

THE QUESTION OVER REBAPTISM IN LATE ANTIQUITY. HERETICAL CHALLENGES TO ORTHODOX VIEWS ON BAPTISM

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Abstract: *During Late Antiquity, there was much debate over re-baptism. For those who wished to join their communities, many heretical movements, including the Donatists and Novatians, required re-baptism. The orthodox view of baptism as a one-time sacrament conferring permanent membership in the church was challenged by this position. Christian identity and the relationship between Christian groups were significantly affected by the controversy over re-baptism. According to orthodoxy, baptism is a one-time sacrament that reinforces the unity of the church and the apostolic succession. The heretical view, on the other hand, emphasized the exclusivity of their respective communities and their rejection of the broader Christian tradition. As part of this topic, we will examine the historical, theological, and social dimensions of the controversy over re-baptism, including the beliefs and practices of the heretical groups, orthodox leaders, and communities, and the broader implications of these debates for Christian identity and community during late Antiquity.*

Keywords: *Rebaptism, Baptism, Late Antiquity, Heresies*

The question of re-baptism in late antiquity has been a subject of debates and disagreements among scholars for centuries. Rebaptism was a practice in late antiquity when people were baptized again, either out of doubt or as a symbol of renewed faith. The issue arose due to the emergence of various heretical sects that challenged the orthodox views on baptism.

The early period of the Orthodox Church was marked by a widespread belief that baptism was a crucial sacrament that could only be performed once and that it was essential for one's salvation.¹ The belief was rooted in the notion that baptism would enable Christians to reach heaven after their death, making it a cornerstone of the faith. However, some heretical sects contested this belief, claiming that baptism was insufficient for salvation and that it needed to be repeated. This sparked a fierce theological debate between the "Orthodox" (catholic) Church and the heretical groups.

¹ Sozomenus. *Kirchengeschichte*, 1–408.

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The dispute had far-reaching implications and was one of the defining moments in the history of the early Church. The “Orthodox” Church was of the view that re-baptism was unnecessary and even heretical, as it implied that the first baptism was not effective. They argued that baptism was an irreversible sacrament and that it could not be repeated. The heretics, on the other hand, contested that baptism was an ongoing process that could be repeated as many times as deemed necessary. They believed that re-baptism was a means of spiritual renewal and that it could be done repeatedly to wash away one’s sins.²

The debate was not limited to baptism alone and encompassed several other aspects of Christian theology, including the nature of the Trinity, the role of the Church, and the relationship between faith and good works. The controversy ultimately led to the formation of different sects within Christianity, each with its own set of beliefs and practices. Despite the differences, the early Church was able to establish a set of core doctrines that formed the basis of Christian theology for centuries to come.

The debate had significant implications for the Church’s understanding of sacraments, salvation, and the nature of the Church itself. It also had practical implications, as it affected the way in which baptism was administered and who was considered a valid candidate for baptism. The controversy was ultimately resolved in favour of the “Orthodox” view, which became the standard doctrine of the Church. However, the debate left a lasting impact on the Church’s theology and its understanding of sacraments.

The practice of rebaptism during late antiquity was a controversial issue that arose due to theological disagreements or doubts about the validity of previous baptisms. This practice was especially prevalent in the 4th and 5th centuries and became a source of controversy and division within the Christian church. During the early days of Christianity, the legitimacy of the Catholic Church and its sacraments was questioned by the Donatist sect in North Africa, which emerged as a result of a dispute over rebaptism. The Donatists believed that only those who were baptized by a pure and unbroken chain of bishops could be considered true Christians. They argued that if a priest who was in a state of sin performed the baptism, then the sacrament was invalid and needed to be repeated by a priest who was free from sin³.

The Donatists’ view of rebaptism had far-reaching implications for the religious landscape of the time. They believed that baptism was necessary for salvation, and therefore, rebaptism was necessary for those who had been baptized by a priest who was in a state of sin. They contended that the original baptism was not valid and that it was necessary to repeat the sacrament in order to be

² Epiphanius, *Panarion* 3.414.3

³ See Adamiak 2019, pp. 46–64.

fully accepted into the church. This theological disagreement was not easily resolved and had a lasting impact on the early Christian Church. The dispute led to the fragmentation of the church and the emergence of a separate Donatist Church. The Donatist movement persisted for centuries and influenced the development of African Christianity.⁴

The debate over re-baptism continued for several centuries. The issue was not limited to the Donatists alone, as other heretical sects also challenged the Orthodox Church's views on baptism. The Novatians, for example, believed that those who had lapsed from the faith and then returned needed to be re-baptized. They argued that the sacrament they received before their lapse was invalid since they had fallen away from the faith.

Baptism has been a significant practice since the New Testament era and even before. The most well-known Baptist of that time was John the Baptist, who baptized Jesus, among others. The ancient tradition of baptism has been incorporated into the evangelical stories and is based on the Hebrew method of baptism. The baptism of John was adopted by the Apostles of the New Testament, who followed a hierarchical order in performing baptisms. First, the children were baptized, and then the men and women followed, and there were also whole families who were baptized.⁵ This baptism involved pouring water all over the Christian's body and was considered to be the one and only baptism, the Holy One. As a result, there was no consideration of rebaptism in those times.

However, the Orthodox Church continued to reject the practice of rebaptism, arguing that baptism was a sacrament that could not be repeated.⁶ According to their belief, baptism was a once-in-a-lifetime event that could not be repeated, and re-baptism amounted to a denial of the efficacy of the first baptism and the grace of God. In the 3rd century, the Church decided that baptisms performed by heretics were invalid, which caused the Donatist schism. The Donatists believed that the sacrament was valid regardless of the state of the priest who performed it. The Church's position was supported by several influential theologians, including Augustine of Hippo, who wrote extensively about baptism.⁷ Despite this, the practice of baptism has continued to evolve over the centuries and is still an essential sacrament in many Christian denominations today.

During the 3rd to 4th centuries, there were multiple heretical movements that challenged the traditional way of baptisms, resulting in various contro-

⁴ Ps.-Hegem. Act. Arch. 68: *Montenses vero dicunt nos scripturas sanctas exurendas tradidisse ... dicentes eorum sacerdotes esse non posse qui scripturas tradiderunt* (GCS 16: 100).

⁵ Green 1987, p. 69.

⁶ See for example Gregory of Nazianzus, *Contra Arianos* (Hom. 33).

⁷ On the rebaptism of Donatists and Augustine of Hippo see Adamiak 2019, pp. 46–64.

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versies. Among these movements, Arianism is the most well-known, but the Eunomian heresy stands out as the most contentious regarding re-baptism. Eunomian baptism rejected the traditional baptismal practice of the Holy Trinity and the three-fold pouring of water over the head and body, instead opting for a one-time pouring of water in the name of Jesus' death.⁸ The Eunomians believed that the traditional baptism was incomplete and did not fully represent Jesus' death and resurrection. However, the mainstream Orthodox Church deemed Eunomian baptism to be heretical and rejected it as a valid form of baptism. Rebaptism was not considered the Orthodox way of true baptism, and Eunomian heresy was the most controversial movement that challenged the traditional practice.

Eunomius's theory said that whoever was baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity, should be rebaptized in the name of Jesus's death. The Eunomians were "studying" this kind of rebaptism and created a whole philosophy behind it.⁹ Their practices involved, not only the rebaptism of the "Orthodox" but also the rebaptism of the other Heretics as well (e.g., the Arians),¹⁰ and their practice involved the pouring of the head in the water, while the legs were up and did not get wet.¹¹

But how did the Orthodox Church deal with the heretical views and practices of rebaptism? The most formal way was the publication of an edict during late antiquity, which said that rebaptism was forbidden, even for the heretic ones who converted to "orthodoxy".¹² Instead of rebaptism, a religious prayer was read to them as a type of forgiveness.¹³ However, we do meet cases of rebaptism of the Heretics who converted to Orthodoxy,¹⁴ but in general, it was a disapproving act. For instance, if a bishop attempted to rebaptize a heretic Christian, he would lose his grace.

As we can see, the question about rebaptism was controversial during Late Antiquity. The appearance of the many Christian controversies made the "Orthodox" Church separate its position from them, by establishing the one and only way of baptism, the baptism in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Any other way was either unorthodox or even worthy of punishment. The heresies that appeared at that time were a kind of threat to the one and true church; That is why it had to seal its identity, as well as the identity of its Christian group.

⁸ Historia Imperatorum Liber II, l. 2096

⁹ Theodorus Anagnostes, *Epitome Historiae Tripartitae*, 3.196.4.
¹⁰ *Euchologion* f. 123.

¹¹ Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 3.414.9.

¹² Meletius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 3.10.5.14.

¹³ Meletius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 3.10.5.14.

¹⁴ *Synodicon Vetus*, 26.3.

During the early centuries of Christianity, the Church faced several challenges that forced it to develop a more nuanced understanding of the sacrament of baptism. One of the biggest controversies was the Donatist controversy, which questioned the validity of sacraments administered by clergy who had lapsed in their faith or committed serious sins. To address this controversy, the Councils of Hippo and Carthage in the late 4th century affirmed the validity of sacraments administered by clergy who were in a state of grace, regardless of their moral character. The famous Church Father Augustine also made significant theological contributions to this issue, which provided a framework for understanding the efficacy of sacraments beyond the moral character of the administering clergy.¹⁵

Another major controversy during this period was the Paulinist controversy, which centered on the correct understanding of Christ's nature. The orthodox Christological position emphasized the importance of correct beliefs underlying the administration of sacraments. The Church Fathers played crucial roles in articulating and defending orthodox Christology, with figures such as Athanasius and Cyril of Alexandria making significant contributions.¹⁶ These debates ultimately led to a more explicit formulation of the orthodox Christological position, which was essential for the development of sacramental theology in the early Church.

For centuries, the concept of rebaptism has been a contentious and divisive issue. The Byzantine period witnessed the emergence of debates and practices surrounding rebaptism, which highlights the significance of this topic. The struggle between heresies and Orthodoxy was a continuous battle, and the practice of baptism became a battleground for the two sides. This paper delves into the historical, scriptural, and theological dimensions of the question of re-baptism, seeking to provide a deeper understanding of the challenges that Orthodox views on baptism face from heretical perspectives. It is our hope that future studies and writings will further contribute to a comprehensive understanding of this complex topic, filling in the gaps in academic knowledge and providing a more nuanced view of rebaptism.

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¹⁵ Aug. *Psalm. c. Don.* 110, 188, 216–23, 244–53, 266, 293 (*BA* 28: 166, 176, 180, 184, 186, 190).

¹⁶ See for example Schwartz 1925, pp. 5–37.

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