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The Council of Nicaea on baptism

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The canons of the Council of Nicaea mention baptism three times: solid education into baptism is required, baptism by heretics is refuted, and baptism by schismatics is accepted. This article deals with the background of these decisions in the theology of that time, with special attention to the differences between Rome and the rest of Christianity.

The Western tradition culminated in Augustine's theology on baptism, which dates from the Roman practice of the third century up to the Council of Nicaea.

Keywords: Nicaea; baptism; heretics; schismatics; East and West; Augustine.

The Council of Nicaea on baptism

Baptism is not mentioned in the symbol of Nicaea (Denziger-Schönmetzer, nr 125), in contrast to the version of Constantinople[1] (Denziger-Schönmetzer, nr 150). This does not mean that baptism would not have been important for the participants of the Nicaean Council, but rather that their focus was so concentrated on the divinity of Christ that the section in the Creed on the Holy Spirit is limited to mentioning his name: 'and in the Holy Spirit'. The divinity of the Spirit and his work were not explicitly at stake in Nicaea.

Nevertheless, baptism was on the table at Nicaea. Unfortunately, no minutes of the meeting are extant, and probably they have never been written, but from the Canons (Fernández 2024: 132–145) we can conclude that baptism was implicitly and explicitly on the table, and from the decreed measures it is clear that it was of high importance.

Solid instruction – Canon 2

Canon 2 (Fernández 2024) repudiates the praxis:

> [*T*]hat men just converted from heathenism to the faith, and who have been instructed but a little while, are straightway brought to the spiritual laver, and as soon as they have been baptized, are advanced to the episcopate or the presbyterate. (p. 134)

This should no longer be allowed in the future. Although the focus is on ministry, and where no novices may be ordained, it also touches on baptism: or better, the preparation for it. Catechumens should not be instructed but a little while and 'straightway brought to the spiritual laver'. Therefore, the council asks for a solid education of catechumens before they are baptised.

Just like other Nicaean canons, this rule has not always been followed since its proclamation,[2] but the intention is clear. A beautiful example of such good preparation for baptism is the catechetical lessons of Cyril of Jerusalem (pp. 315–386).[3]

True faith – Canon 19

Canon 19 (Fernández 2024:142) is the most important of the rules for understanding how the Nicaean bishop thought about baptism. 'Concerning the Paulinists who have flown for refuge to the Catholic Church, it has been decreed that they must by all means be rebaptised'. Paulinists are the followers of Paul of Samosata (200–275), who denied the full divinity of Christ. Therefore,

1.When *Constantinople* is mentioned in this article, it refers to the first Council with that name in 381, just like 'Nicaea' refers to the meeting of 325.

2.Remarkable examples are Ambrose of Milan and Nectarius of Constantinople (Ritter 1965:113), who were rashly baptised because they were elected to be bishops (resp. 374 and 381).

3.Dates, specially dates of birth, of early Christian theologians are often approximations.

Note: Special Collection: The Creed of Nicaea after 1700 Years: The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'The Creed of Nicaea after 1700 years: Reflections on doctrine, confession, and ecumenism', under the expert guidance of guest editors Nico Vorster, Sarel van der Walt and Nadia Marais.

their teaching touched the very core of the Nicaean synod. Paul of Samosata was already condemned as a heretic in 269. At the Nicaean council, this is presupposed. It only deals with the consequences regarding baptismal practice for people who convert from this community to the Catholic Church. They must be rebaptised, or better, really baptised, because the baptism of the Paulinists is not acknowledged as valid.

To understand this decree, we must firstly see what baptism meant for the early orthodox Christianity.

Baptism, eternal life, and the Trinitarian formula

Baptism is mentioned in most versions of the Creed that were used in the Greek church (Denziger-Schönmetzer 41–48). It was not a matter of debate, but rather a solid element of Christian faith. It was even a core element (Kinzig 2024:61, 104). Baptism was not only confessed. It was the ritual for becoming a Christian. The liturgy of baptism and its confession in the Creed are the basic expressions of true orthodoxy, the glory (*doxa*) of God in both acts and words in the one liturgy.

From the very beginning of Christianity, baptism was executed by using the trinitarian baptismal formula: in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Mt 28:19; *Didache* 7). Other formulas were rejected, except for being baptised in the name of Jesus in the earliest period, because Jesus's relations to the Father and the Spirit were presupposed. Baptism in his name implied the confession that he is divine and participates in the divinity of the Father and the divine Spirit. 'For the naming of Christ is the confession of the whole, showing forth as it does the God who gave' (Basil of Caesarea, 330–379, *On the Holy Spirit* 12.28). For the same reason, the Spirit can also be mentioned alone (Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 12.28). However, the full trinitarian formula was basic and soon became the exclusive formula and a marker of orthodoxy. Other formulas were rejected. According to Irenaeus (140–202), some heretics *were uttered* when they baptised new members:

> [*B*]aptize them, with the utterance of these words: 'Into the name of the unknown Father of the universe – into truth, the mother of all things – into Him who descended on Jesus – into union, and redemption, and communion with the powers'. Others still repeat certain Hebrew words, in order the more thoroughly to bewilder those who are being initiated. (*Against heresies* 1.21.3)

This practice was an expression of their aberrant doctrine, and so also an argument for Irenaeus to reject them as heretics.

It was precisely this argumentation that Athanasius (297–373) picked up in the aftermath of the Nicene council. Athanasius found a convincing argument for the confession of the divinity of the Son in baptism. In his second oration against the Arians (± 360; Bardenhewer 1912:55), he says: 'The Arians do not baptize into Father and Son, but into Creator and creature, and into Maker and work' (*Against the Arians* 2.42).[4] This does not mean that the Arians literally used different words. They will have used the normal formula 'in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'. But because of their ideas about the Son, they actually baptised in the name of a creature. So, it is not about an aberrant formula as such but about a wrong interpretation of baptism, which is rooted in wrong convictions about God.

If the Son is a creature, he cannot be the Lord who gives eternal life. So, if we are baptised in the name of a creature, baptism will not be life-giving. Salvation is at stake if baptism is not in the name of divine persons. The relation of baptism and salvation is basic for early Christianity. It is 'the seal of eternal life' (Irenaeus, *Epideixis* 3). Because Christians believe that they receive participation in eternal life through baptism, the initiation must be in the name of God only. No creature can participate in it, for no creature can give eternal life. 'If the Son be a creature, the nature of rational creatures being one, no help will come to creatures from a creature, since all need grace from God' (Athanasius, *Against the Arians* 2.41). Consequently, eternal life will be lost if a creature guarantees the effects of baptism. So, the effectiveness of baptism, upon which all Christians agreed, implied that they must confess the divinity of the Son.

The Arians could claim that the name of the Father would be sufficient, because he is God. But why is the name of the Son mentioned in the baptismal formula, then? Why should we add something superfluous to such a holy moment? It can only confuse:

> Why is a thing made classed with the Maker in the consecration of all of us? […] For if it was that we might be joined to the Godhead, what need of the creature? (Against the Arians 2.41).

The Arians confuse categories of the Creator and the created and blur the distinctions that are needed for truth.

Athanasius concludes:

> Since the course of the discussion has led us also to mention holy Baptism, it is necessary to state, as I think and believe, that the Son is named with the Father, not as if the Father were not all-sufficient, not without meaning, and by accident; but, since He is God's Word and own Wisdom and being his Radiance, is ever with the Father (*Against the Arians* 2.41).

Hilary of Poitiers (pp. 310–367) takes on the same position. Those who reject the divinity of the Son have framed strange doctrines of their own device and are neither called nor baptised, nor believing;

> [*B*]ecause in one God the Father and in one Lord Jesus Christ there lies the one faith of one hope and baptism. And no alien doctrine can boast that it has a place among the truths which

4.Gregory of Nyssa (334–395) mentions a similar formula of Eunomius (died ± 393): 'He says that baptism is not into the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as Christ commanded his disciples when He delivered to them the mystery, but into an artificer and creator' (*Against Eunomius* 11.5). Gregory blames Eunomius for borrowing from the Gnostics.

> belong to one God and Lord and hope and baptism and faith. (*On the Trinity* 8.40)

Baptism and the divinity of the Spirit

The argumentation from baptism to the divinity of the Son becomes a powerful weapon in the debates on the divinity of the Holy Spirit, when Macedonius of Constantinople (died ± 360) contested it. In his work, *Against the Arians*, Athanasius mentions the divinity of the Spirit in the passing as a consequence of his argumentation about the Son: 'When baptism is given, whom the Father baptises, him the Son baptises; and whom the Son baptises, he is consecrated in the Holy Ghost' (*Against the Arians* 2.41). It was not yet a hot issue.

This changed when Macedonius came on the stage. In his letters to Serapion, Athanasius comes to a full argumentation from baptism to the divinity of the Spirit.

> For this grace and gift that is given, is given in the Triad, from the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. As the grace given is from the Father through the Son, so we can have no communion in the gift except in the Holy Spirit. For it is when we partake of Him that we have the love of the Father and the grace of the Son and the communion of the Spirit himself. (*To Serapion* 1.30)

He elaborates further on the categorical distinction between creating and created. 'For what communion can there be between that which is originate and that which creates? What unity between the lower creatures and the Word who created them?' (*To Serapion* 1.30). If the Holy Spirit is a creature, you must conclude that Christians have a double identity.

> If you have dreamed dreams of calling the Holy Spirit a creature – then you no longer have one faith and one baptism, but two, one in the Father and the Son, another in an angel who is a creature (*To Serapion* 1.30).

Apollinaris of Laodicea (± 310–382) shows the consequences of this double identity . He, too, contests the confusion of categories when he is baptised with the trinitarian formula while denying the divinity of the Spirit (Apollinaris of Laodicea, *A sectional Confession of Faith* 5)[5]:

> For either we must apprehend the perfect Trinity in its natural and genuine glory, or we shall be under the necessity of speaking no more of a Trinity, but only of a Unity; or else, not numbering created objects with the Creator, nor the creatures with the Lord of all, we must also not number what is sanctified with what sanctifies; even as no object that is made can be numbered with the Trinity, but in the name of the Holy Trinity baptism and invocation and worship are administered.

It is precisely the trinitarian shape of the baptismal formula that indicates the divinity of all three names. The Holy Spirit cannot be excluded from this unless the whole baptism will be valueless. Origen also states in *On the Principles* 1.3.2:[6]

> From all which we learn that the person of the Holy Spirit was of such authority and dignity, that saving baptism was not complete except by the authority of the most excellent Trinity of them all, i.e. by the naming of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and by joining to the unbegotten God the Father, and to His only-begotten Son, the name also of the Holy Spirit. (pp. 185–253)

Baptism is a matter of worship. If you baptise in the name of God and in the name of a creature, you worship both God and a creature. This would be a blasphemy. Apollinaris of Laodicea states in *A Sectional Confession of Faith* the following:

> For if there are three glories, there must also be three several forms of cultus with those who impiously worship the creature; for if there is a distinction in the nature of the objects worshipped, there ought to be also with these men a distinction in the nature of the worship offered. What is recent surely is not to be worshipped along with what is. (p. 5)

The Cappadocian fathers fully elaborated the track that Athanasius had opened. Basil argues that baptism is necessary for salvation. This is the main argument in the debates on the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Our salvation is at stake. 'In what way are we saved? Plainly because we were regenerate[*d*] through the grace given in our baptism' (*On the Holy Spirit* 10.26). Baptism secures us 'a participation in a life no longer subject to death' (Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Holy Spirit*, 19).

If this baptism is in the name of a creature, how can it be effective? It would make salvation dependent on somebody who himself needs a saviour. Then the hope of salvation will be vain (Gregory of Nyssa, *Great Catechism* 39). The Spirit is the 'Creator-Spirit, who by baptism and by resurrection creates anew' (Gregory of Nazianzus 329–390, Oration 31.29). If the divinity of the Spirit is denied, baptism is only partially divine. Consequently, it does not give salvation and is useless. 'If the Holy Ghost is a creature, you are baptized in vain' (Gregory Nazianzus, *Oration* 37.18). 'Whether a man have departed this life without baptism, or have received a baptism lacking in some of the requirements of the tradition, his loss is equal' (Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 10.26).

The Macedonians not only deprive themselves and their followers of eternal life, but they also oppose God's own commandment. Basil, in *On the Holy Spirit*, declares:

> For if our Lord, when enjoining the baptism of salvation, charged His disciples to baptize all nations in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, not disdaining fellowship with Him, and these men allege that we must not rank Him with the Father and the Son, is it not clear that they openly withstand the commandment of God? (10.24)

The confession of the divinity of the Spirit has to do with true worship. Gregory Nazianzus in *Oratio* 31.28 states:

5.The *Sectional Confession of Faith* was previously attributed to Gregory Thaumaturgus (pp. 213–270), but there are strong indications within the text itself that it is from a later time. Arguments from external evidence for the authorship of Apollinaris are convincing (Bardenhewer 1914:330).

6.It might be that Rufin, in his translation, adapted Origen's text to the debates of the late fourth century (Berghuis 2009:152, note 57). However, it is possible that Origen himself stressed the divinity of the Spirit and used the word 'Trinity'. His section about the Holy Spirit is not focused on baptism but on the Spirit himself, with reference to biblical texts. Even the word 'Trinity' was already in use before Origen, at least in the Latin version 'trinitas' (Tertullian 160–230, *Against Praxeas* 2), and the exchange of ideas was strong in early Christianity. It certainly did not consist of isolated communities.

> If [*the Holy Spirit*] is not to be worshipped, how can He deify me by Baptism? But if He is to be worshipped, surely He is an Object of adoration, and if an Object of adoration He must be God; the one is linked to the other, a truly golden and saving chain.

By denying the divinity of the Spirit, they do not give the true glory [*doxa*] to God, as Basil (in *On the Holy Spirit*) states:

> What reason is there for robbing [*Him*] of His share of glory [–] Him Who is everywhere associated with the Godhead; in the confession of the Faith, in the baptism of redemption, in the working of miracles, in the indwelling of the saints, in the graces bestowed on obedience? (24.55)

Basil continues:

> We are baptized […] under the obligation to believe, we make our confession in like terms as our baptism, in accordance with the tradition of our baptism and in conformity with the principles of true religion. (27.67)

We have deemed ourselves under a necessary obligation to combine in our confession of the faith him who is numbered with them at Baptism, and we have treated the confession of the faith as the origin and parent of the doxology. What, then, is to be done? They must now instruct us either not to baptise as we have received, or not to believe as we were baptised, or not to ascribe glory as we have believed

It can be concluded that orthodox theologians involved in the debates around the 4th century councils, used baptism, particularly the trinitarian formula, to argue the divinity of the Son and the Holy Spirit. They do so regarding the certainty of human salvation, which cannot depend, not even partially, on a creature, and regarding the true glory of God, in the unity of credal confession and baptism. As Basil in Epistle 91 ends one of his letters:

> May the good teaching of the Fathers, who met at Nicaea, shine forth; so that the ascription of glory may be rendered to the blessed Trinity in the terms of the baptism of salvation.

Basil argues that his argumentation from baptism to the divinity of the Son and the Spirit is the true faith of Nicaea. From their strict attitude against the Paulianists, it may be concluded that he is right. The denial of their baptism by Nicaea is an expression of their trinitarian theology.

The canon of Nicaea explicitly decrees that Paulianists must be baptised when they come into the Catholic Church. But why do they not mention people who were baptised by Arians? Athanasius explicitly argues that the baptism by Arians is not valid. Nevertheless, neither Nicaea nor any other council decrees their rebaptism. On the contrary, the radical orthodox Epiphanius even blames people who do so (*De fide* 13.5). He simply argues that it is not decreed by the church. But why did the church not decree this, as she did with the Paulianist baptism?

The answer must be found in the fact that the Arians did not have a counter church. They were not organised in separate communities, although condemned, within the church (Epiphanius, *De fide* 13.5). There was no Arian church outside the church from which members could come to the Catholic Church. They were a party within the Catholic Church. Therefore, they could not come to the church from outside.[7] For a long time after Nicaea, they even had dominant positions in the church because of the church policy of the emperors. It is only by the end of the 70s of the 4th century, when the tide at the imperial court was changing that small groups of Arians organised themselves, but this was hardly relevant anymore. For later synods, it was better to leave the matter as it had been so that Arianism could die a silent death.

Faith only – Canon 8

Canon 8 (Ferrnández 2024:136) deals with the Novatians, or as they are called in Nicaea, the Cathari, 'if they come over to the Catholic and Apostolic Church'. Their clergy can be accepted after a simple ritual. No baptism is required in contrast to the Paulianists. For understanding this difference, we must focus on the early Christian ideas on the unity of the church.

One baptism

The symbol of Constantinople does not simply speak about 'baptism' but 'one baptism'. This corresponds with the earlier Creed of Cyril of Jerusalem. Baptism in these Creeds is provided with the definite numeral: *one* baptism. This is not just a rejection of a plurality of baptisms but it has, first, a fundamental theological meaning.

The *one* in 'one baptism' corresponds with the *one* in the Creeds: *one* God, *one* Lord, *one* Holy Spirit, *one* Church (see Van de Beek 2006; 2012:37). The unity of God in the three persons is fundamental for Christian theology. The divine persons are the presence of the one power and glory of God, which is celebrated in the one church. This is expressed both in the trinitarian baptismal formula and in the trinitarian confession, usually indicated as *faith*. Faith and baptism cannot be separated. *Faith* here does not have the meaning that has become dominant in later Protestantism and even more in Neo-Protestantism: that your personal faith is required for baptism, or at least for receiving its effects. In the writings of the 4th century fathers, 'faith' has an objective meaning, the *fides quae*. *What* do you believe? What do you confess? We confess the triune God as the one (and only one) undivided God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Creed and baptism are one, as stated in Basil (Epistle 159.2; see also Epistle 175; 251.4):

> As we were baptized, so we profess our belief. As we profess our belief, so also we offer praise. As then baptism has been given us by the Saviour, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, so, in accordance with our baptism, we make the confession of the creed, and our doxology in accordance with our creed.

7.See Shapland (1951:137) regarding the consequent prudence concerning the baptism by Arians.

Being baptised in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit implies being baptised into this unity. Athanasius (*Letter to Serapion* 4.7) declares: 'The Godhead which is in this Triad is one; and there is one faith and one baptism given therein' (see also Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical lessons* 16.4; Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 11.2–3).

This one God requires undivided worship, undivided devotion, undivided service, as the Shema (Dt 6:5) says: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength'. The totality of life and actions must be devoted to him. This includes our actions and attitudes to human beings, and to the whole creation. 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind [...] and love your neighbour as yourself' (Mt 22:38–39). These commandments are the same. You cannot exclude any element from this fundamental unity of God and his creation:

> Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. (1 Jn 4:20)

Baptism is being baptised in the name of the one Spirit, as representation of the one God into one body, the communion of the church. 'As parts in the whole so are we individually in the Spirit, because we all were baptized in one body into one Spirit' (Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 61). The church fathers often refer to Ephesians 4:6 to indicate the importance of this comprehensive unity (e.g. Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 11.1; Epiphanius, *Ancoratus* 7; 118). This unity includes the whole human being, not only their souls but also their bodies. Cyril of Jerusalem explains:

> This grace [*of baptism*] was not in part, but His power was in full perfection; for as he who plunges into the waters and is baptized is encompassed on all sides by the waters, so were they also baptized completely by the Holy Ghost. The water, however, flows round the outside only, but the Spirit baptizes also the soul within, and that completely. (*Catechetical lessons* 17.14)

When people break this unity by immoral behaviour, or by turning their back on the church, their salvation is at stake. You cannot be partially Christian. Cyril of Jerusalem, in his catechetical lessons, repeatedly warns his pupils to stay in the true faith. However, it happened that people gave up their participation in worship and Christian life. Are they still Christians, or not? This had been already a hot issue during the time of persecution. The strictest theologians refuted any possibility of return to the church. You cannot enter eternal life twice. Most bishops accepted a return after a trajectory of penitence. But then the question arose: Should they be baptised again? The general conclusion is that they should not be rebaptised. Mere laying on of hands is sufficient for re-acceptation into the community of the church. Baptism cannot be repeated: there is only one eternal life, as there is only one God. Precisely because of the unity of God and his undivided faithfulness, baptism remains valid, also after having become a *lapsus*. The prodigious son remains a son. Therefore, rebaptism is not required. It would even be a blasphemy because it would deny God's unity.

Any repetition of baptism does not acknowledge its profound meaning.[8] Epiphanius mentions a group that he calls *hemerobaptists* (*Ancoratus* 1.12; *Panarion* 17; see also Eusebius, *History of the Church* 4.22.6). They were people who repeated baptism because of sins that they had committed after having been baptised. Because human beings sin every day, a daily baptism was required according to this sect. This is rejected by the mainstream church, not only because it opens the door for taking sin easily (Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cathechetical lessons,* Prologue 7)[9] but also and even more, because baptism is not about forgiveness of daily sins but about doing away with a whole life of sin. The one baptism is participation in the one God, in his *oikonomia*, his work of salvation by the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. It is not about *daily* life, but about *eternal* life, where sin does not reign anymore. Basil (*On the Holy Spirit* 15.35) explains:

> On this account, we do not, as is the fashion of the Jews, wash ourselves at each defilement, but own the baptism of salvation to be one. For there the death on behalf of the world is one, and one the resurrection of the dead, whereof baptism is a type.[10]

The daily sins are not a reason for new baptisms, but stains on the one eternal life. They cannot be repaired by a new baptism, but by confession, penitence, and adaptation to the lifestyle that fits being baptised in the name of the triune God.

'Baptism' outside the Catholic Church

The unity of baptism implies participation in all its aspects and finally in the unity of God. After having been baptised, this cannot be repeated because it can not be broken by any human action. God will not break it because of his faithfulness, which is an expression of his unity. However, if the ritual is executed without relation to the triune God, it is an empty action, for baptism is nothing without God. It is not even an invalid baptism; it is not a baptism at all. It is fake. It is a blasphemy (abuse of the holy Name of the triune God).

This might be caused by the people who commit themselves to this ritual, while not having any interest in God and in living in his community. They can do so for earthly advantage or a better social position. This will not have happened frequently during the time that Christianity was often a persecuted minority, but after the Constantine turn, it certainly happened. In a context where Christianity was

8. *Constitutiones apostolorum* 8.47, canon 47: 'If a bishop or presbyter rebaptises him who has had true baptism ..., let him be deprived, as ridiculing the cross and the death of the Lord'.

9. Hippolyt (*Refutatio* 9.7) tells that bishop Callistus practised rebaptism for sinners. This corresponds with his extremely lax attitude to the moral life of his church members (Tertullianus, *De pudicitia* 1; Hippolyt, *Refutatio* 9.12). Also, the Gnostic group of the Marcites repeated baptism for the subsequent levels of introduction into the mysteries (Irenaeus, *Against heresies* 1.21; Hippolyt, *Refutatio* 6.36). According to Irenaeus, this is 'a denial of that baptism which is regeneration to God, and thus to a renunciation of the whole faith'.

10. When the Elkesaits repeated baptism (Hippolyt, *Refutatio* 9.10), this may have been inspired by these daily Jewish purification rituals.

booming when the Church of the Resurrection was built in the city of Jerusalem, Cyril (of Jerusalem) warns his catechumens against hypocrites. Such a baptism is of no value (Catechetical lesson 17.35, 36). However, Cyril does not say what should happen if such a person repents and becomes a true Christian: Should he or she be baptised, then? Or does the previous ritual become valid?

Clearer is the debate if it is about the persons who *execute* baptism. If they do not belong to the orthodox church, can they baptise them? Will their baptism be valid or not? And consequently, must the persons that they baptise be baptised again, or will they be really baptised when they become members of the orthodox church? This question about baptism by heretics has raged in the church for centuries, making canon 19 of Nicaea so interesting.

The Creeds that mention baptism are univocal: we confess one baptism, and 'one' implies unity of all its aspects, of which the unity of the church is basic. It is as basic as the unity of the triune God. The unity of the church is the way the unity of the Holy Spirit is expressed. Consequently, baptism outside this one Church is baptism without the Holy Spirit, and no baptism at all. Therefore, the Cappadocian fathers reject baptism that was executed by a heretic bishop (Basil, letter 188; 199.20 and 47). The orthodox theologians of the East are almost unanimous about this conclusion (e.g. Athanasius, *Against the Arians* 2.43; *Constitutiones apostolorum* 6.15). When Dionysius of Alexandria (†265) made an exception in a specific pastoral case (Letter 9, cited by Eusebius, *Church History* 7.9), the mere fact that this needs correspondence with his colleague in Rome indicates that it is not the normal practice.

This argumentation seems clear, and the decree of Nicaea that Paulianists should be rebaptised is consistent with it. However, when we zoom out, the matter is more complicated. Theologians, both in the East and the West, took on various positions which led to harsh conflicts and even excommunications.

North Africa

Theologians in North Africa were the strictest. Tertullian states:

> There is to us one, and but one, baptism; as well according to the Lord's gospel as according to the apostle's letters, inasmuch as *he says*, One God, and one baptism, and one church in the heavens. (*On baptism* 15)

Heretics do not confess the true God. They have a different God from the Christians and consequently their ritual is not a baptism at all:

> Because they and we have not the same God, nor one – that is, the same – Christ. And none with ours either, because it is not the same; a baptism which, since they have it not duly, doubtless they have not at all. (*On baptism* 15)[11]

11.See also his cynic criticism in *Against Marcion* 1.23: 'None I should think more shameless than him who is baptized to his god in water which belongs to another'. See also *De pudicitia* 19.

The main opponent of baptism by heretics is Cyprian.[12] He is unambiguous about this. 'We say that those who come thence are not re-baptized among us but are baptized. For indeed they do not receive anything there, where there is nothing' (letter 71.1, to Quintus). A heretic 'cannot give the Holy Spirit, because he that is appointed without is not endowed with the Holy Spirit' (*Letter 70.3, to Januarius*). Consequently, people who have received such a fake baptism must be baptised when they come to the church. A person who was baptised in a heretic community is worse than a heathen. 'Men are not washed among them but rather made foul; nor are sins purged away but are even accumulated' (*On the unity of the church* 2). Therefore, 'he who has been seduced into error, and baptized outside of the Church, should lay aside even this very thing in the true and ecclesiastical baptism' (*Letter 70.2, to Januarius*). The position of Cyprian is confirmed by a synod of all African bishops in Carthage in 256 (*Sententiae episcoporum*).

The unity of the church is Cyprian's core argument. Consequently, he not only rejects baptism by heretics, who do not keep to the trinitarian confession, but also baptism that was executed by schismatics. This provoked a fierce conflict with the Novatians. Novatian taught an orthodox doctrine on the Trinity, but he disagreed with the Catholic Church about the acceptance of *lapsi*, which led to a schism. The African church, under Cyprian's leadership, drew its conclusion: Novatians did not belong to the Catholic Church; consequently, they do not have the Holy Spirit, and therefore they cannot validly baptise. Their baptism is of no value; therefore, when Novatians come to the Catholic Church, they must be baptised.

Rome

Rome is situated at the other end of the spectrum. For Rome, baptism was not an expression of participation in the life that is given to the church by the triune God, as it was for the orthodox Greek fathers and even more for the African tradition. Rather, it was one of the many elements of Christian identity, wherein each element is a separate part of the whole composition of Christian faith. Consequently, it is not mentioned in the Roman versions of the Creed. With this concept of baptism, Roman bishops and other theologians in the sphere of Roman influence could accept baptism by schismatics or heretics. Baptism is just baptism, and if it is received, it contributes to your identity as a Christian. The focus is not so much on eternal life, but rather on remission of sins. The water is not an expression of death and life, but of cleaning. Hippolyte even mentions that the Roman bishop Callistus repeated baptism for those who asked for remission of sins (Hippolytus, *Refutation* IX.12). This corresponds with the lax practice of church disciple in Rome (Hippolytus, *Refutation* IX.7). Church life was more pragmatic than in the eastern regions, with its strict focus on the unity of life, confession, and organisation.

12.See more extensively about Cyprian's position: Van de Beek 2010.

The disagreement of North Africa and Rome led to heavy clashes between the leading bishops, with its apex the conflict between Cyprian and Stephen of Rome (Ferguson 2009: 380–399). Because Cyprian refused to accept persons from separatist churches without a new (Cyprian would say, 'true') baptism, Stephen excommunicated the bishop of Carthage. Cyprian did not react with the same exclusion of Stephen but sought (and got) support from Firmilian of Caesarea in present-day Türkiye. Consequently, Stephen also excommunicated Firmilian. Nevertheless, they, from their side, continued the bond with Rome in the unity of the church, mocking with Stephen: 'While you think that all may be excommunicated by you, you have excommunicated yourself alone from all' (Firmilian, letter to Cyprian, Cyprian's letters 75.24).

Both Cyprian and Stephen called on tradition.[13] However, Cyprian called on African tradition, and Stephen on Roman tradition. So, this motive did not help very much to settle the conflict. After their death, less pronounced bishops were on both seats, and the conflict lost its sharpness, but it continued, and when there was a motive, the fire was stirred up.

When Constantine changed the position of Christianity from a persecuted minority to the leading religion of the empire, he saw that the tensions between Africa and Rome were a danger to the unity of his dominion. One of his first acts after the change of the position of the church in 313 was settling the conflict. On a synod in Arles in 314, an agreement was forced: the baptism by heretics, who denied the divinity of the persons of the Trinity, was rejected, but the baptism of schismatics, who separated because of disagreement on church discipline, was accepted (Denziger-Schönmetzger nr 123). Consequently, Novatians could enter the Catholic Church without being baptised.

The East

Constantine also wanted to resolve conflicts in the church in the East. His second decade anniversary of being Emperor should express the unity of the empire, supported by a unanimous religion. That was his aim with the Council of Nicaea. As for the core issue of the council, the relation of Jesus and God, Constantine could force a unity for the day that the council expired, but soon this victory became the source of fiercer conflicts. But for baptismal practice, he was successful. Nicaea followed the line of Arles. Heretics must be rebaptised. This is the base of canon 19, about the Paulianists. That Marcionists and Sabellianists are not mentioned, does not mean that the rule would not be adapted for them, but that the church had already practised this for a long time. It was self-evident that they did not belong to the church and should be baptised when they became Catholic and thus real Christians.

13.Eusebius, *Church History* 7.3, says that Cyprian's decision was a novelty, but that is not right. Augustine says that it was invented by Cyprian's predecessor, Agrippinus (Augustine, *On baptism* 2.7.12). However, it was a long tradition in the church outside Rome. Tertullian repeatedly rejects baptism by heretics (see p. 13), and also Clemens Alexandrinus († 215) already wrote: '[*The Lord*] subjoins: For so shall you pass through the water of another; reckoning heretical baptism not proper and true water. And you shall pass over another's river, that rushes along and sweeps down to the sea; into which he is cast who, having diverged from the stability which is according to truth, rushes back into the heathenish and tumultuous waves of life'. (*Stromata* 1.19; Ferguson 2009:319).

Canon 8 of Nicaea implicitly confirms the rule of Arles. Although it explicitly only refers to members of the clergy of the Novatians and their ministry, the acceptance of these people in their position naturally also means the acceptance of their baptism.

The orthodox Greek fathers, after Nicaea, follow the track of baptism that Nicaea expresses. As mentioned above, Athanasius and the Cappadocians rejected baptism by heretics. This is nothing new in that region. According to Firmilian, this has been practised from the beginning:

> We do not remember that this at any time began among us, since it has always been observed here, that we knew none but one Church of God, and accounted no baptism holy except that of the holy Church. Certainly, since some doubted about the baptism of those who, although they receive the new prophets, yet appear to recognise the same Father and Son with us; […] many of us meeting together in Iconium very carefully examined the matter, and we decided that every baptism was altogether to be rejected, which is arranged for without the Church. (Cyprian's letters, 74.19)

While rejecting baptism by heretics, Basil, in agreement with the decisions of Arles and Nicaea, accepts the baptism by Novatians – also in accordance with custom (Basil, letter 188.1).

Tensions on baptism between East and West

Ongoing conflicts

Can the conclusion be drawn that Nicaea was successful regarding baptism policy? For the East, this can be affirmed. However, this was not so much the merit of the council. It was only the affirmation of existing use in the Eastern churches.

The situation was quite different in Africa. Nicaea may not have been very influential there, but the decision of Arles was directly pointed to the situation in Africa. And Africa did not accept it. A new generation of African radical Christianity arose, and because the Catholic Church excluded them, they organised themselves in a counter church, the Donatists. They collected all radical elements of African Christianity as their identity markers. And it appears precisely from this cumulation that tensions and differences in the past centuries existed that could not be healed by the decisions of Arles and Nicaea.

In the conflicts with Rome in the 3rd century, Firmilian and Cyprian is unanimous: heretics must be rebaptised. But it must be wondered if they spoke about the same matter. When speaking about heretics, Firmilian thought of Kataphrygians (or Montanists). According to Firmilan, an Asian synod affirmed a long-standing usage to rebaptise them when they came to the Catholic Church. This is supported by a letter of Dionysius of Alexandria (letter 6.1, cited by Eusebius, *Church History* 7.5.4). Kataphrygians had a

different opinion about the Holy Spirit, and consequently about the Trinity. Therefore, they were labelled as heretics.

When Cyprian speaks about heretics in his own context, he means Novatians. For him, they are not schismatics only, but also heretics. Schism itself is heretical because the church is the dwelling of the Holy Spirit. Separation of the church is a denial of the Spirit, and thus blasphemy.

For most Catholic theologians, separation is more like a collective *lapsus*: a group of persons like individual persons who deny their faith. According to Catholic practice, *lapsi* could be accepted again without a new baptism. They still belonged to the church, like the prodigious son remained a son.

Cyprian accepted this practice when it was about individuals, but he rejected it for communities. His opponents, the Novatians, also excluded individual *lapsi*. They kept to the old rigorous conviction that is also found in the letter to the Hebrews (6:4–6), that *lapsi* could not return. This is even more relevant if it is about bishops who denied their faith. Such a bishop could not return to his ministry, and when he baptised somebody, this baptism was invalid. So, the Novatians and their successors, the even more radical Donatists (and the Egyptian Melitians), related the validity to the *person* of the bishop, while Cyprian (and the theologians of the East) related it to the *community* wherein it was done.

In sum, we find an entire range of convictions and practices regarding baptism. The Novatians and Donatists were convinced that a baptism by any bishop who could be blamed for denial of his faith, or another serious sin, was invalid. According to Cyprian, baptism within a separated, either schismatic or heretic, community was invalid. According to the Greek theologians and the decrees of Arles and Nicaea, only baptisms within heretic communities were invalid (and thus baptism by Arians was valid because they did not have a separate community). The Roman bishops in the 3rd century also accepted baptism from heretic communities, but Rome adjusted its practice to the decisions of Arles and Nicaea.

The radical African church did not accept the decisions of the wider community of Christians. This resulted in heavy conflicts, not so much with Christians overseas, but rather with leading theologians in Africa itself who were shaped by the Roman tradition, had received a Roman education, and belonged to the Roman culture. The conflict was not limited to words and excommunications but resulted in terrorist attacks and finally the intervention of the Roman army (Frend 1952). It was the beginning of the end of North African Christianity.

Rome accepted Arles and agreed with Nicaea, like all leading Greek theologians. Everything seemed in peace. But exactly that peace was deceitful. The practice might be the same, but the underlying convictions, at the deepest level of feelings and convictions, were opposite. At the rational level of church meetings and church policy, they could agree, but at the level of spirituality and culture, they were different. It lasted long until the underlying frictions resulted in an open conflict. The tensions built up from century to century, but the schism of 1054 was already present in the 3rd century and from the beginning of the church.

The difference can be illustrated from the previously mentioned correspondence of Dionysius of Alexandria and Sixtus of Rome in the year 257 or 258. Rome had an open attitude regarding the acknowledgement of baptism. Anybody who was baptised, no matter in which community, was accepted. Dionysius worked in the context of the Greek tradition. Baptism by heretics was not acknowledged. There was a member of his congregation who confessed to him that he was baptised in a heretic church. He was a very engaged member who participated in all activities and always celebrated the Eucharist. But now he desired to become truly baptised and abhorred the perverse ritual he had once undergone (Dionysius letter 9).

Dionysius was confused. How could he possibly baptise such an outstanding member of his congregation, as if everything that this person had done and expressed would be of no value? Therefore, he refused to do so. But the person insisted. Other people also laid pressure on the bishop to keep to the tradition of rebaptism. Dionysius asked for advice from his colleagues in Asia-Minor. They referred to their own tradition of rebaptising heretics, which usage had been recently confirmed by all bishops in a council about the Kataphrygians. So, Dionysius did not get much support. Then he sent a letter to Sixtus. Maybe the authority of the Roman bishop could help him. Sixtus, in line with the Roman tradition, had no problems with Dionysius' choice not to rebaptise the man.

Sixtus and Dionysius agree. However, their attitude is totally different. Dionysius considers the whole essence of Christianity. Everything is intertwined, and you cannot take a single element from it. It is everything or nothing. From the unity of Christian confession and life of the person, Dionysius accepts his defective baptism as valid. For Sixtus, it is the other way around. Baptism is just one of the elements that Christians have as identity markers. You can collect these markers from anywhere. So, no problem to take your baptism from a heretic community. For Dionysius, being a Christian is a unity of life, and therefore rebaptising is a problem for him, for it would imply the rejection of everything the person celebrated and contributed to the congregation. For Sixtus, being a Christian consists of a collection of markers and joining a group. Some of these markers may be defective or even lacking. This is in line with the pragmatic approach of the Roman Church and the lax church discipline of his predecessors.

Augustine of Hippo

The aspects of baptism, according to the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitanum, are intrinsically bound together by

the unity of God. In the Roman tradition, however, these are separate elements that must be collected separately to gain salvation. In the work of the greatest theologian of the Roman tradition in the patristic period, Augustine, the consequences are elaborated. You can belong to the church, but are you really a Christian? Or are you only externally so? Much caff is present in the church (Ten Hove 2020). Only a part, even a small part of the church members is wheat. Therefore, baptism is not decisive for salvation. True faith in God, as a human attitude, is required, and true faith must be accompanied by acts of love to be valuable.

In this context, also the baptism by heretics comes into a different light. Baptism is not an entrance into the fullness of eternal life in communion with the triune God, but one of the elements on the way to salvation. You can be baptised without being saved. Similarly, you can be baptised without belonging to the true church. After being baptised in a heretic community, you can come closer to salvation by a transfer to the orthodox church, and it must be proven by your acts and life, whether this step was sufficient. In any case, it is not salutary. Augustine comments on baptism as follows:

> If baptism is both possessed and transferred by the multitude of others who work the works of the flesh, of which it is said, that 'they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God', [*Galatians 5:19–21*] then it is possessed and transferred also by heretics, who are numbered among those works; because they could have transferred it had they remained, and did not lose it by their secession. But men of this kind confer it on their fellows as fruitlessly and uselessly as the others who resemble them, inasmuch as they shall not inherit the kingdom of God. And as when those others are brought into the right path, it is not that baptism begins to be present, having been absent before, but that it begins to profit them, having been already in them; so is it the case with heretics as well. (Augustine, *On baptism* 7.54.103)

Augustine has provided the Roman practice with a solid theological underpinning. He compartmentalises baptism by making a distinction between its validity and its efficacy (Ferguson 2009:795–803; Van Ittersum 2018:208–212). The validity is guaranteed using the trinitarian formula, even if baptism is executed by a heretic within a heretic community. It can become legitimate when the baptised enters the Catholic Church, and its efficacy must subsequently be proven by a Christian life. Baptism has its own limited value, and this can be accepted, but it must be complemented by the other elements of true Christian faith. 'In each person we must acknowledge what he already has, and to each person we must give what he has not' (Augustine, *On Baptism* 5.21.29):

> The Church observed the most wholesome custom of correcting what was wrong, not repeating what was already given, even in the case of schismatics and heretics; she healed the wounded part, but did not meddle with what was whole. And this custom, [*is*] coming, I suppose, from apostolic tradition. (see also 5.21.29)

Still in the time of Augustine, most Christians in Africa kept to the Donatist tradition on the baptism practice, while, in spite of the strong efforts of Augustine to overcome them, the Roman party was a minority. Augustine's life, education, and training were Roman. His Christianity was shaped by the Italian tradition. Although born in Africa, he got a classic Roman education, and after his stay in Italy, he returned to his homeland as a stranger, and he remained so to the end of his life (Brown 2000:472–473). Consequently, the conflict in Africa, which is a conflict between Rome and the wider tradition of the church, only deepened.

Eventually, Augustine goes further than the Roman church of his time. Rome accepted the decisions of Arles and Nicaea, and by doing so, it consolidated the unity with the churches in the East despite underlying frictions. They rejected baptism by heretics but accepted schismatics without baptism. Augustine lumps both categories together. Not only is baptism by schismatics accepted by Augustine, but also by heretics, and he concludes:

> It is true that Christ's baptism is holy; and although it may exist among heretics or schismatics, yet it does not belong to the heresy or schism; and therefore, even those who come from thence to the Catholic Church herself ought not to be baptized afresh. (*On Baptism* 1.19.29)

Consequently, Augustine revisits the decisions of Arles and Nicaea and revisits the Roman practice of the 3rd century. This extends so far that he regards the credal phrase on forgiveness of sins as a kind of daily baptism (Kelly 2014:384), thinking within the same framework as Callistus, with his explicit repetition of baptism (see above p. 14).

However, the symbol of Nicaea-Constantinople was accepted as the Creed of the Catholic Church, including the phrase 'we confess one baptism'. It was established in a Council under the supervision of the emperor and therefore valid for the whole empire; also for Africa, where Augustine precisely fought for keeping the unity with Rome and combating the separatist, Donatist. Thus, he had to accept the Constantinopolitan Symbol, while disagreeing with its concepts on the church and baptism.

Augustine accepts the phrase, 'one baptism', but he gives it a radical reinterpretation. The heretics baptise with the same formula as the Catholics; therefore, it is the same baptism (*On Baptism* 5.21.29). By using his distinction of validity and effectivity of baptism, he can support the phrase and even use it to his own ends while rejecting the intention of the Greek theologians who established the Symbol. Thus, the Western Church could use the Symbol in liturgy while keeping to its own practice and spirituality.

Conclusion

Baptism belongs to the core of the Christian faith in Nicaean theology. It is of such importance that its formula can be used as an argument in the doctrine of God. The divine Persons are one, and as the dwelling place of the Spirit, the Church participates in this unity. Baptism is the way in which Christians are inserted into this sinless, eternal divine life. Heretics are excluded from this unity. Consequently, they

cannot baptise, but only offer a meaningless ritual, which is a perversion of true baptism.

In contrast to this comprehensive unity of faith, the Roman tradition has an approach from individual participation in salvation, and an analytic view of its elements. Baptism is only one of these elements and not the basic one as it is in the East and Africa. Consequently, it does not belong to the Creed, which only refers to the fundamental articles of faith.

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