

Epistle 64 to Fidus (on infant baptism)

Cyprian of Carthage

Early Church (pre-Nicene) · Ante-Nicene · Letter

STROMATA 270

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INTRODUCTION

Answering a country bishop who wondered whether baptism should wait until the eighth day after birth, in imitation of circumcision, Cyprian and his fellow bishops reply that the grace of God should be denied to no one, least of all a newborn. The letter is among the earliest explicit witnesses to the baptism of infants and to the reasoning marshalled in its support. Its warmth about the mercy owed to the very youngest gives it a pastoral gentleness. Short and focused, it reads as a considered conciliar reply to a single practical question.

Epistle 58

To Fidus, on the Baptism of Infants.

Argument.— In This Letter Cyprian is Not Establishing Any New Decree; But Keeping Most Firmly the Faith of the Church, for the Correction of Those Who Thought that an Infant Must Not Be Baptized Before the Eighth Day After Its Birth, He Decreed with Some of His Fellow-Bishops, that as Soon as It Was Born It Might Properly Be Baptized. He Takes Occasion, However, to Refuse to Recall the Peace that Had Been Granted to One Victor, Although It Had Been Granted Against the Decrees of Synods Concerning the Lapsed; But Forbids Therapius the Bishop to Do It in Other Cases._

1\ Cyprian, and others his colleagues who were present in council, in number sixty-six, to Fidus their brother, greeting. We have read your letter, dearest brother, in which you intimated concerning Victor, formerly a presbyter, that our colleague Therapius, rashly at a too early season, and with over-eager haste, granted peace to him before he had fully repented, and had satisfied the Lord God, against whom he had sinned; which thing rather disturbed us, that it was a departure from the authority of our decree, that peace should be granted to him before the legitimate and full time of satisfaction, and without the request and consciousness of the people — no sickness rendering it urgent, and no necessity compelling it. But the judgment being long weighed among us, it was considered sufficient to rebuke Therapius our colleague for having done this rashly, and to have instructed him that he should not do the like with any other. Yet we did not think that the peace once granted in any wise by a priest of God was to be taken away, and for this reason have allowed Victor to avail himself of the communion granted to him.

2\ But in respect of the case of the infants, which you say ought not to be baptized within the second or third day after their birth, and that the law of ancient circumcision should be regarded, so that you think that one who is just born should not be baptized and sanctified within the eighth day, we all thought very differently in our council. For in this course which you thought was to be taken, no one agreed; but we all rather judge that the mercy and grace of God is not to be refused to any one born of man. For as the Lord says in His Gospel, The Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them, Luke 4:56 as far as we Can, We must strive that, if possible, no soul be lost. For what is wanting to him who has once been formed in the womb by the hand of God? To us, indeed, and to our eyes, according to the worldly course of days, they who are born appear to receive an increase. But whatever things are made by God, are completed by the majesty and work of God their Maker.

3\ Moreover, belief in divine Scripture declares to us, that among all, whether infants or those who are older, there is the same equality of the divine gift. Elisha, beseeching God, so laid himself upon the infant son of the widow, who was lying dead, that his head was applied to his head, and his face to his face, and the limbs of Elisha were spread over and joined to each of the limbs of the child, and his feet to his feet. If this thing be considered with respect to the inequality of our birth and our body, an infant could not be made equal with a person grown up and mature, nor could its little limbs fit and be equal to the larger limbs _of a man_. But in that is expressed the divine and spiritual equality, that all men are like and equal, since they have once been made by God; and our age may have a difference in the increase of our bodies, according to the world, but not according to God; unless that very grace also which is given to the baptized is given either less or more, according to the age of the receivers, whereas the Holy Spirit is not given with measure, but by the love and mercy of the Father alike to all. For God, as He does not accept the person, so does not accept the age; since He shows Himself Father to all with well-weighed equality for the attainment of heavenly grace.

4\ For, with respect to what you say, that the aspect of an infant in the first days after its birth is not pure, so that any one of us would still shudder at kissing it, we do not think that this ought to be alleged as any impediment to heavenly grace. For it is written, To the pure all things are pure. Titus 1:15 Nor ought any of us to shudder at that which God has condescended to make. For although the infant is still fresh from its birth, yet it is not such that any one should shudder at kissing it in giving grace and in making peace; since in the kiss of an infant every one of us ought for his very religion's sake, to consider the still recent hands of God themselves, which in some sort we are kissing, in the man lately formed and freshly born, when we are embracing that which God has made. For in respect of the observance of the eighth day in the Jewish circumcision of the flesh, a sacrament was given beforehand in shadow and in usage; but when Christ came, it was fulfilled in truth. For because the eighth day, that is, the first day after the Sabbath, was to be that on which the Lord should rise again, and should quicken us, and give us circumcision of the spirit, the eighth day, that is, the first day after the Sabbath, and the Lord's day, went before in the figure; which figure ceased when by and by the truth came, and spiritual circumcision was given to us.

5\ For which reason we think that no one is to be hindered from obtaining grace by that law which was already ordained, and that spiritual circumcision ought not to be hindered by carnal circumcision, but that absolutely every man is to be admitted to the grace of Christ, since Peter also in the Acts of

the Apostles speaks, and says, The Lord has said to me that I should call no man common or unclean. Acts 10:28 But if anything could hinder men from obtaining grace, their more heinous sins might rather hinder those who are mature and grown up and older. But again, if even to the greatest sinners, and to those who had sinned much against God, when they subsequently believed, remission of sins is granted — and nobody is hindered from baptism and from grace— how much rather ought we to shrink from hindering an infant, who, being lately born, has not sinned, except in that, being born after the flesh according to Adam, he has contracted the contagion of the ancient death at its earliest birth, who approaches the more easily on this very account to the reception of the forgiveness of sins— that to him are remitted, not his own sins, but the sins of another.

6\.. And therefore, dearest brother, this was our opinion in council, that by us no one ought to be hindered from baptism and from the grace of God, who is merciful and kind and loving to all. Which, since it is to be observed and maintained in respect of all, we think is to be even more observed in respect of infants and newly-born persons, who on this very account deserve more from our help and from the divine mercy, that immediately, on the very beginning of their birth, lamenting and weeping, they do nothing else but entreat. We bid you, dearest brother, ever heartily farewell.

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