Part 3 - The Great Baptism Fiasco!

We can complete the picture of the metamorphosis of the Christian Church at the hands of the Early Church Fathers by looking at the whole subject of baptism. What, then, does the New Testament show us concerning how the apostles taught people go about it?

Acts 2v38, 41 - Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”....Those who accepted his message were baptized...

Acts 8v12 - But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.

Acts 8v36-38 - As they travelled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. Why shouldn’t I be baptized?” And he ordered the chariot to stop. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.

Acts 9v17-18 - Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord - Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here - has sent me to you that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized...

Acts 10v44-48 - While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, “Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.” So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Acts 16v30-33 - He (the Philippian jailer) then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved - you and your household.” Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptised.

From these passages we can clearly see that when it comes to baptizing people, and just as with the way in which churches were set up and functioned, there was a set way of doing things which the apostles passed on, and to which everyone was expected to adhere. And we see that baptism was done in water, by immersion (though there is a very good case to be made for throwing water over people instead of immersing them), and as soon after profession of faith in Jesus as was practically possible, usually immediately. Further, there was no requirement whatever for others to be present, and the baptizing was done by whoever had just brought the one to be baptized to the Lord. Baptism therefore, as practiced without exception in the New Testament, precludes certain things; namely, infant baptism, baptismal preparation and baptism ‘services’. (Again, we must remind ourselves that the New Testament churches didn’t have anything even remotely resembling church ‘services’ of any kind, let alone baptism ones.) So it’s all pretty straightforward really, and I can again reassure you that no Bible scholar would question what I have just written concerning how churches, whilst under the influence
and teaching of the apostles, went about baptizing people. How, then, and why did things change? Well, we are going to have to slap the Early Church Fathers’ wrists again and stand them in the corner in disgrace. Just get a load of this:

_Ignatius - Bishop of Antioch, AD 110_
In his letter to the believers in Smyrna he writes:  
"It is not permitted to...baptize independently of the Bishop."
We must remind ourselves that he is here using the word _bishop_ (or overseer) in a way completely alien to what was meant by the apostles: that is, merely a synonymous word for _elder_ and _pastor_ (or shepherd).

_Justin Martyr, AD 150_
"All who accept and believe as true the things taught and said by us, and who would undertake to have the power to live accordingly, are taught to pray and entreat God, fasting, for the forgiveness of their former sins, while we join their prayer and fasting. Then we bring them to a place where there is water, where they are regenerated in the same way we were."

Two things should be noted here. Firstly, the time lapse between becoming a believer and being baptized is getting bigger and bigger. Not only does permission have to be sought from the Bishop, but there is mandatory prayer and fasting as well. The simplicity of the New Testaments, "...repent, believe on Jesus and be baptised..." has become, "Believe on Jesus, repent over a period of time with prayer and fasting, and then, after getting permission from the Bishop, be baptized."

Here lies the origin of the practice of baptismal preparation, and do be very clear that it is indeed based on the teaching of the Early Church Fathers and not the Bible at all. Immediate baptism upon profession of faith in Jesus, which is what the apostles taught everyone, has been overruled and replaced with baptismal preparation, along with and the need for authorization by the Bishop and for prayer and fasting.

Secondly, and this is nothing short of incredible (Did you spot it?), as early as 150AD we have the Fathers teaching that someone is born again not when they believe in Jesus as their Saviour, but rather when they are baptized. Under them, in order to be saved, one has to believe in Jesus, pray and fast, and finally, if one gets the Bishop’s permission, be baptized. The simplicity of the New Testaments, "...repent, believe on Jesus and be baptized...", has now been complicated even further to become, "Believe on Jesus, repent over a period of time with prayer and fasting, and then, after getting permission from the Bishop, be baptized at which point you will be born again.” (If this isn’t making your hair stand on end then it jolly well should be!)

_Tertullian AD 200_
"The unwed should be deferred for temptation is waiting for them as alike in the case of the virgins because of their maturity, as in the case of the widowed because they are without partners. Let them wait until they marry, or until they are strengthened for continence. (i.e. sexual abstinence) Those who understand the importance of baptism will rather fear its attainment rather than its delay."

Now we have the situation whereby single people can’t get baptized, and therefore be born again and
saved, unless the Bishop is happy beyond all doubt that they will never commit sexual sin. Baptism is now so grave and serious that someone must be considered to be beyond the possibility of sexual sin before they can receive it. But why on earth does he say that? Well, because of the following:

"...there are sins too ruinous, and too serious to receive pardon. Such are murder, idolatry, fraud, denial of Christ, blasphemy, and of course adultery and fornication...Christ will no more intercede for those: he who has been born of God will never commit them: if he has committed them he will not be a son of God."

Baptism is now seen only to cover and relate to past sins, but not subsequent ones. Tertullian is saying that, in effect, Christians will never do such things; or at least will be lost if they do. And of course the Bishop, from whom permission had to be sought, would apparently be the one who was able to make such judgments. (We have here, if you think about it, a rather novel definition of a Christian: someone who is beyond serious sin!)

It doesn't take much to see just how daft this all is. Even if these guys didn't have the entire New Testament readily available to them they most certainly had the Old Testament, and they knew full well, for instance, the story of King David's affair with Bathsheba and the subsequent murder of her husband. Would Tertullian and his fellow church leaders have maintained that King David wasn't actually saved and that he isn't now with the Lord in Heaven? There's no doubt that this irrational and dangerous stuff.

Tertullian has more to say though:
"All waters, after the invocation of God, attain the sacramental power of sanctification: for the Spirit straightway comes upon them from the heavens and is upon the waters sanctifying them by His own power: and being thus sanctified they are imbued at the same time with the power of sanctifying."

We have here the explanation as to why they thought that someone is born again when they are baptized rather than when they actually turn to Jesus in faith. Apparently, the water in which the person is going to be baptized becomes holy because the Spirit comes on it at the invocation of whichever priest is doing the baptizing; and it is this holy water which not just causes the person to be cleansed from past sins but also causes them to be born again and be sanctified against future ones. The water is therefore imbued with supernatural power through being blessed by a priest. And what we have here is superstition, pure and simple; and if your hair still isn't standing on end then I can only conclude that you are either completely bald, wearing a wig or aren't even a genuine believer!

Cyprian - Bishop of Carthage AD 250
"A man is not born by imposition of the hand when he receives the Holy Spirit, but in baptism."

We see again this idea of baptismal regeneration plus the rather strange notion that someone might have received the Spirit through the laying on of hands, yet still not be actually born again should they still not be baptized. It really does get more and more daft.

However, another innovation comes on the scene now which is the logical extension and conclusion of what they were so wrongly teaching about baptism:
"If remission of sins is granted to even the worst offender, and if no-one is shut out from baptism, how much less ought an infant to be shut out..."

What we have here is the simple fact that, when we come to the practice of infant baptism, it has never had anything whatsoever to do with the New Testament: and those who invented it never claimed that it had. It was merely a practice that emerged as a logical extension and consequence of the most appalling false teaching and wrong understanding about baptism and the nature of conversion by men who didn’t have at their disposal the New Testament scriptures in their entirety. But even if we do allow them the luxury of the feeling that, without the New Testament, this was understandable, we nevertheless can’t offer the same excuse to anyone doing similarly from the third century onwards. When people try and locate such a completely non-biblical practice as infant baptism in the pages of the New Testament it should be clear to you now that they are doing so out of sheer ignorance, and not realizing that its originators didn’t even claim to have gotten it from the Bible in the first place.

We are seeing again and again and again that whether it’s how churches ought to be set up and practice, or the way in which baptism ought to be done, these aberrations of the last 1800 years are not, and never have been, anything whatever to do with the teaching of the New Testament. Further, those who came up with it all never even claimed to have got it from the New Testament. Indeed, they didn’t even have the entire New Testament available to them from which they could have gotten it anyhow.

Is it not ironic that, when it comes to something as foundational and important as baptism, the Christian Church has actually managed to get it completely wrong in both of the two possible ways available to it? Think about it: with infant baptism we baptize when we shouldn’t, and with baptismal preparation for new coverts we are not baptizing precisely when we should. A double whammy indeed! And for those who feel such preparation of new converts is important (though at least believers are being baptized and not babies) we must nevertheless realize that whatever reasons are cited for it they held just as true at the time of the apostles as well. They were perfectly aware that, for instance, they might end up baptizing people whose commitment later proved questionable. But the way to baptize was nevertheless given them by the Lord Himself and how right they were, in contrast to us, to just assume that He knew best and that His way was the only way, and that they should just get on with it and be obedient to His Word. We could go into the reasons for immediate baptism without preparation (for example, baptismal preparation puts the new convert on a kind of probation, the very opposite of what God’s grace is all about, and makes believing in Jesus alone not enough), but this is not the place to do it. Suffice to say that although few take baptismal preparation as far as its originators did - mandatory fasting and prayer, and the like - baptism classes are nevertheless rooted in the same fundamental error. And it’s worth noting that if there was one character in the New Testament whom we might be glad we hadn’t baptized too readily, even though he professed faith in Jesus, then it would have been Simon Magus in the eighth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. Yet what do we find but that he was indeed baptized immediately upon his profession of faith, and without any subsequent changes of policy being introduced by the apostles as a result. The choice is always between the Bible or traditions and practices which originate from elsewhere. Remember what Ray Simpson wrote concerning
the Anglican Church and its commitment to, "...the teaching of the Bible and the Early Church Fathers."

Let's here some more in this regard from the experts:

David F Wright was Senior Lecturer in Ecclesiastical History, University of Edinburgh. In “A Lion Handbook - the History of Christianity“ - Chapter on Beginnings, Section on Instruction Before Baptism, page 115, he writes:

"At the birth of the Church converts were baptized with little or no delay. But a course of instruction prior to baptism soon became customary, especially for non-Jewish converts. Hippolytus of Rome again provides valuable evidence. A converts occupation and personal relations were scrutinized, and then came pre-baptismal instruction which took 3 years (even longer in Syria). Good progress, or the imminence of persecution could shorten the period...More intensive preparations, including fasting, exorcism and blessing, immediately preceded baptism. The converts were often taught by laymen, such as Justin in Rome or Origen in Alexandria. By the 4th Century the clergy had taken over the instructions of converts, and the bishop had become personally responsible for the concentrated teaching and discipline immediately before baptism (Here lay the origin of Lent: from the 2nd Century baptisms normally took place at Easter.)....Careful preparation for baptism was seen as essential because baptism was commonly thought of as dealing with a person's past corruption but not his future faults. This explains the practice of delaying baptism, the development of a system of penitence to cover sins after baptism, and even Tertullian's insistence on purity before baptism so that baptism became almost a prize. The systematic teaching of converts along these lines flourished in the 3rd and 4th Centuries. As infant baptism became increasingly common the practice faded." (Used with permission.)

Dr John Drane, lecturer in practical theology at Aberdeen University, adjunct Professor of New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary, California, and a visiting Professor at Morling College, Sydney (we saw him, and this quote, previously) “Introducing the New Testament”. Chapter 22 and the section on The Institutional Church on page 397 Published by Lion. Revised 1999 Edition:

"Instead of the community of the Spirit that it had originally been, the Church came to be seen as a vast organization. Instead of relying on the Spirit's direct guidance it was controlled by an hierarchy or ordained men, following strict rules and regulations which covered every conceivable aspect of belief and behaviour. By the middle of the 2nd Century the change was complete. At the beginning the only qualification for membership of the Church had been a life changed by the Holy Spirit. Indeed, at the start there had been no concept of church 'membership' at all...But by the end of the 1st Century things were rather different. Now the key to membership of the Church not found in inspiration by the Spirit, but in acceptance of ecclesiastical dogma and discipline. And to make sure that all new members had a good grasp of what that meant, baptism itself was no longer the spontaneous expression faith in Jesus as it had originally been. Now it was the culmination of a more or less extended period of formal instruction and teaching about the Christian faith. And in all this we can see how the life of the Spirit was gradually squeezed out of the Body of Christ, to be replaced as the church's driving force by the more predictable if less exciting movement of organized ecclesiastical machinery." (Used with permission.)

That is, baptism was more and more seen as the door through which someone became a member of the church, but with the church being now an ecclesiastical organization as opposed to the little extended families it had started out as. Of course, the condition of such membership was submission to the church's hierarchy and leadership.
So just where have we come? What is it we have we seen concerning this transformation of the Christian Church at the hands of those who were not authorized by the Lord in any way to have done anything of the kind? Well, we have gone from the Christian Church being a family to it becoming a religious franchise. We have gone from organism to organization; from charismatic community to ecclesiastical Multi-national Corporation; from God-led to man-led; from divine inspiration to mere human machination. In short, the Lord has been moved out of His home and an alternative and unbiblical way of doing things moved in instead to take His place.

It was inevitable too that, in time, Spirit-led open and interactive worship and sharing in which all could take part would be replaced by religious services led from the front by the priests, the professionals, the experts. Inevitable too was the Lord’s Supper as a full meal, eaten together by God’s extended family, being replaced by a ritual with bread and wine in the context of the newly created ‘church services’. And of course the last bit of the blueprint to go was churches meeting in homes as religious cathedrals were donated to the priesthood by the Roman Emperor for the express purpose of holding such ‘religious services’. The change was complete. The transformation was accomplished and the metamorphosis eventually finalized. Within mere decades of the death of the apostles Christian churches, as established and set up by them, were no more; destroyed and replaced by a monstrous alternative which went comprehensively and systematically against virtually everything those churches had been.

But now we have another question to answer, and it’s this: What, then, ought we to be doing about it? I have, indeed, lit the fuse; in the next section the dynamite will go off!