean Daniélou, *The Bible and the Liturgy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1956) 19-113; and his *From Shadows to Reality: Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers*, trans. Wulstan Hibberd (London: Burns and Oates, 1960) 69-114, 153-226, 261-275.

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