The Mystical Union of Infant Baptism: How Baptists Contributed to the Idea of Race by Their Rejection of Infant Baptism

Isaiah E. Jones
Utah State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/etd

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/etd/4514
THE MYSTICAL UNION OF INFANT BAPTISM: HOW BAPTISTS CONTRIBUTED TO THE IDEA OF RACE BY THEIR REJECTION OF INFANT BAPTISM

by

Isaiah E. Jones

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

History

Approved:

Norman Jones
Major Professor
Member

Philip Barlow
Committee

Frances Titchener
Committee Member
Member

Daniel Davis
Committee

Mark McLellan
Vice President for Research and Dean of the School of Graduate Studies

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY

Logan, Utah

2015
ABSTRACT

The Mystical Union of Infant Baptism: How Baptists Contributed to the Idea of Race by Their Rejection of Infant Baptism

by

Isaiah E. Jones, Master of Arts
Utah State University, 2015

Major Professor: Norman Jones
Department: History

In the first three centuries CE, the sacrament of baptism proved to be a universal tool which united people beyond age, race, or ethnicity as we understand it today. To put it simply, the theological meaning of baptism was reinforced by the sacrament of infant baptism. That is to say that the Christian faith was for all, irrespective of one’s race, age, or social-status. This openness to Christianity changed in the early modern period. In the seventeenth century the Baptists rejected infant baptism, for a more rational faith based on Enlightenment and Romantic assumptions. What the Baptists did not realize was just how embedded the social, political, economic, and other forms of human meaning and understanding were rooted in the sacrament of infant baptism. This thesis is an intellectual and social history on how Baptists contributed to the idea of race in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by their rejection of infant baptism. By the eighteenth
and nineteenth centuries Southern Baptists created a theology that supported racial superiority in North America.

Once radical Protestant groups such as the Baptists rejected the inclusive baptismal theology of Irenaeus Lyon and Origen of Alexandria by leaving the Church of England, the incarnational and communal elements that once united Christianity would lead to racial divisions within Christian denominations in the modern period. Consequently, by rejecting the classical understanding of baptism-salvation; many Baptists looked elsewhere than baptism or religion for their identity and now looked to novel notions of species and race. These innovative explanations of identity outside of baptism led to racial superiority within North American Christendom in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. For the purpose of this study, I shall look at second century CE theologians Irenaeus of Lyons (130-202 CE) and Origen of Alexandria (184-254 CE) and compare their thoughts to the theological interpretation of John Smyth of Nottinghamshire (1570-1612 CE), and how his theological approach indirectly contributed to the idea of racial superiority (i.e. skin color) within early North American Christendom.
PUBLIC ABSTRACT

The Mystical Union of Infant Baptism: How Baptists Contributed to the Idea of Race by Their Rejection of Infant Baptism

by

Isaiah E. Jones, Master of Arts
Utah State University, 2015

Major Professor: Norman Jones
Department: History

In the first three centuries CE, the sacrament of baptism proved to be a universal tool which united people beyond age, race, or ethnicity as we understand it today. To put it simply, the theological meaning of baptism was reinforced by the sacrament of infant baptism. That is to say that the Christian faith was for all, irrespective of one’s race, age, or social-status. This openness to Christianity changed in the early modern period. In the seventeenth century the Baptists rejected infant baptism, for a more rational faith based on Enlightenment and Romantic assumptions. What the Baptists did not realize was just how embedded the social, political, economic, and other forms of human meaning and understanding were rooted in the sacrament of infant baptism. This thesis is an intellectual and social history on how Baptists contributed to the idea of race in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by their rejection of infant baptism. By the eighteenth
and nineteenth centuries Southern Baptists created a theology that supported racial superiority in North America.

Once radical Protestant groups such as the Baptists rejected the inclusive baptismal theology of Irenaeus Lyon and Origen of Alexandria by leaving the Church of England, the incarnational and communal elements that once united Christianity would lead to racial divisions within Christian denominations in the modern period. Consequently, by rejecting the classical understanding of baptism-salvation, many Baptists looked elsewhere than baptism or religion for their identity and now looked to novel notions of species and race. These innovative explanations of identity outside of baptism led to racial superiority within North American Christendom in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. For the purpose of this study, I shall look at second century CE theologians Irenaeus of Lyons (130-202 CE) and Origen of Alexandria (184-254 CE) and compare their thoughts to the theological interpretation of John Smyth of Nottinghamshire (1570-1612 CE), and how his theological approach indirectly contributed to the idea of racial superiority (i.e. skin color) within early North American Christendom.
DEDICATION

To my wife Josselyn Jones--

the joy of my life.
In writing this thesis I realized just how many people both inspired and influenced me throughout my journey. I am grateful to my thesis committee members: Norman Jones, Frances Titchener, Philip Barlow, and Daniel Davis for their wise comments which added the right touches to the final product. First, Norman Jones has been supportive every step of the way. His wisdom and attentiveness helped me develop and articulate my thoughts. He is also responsible for showing me what it is to be a historian. Frances Titchener has been more than a professor, but a great friend as well. She showed me patience, love, and guidance from day one. Philip Barlow is another professor and friend who both supported and believed in me. He provided many edifying and delightful conversations. It was his religious studies class where I first discovered my passion for religious history. Daniel Davis, who has become a recent friend of mine, has provided many wonderful conversations as well, and continues to provide sound advice as a dedicated archivist.

I am grateful to USU Special Collections, especially Brad Cole, Bob Parson, Clint Pumphrey, Liz Kline, Randy Williams and Sara Skindelien for their support and financial assistance. I want to thank my friends David Patch, Nick Ciancone, Trey Smith, Cameron Davis, Connor Williams, Jah Shams, and Travis Seefeldt for their great conversations and friendship. Special thanks to my priests, Father Elias Koukos, Father Justin Havens, and Father Mario Giannopoulos for their theological and spiritual guidance. I am indebted to several professors and friends outside of my committee including Kyle Bulthuis, Susan

I would not be where I am today without the support and guidance from both of my parents; Paul and Sylvia Jones, as well as the support from my in-laws. My lovely sister Daphne Jones was always willing to discuss my thesis and provided numerous laughs. My amazing wife Josselyn Jones has been my true companion and number one fan as I transitioned from football to academic life. I would not be where I am without her love, patience, compassion, and support.

Isaiah E. Jones
CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................ iii
PUBLIC ABSTRACT ..................................................................................v
DEDICATION .............................................................................................vii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ...........................................................................viii
GLOSSARY ................................................................................................... xi
TABLE OF ABBREVIATIONS ....................................................................xii

CHAPTER

1. INTRODUCTION .........................................................................................1
2. SLAVERY, RACE, & BAPTISM ...............................................................17
3. PLANTER VS. SLAVE BIBLICAL EXEGESIS ........................................91
4. THE WORD BECOMES FLESH IN VIRGINIA ......................................97
5. THE CREATION OF RACE IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH .........................107

CONCLUSION ...........................................................................................112

BIBLIOGRAPHY ..........................................................................................117
GLOSSARY

**Hereditary Heathen** - Immutable behavioral and moral characteristics that are rooted in one’s skin color and race

**Race (Second Century)** During the time of Irenaeus of Lyon and Origen of Alexandria, race or *(gens)* referred to a family, consisting of all those individuals who shared the same *(nomen)* and claimed descent from a common ancestor.

**Race (Early modern and modern)** from around the seventeenth to the nineteenth century’s race started to refer to unchangeable or hereditary intellectual beliefs, moral, and behavioral characteristics which were rooted in an individual’s skin color.

**Slavery (Early)** Records of slavery in Ancient Greece go as far back as Mycenaean Greece. As the Roman Republic expanded outward, entire populations were enslaved, thus creating an ample supply from all over Europe and the Mediterranean. Greeks, Illyrians, Berbers, Germans, Britons, Thracians, Gauls, Jews, Arabs, and many more were slaves used not only for labor, but also for amusement (e.g. gladiators and sex slaves). By the late Republican era, slavery became a vital economic pillar in the wealth of Rome, as well as a very significant part of Roman society.² Slavery in the ancient world was not based on the color of one’s skin as it was in the early modern and modern era or in the case of my thesis dark-skinned people.

---

¹ E.g. Glossary terms and definitions selected from *Oxford Orthodox Dictionary*

Slavery (early modern and modern) The original slave trade had nothing to do with race or skin-color, but over time, for example, in Colonial Virginia, the planters began to associate (skin-color) with immutable moral, behavioral, and intellectual characteristics that many believed made Africans and Native American people incapable of becoming Christian.

Theologian (Second Century) Greek Christian sources; (theologia) could refer narrowly to devout and inspired knowledge of, and teaching about, the essential nature of God. Evagrius Ponticus (346-399) said, “If you are a theologian, you will pray truly. And if you pray truly, you are a theologian” (Treatise on Prayer, 61). However, in the case of Irenaeus of Lyon and Origen of Alexandria, both men had a rigorous background in Greco-Roman grammar, logic, rhetoric, and philosophy as well as training in the Judeo-Christian scriptures. In Origen’s case, he had a strong background in philology. What made Origen and Irenaeus so different from their early modern Protestant counterparts was that theology in the second century had a stronger emphasis on ascetic struggles (prayer, little sleep, extreme fasting, and vigils). It was these ascetic struggles and prayer that made someone a successful theologian, not academic or university degrees.  

Theologian (Early Modern) From the seventeenth century onwards, the term 'theology' referred to study of religious ideas and teachings that are not specifically Christian (e.g., in the phrase 'Natural Theology' which denoted theology based on reasoning from natural facts independent of specifically Christian revelation or doctrine.

---

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Author and Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dem</td>
<td>John Behr in Popular Patristic Series Irenaeus, <em>Demonstrations of Apostolic Preaching</em> (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In 1957, a South Carolina Baptist church issued a statement on desegregation, using (Acts 17:26 KJV) and (Genesis 9 KJV) as its reference point. “1) God made men of different races and ordained the basic difference between races; 2) Race has a purpose in the Divine plan, each race having a unique purpose and a distinctive mission in God’s plan; 3) God meant for people of different races to maintain their racial group. God has ordained ‘the bounds of their habitation.’”¹ The crucial question that I set out to answer in my thesis is how did we get to a Christian worldview that supports the statement above? It is from here that our journey into antiquity begins. For the purpose of this study, I look at second century CE theologians Irenaeus of Lyons (130-202) and Origen of Alexandria (184-254) and compare their thoughts to the theological interpretation of John Smyth of Nottinghamshire (1570-1612), and how his theology contributed to racial superiority and proslavery theology within early North American Christendom in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

When I use the term “race” throughout my thesis I am not referring to the treatment of the Jews throughout history: I am primarily referring to dark and black-skinned people. Ivan Hannaford, in his volume *Race: The History of an Idea in the West* provides an etymological chart on the concept of race. He states that the word "race" entered Western language late, coming into general use in Northern Europe about the middle of the sixteenth century. There is no word bearing a resemblance to it in the Hebrew, Greek, or Roman language. In fact, in the Classical world and throughout Late Antiquity, race or (*gens*) referred to one’s lineage or family origins.

This study suggests that in the second century of Irenaeus of Lyon and Origen of Alexandria, one of the primary meanings (or purposes) of baptism was for a person to die to himself, die daily to his sins (i.e. repentance), and in turn become a full human being (*anthropos*) by participating in Christ’s death.\(^1\) The early second Christians incorporated individuals (i.e. children and adults) into a community – and this inclusion, stressed the novel idea that Christianity transcended age, race, class, and ethnicity. Because early Christianity socially and culturally transcended identity based on race or skin color, the Christian identity was affirmed and united within the identity of Christ in their baptism. Therefore, all Christians were considered children of the same parents – thus brothers and sisters to one another and equal heirs to God’s kingdom and its promises. John Smyth of Nottinghamshire and his Baptist descendants approach to the Bible and baptism planted a seed for racial superiority in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the North American

South. My argument throughout this paper is that Baptist theology made it possible for individuals to use baptism as a rite of affirming one’s individual choice of beliefs outside of the early tradition of theologians like Irenaeus of Lyon and Origen of Alexandria. The Baptists approach to both scripture and baptism undercut the central communal and social dimension of the sacrament. As a consequence, persons asserted their superiority over one another based on age, race, and ethnicity.

I argue that the Baptists deviation from the interpretation established in the second century’s theological interpretation of the Bible that made the rejection of infant baptism possible was one of the unintended causes that contributed to racial superiority in the early modern period. In the first three centuries CE, the sacrament of baptism proved to be a universal tool which united people beyond age, race, or ethnicity as we understand it today.

When one examines the literature, there is nothing that compares to the modern understanding of race as an immutable moral or behavioral characteristic rooted in skin-color. When slavery was discussed at the time of Irenaeus of Lyon and Origen of Alexandria, slavery was a basic and vital part of the economic support and wealth of the Roman Empire, as well as a very significant part of Roman society. Slavery in the ancient world was not based on the color of one’s skin as it came to be in the early modern and modern period as in the case of race based chattel-slavery.

---

Moreover, what made the universal and communal notion of Christianity possible was its theological understanding of baptism. The theological meaning of baptism was reaffirmed by the sacrament of infant baptism. That is to say that the Christian faith was for all, irrespective of one’s race or skin color. In fact, skin-color as it came to be understood in the early modern period, as an immutable moral or behavioral characteristic based on skin-color, simply did not exist in the ancient world. In my thesis, I examine the intellectual and social history on how John Smyth’s Baptist descendants contributed to the idea of race in the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries by their rejection of infant baptism.

**Classical & Modern Community**

In classical Greco-Roman culture, individuals were considered proper citizens based on their virtue and participation in the Greek polis (πόλις) or the Roman (civitas). If individuals were outside of this organized community, they were considered “barbarians.” These ideas of community and organized participation were later absorbed into a new ecclesiastical Christian order from Augustine’s, *City of God*. The new order retained some, but not all, of the classical political symbols to construct a new identity and to include its community to a new kind of Christian order in Catholic Western Europe. To borrow a phrase from contemporary scholar Brent Nongbri, the pre-Christian

---

people of both Greece and Rome experienced what he terms, “embedded religion.”⁴ That is to say that religion was not a separate or private affair divorced from social, political, and economic life. In fact, “religion” as is often understood in the ‘Post-Enlightenment’ age in the West, as a personal and private affair, did not exist.

The Church of England inherited the political state and ecclesiastical tradition of Augustine of Hippo and embraced it throughout the Middle-Ages. In the early modern period, England’s citizens came to be understood as citizens, not by virtue of their participation in the classical Greek polis or Roman civitas evidenced through the services and attitudes required in contribution in the activity of classical politics, but as willing partners in the Christian mysteries or sacraments, which brought membership of the mystical body of the Christian people in Christ through their baptism. To be English was to be baptized, and to be baptized was to be a part of the greater community of both church and state. As Ivan Hannaford’s Race: The History of an Idea in the West rightly points out, “it is important to note that in both the political and the ecclesiastical, a people (Populus) were bound together (i.e. church and state), and assumed its identity through law and through faith. It did not assume its identity through the natural sciences, biology or secular history or through an autonomous moral order independent of political and religious reality.”⁵ The Church of England would carry this implanted law and faith tradition across the Atlantic and to North America in the seventeenth century.


⁵ Hannaford, Race, 184.
After the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation, a group of rebellious Christians from the Church of England known as the Baptists, sought out to adhere to Martin Luther’s axioms of the *Bible, Faith, and Grace Alone* in their approach to Christianity. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, these evangelical Baptists migrated to North America and committed to a “literal” view of scripture, arguing for inerrancy of the Bible as the sole authoritative word of God. This was contrary to the interpretive tradition of the early church of the first three centuries CE. The alteration in how the Christian scriptures were interpreted led to vicious debates that divided Christian communities. The solution to the problem was the Enlightenment philosophers’ major stress on reason alone as opposed to the evangelical or radical Protestants stress on the Bible alone as an inerrant text. The shift in the theological meaning of baptism influenced the identity of Christians and non-Christians alike. The Protestant teachings of the Baptists now stated that individuals must wait until they were intellectually prepared to choose baptism; being a Christian became a choice in seventeenth-century Dutch Republic and later North America. This stress on choice, in regards to one’s religion, was a key ingredient in dividing Christian communities and licensing racial superiority in slave holding societies in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in North America. Because

---

6 When I use the term “literal” throughout my thesis, I am referring to evangelical Protestant groups like the Baptists. The Baptists of the eighteenth and nineteenth century held a fundamentalist inerrancy in their interpretation of the Bible. I mean that the early Christians of the first three centuries did not see the scriptures as something above the mainstream Church or below it. The Christian scriptures were seen as to supplementing the Christian life in its worship. The scriptures were interpreted alongside their understanding of the person of Christ, the community, and the Holy Spirit. I will go into more detail of this throughout my thesis.
individuals no longer identified with their baptism, race or skin color seemed the most plausible to develop a sense community.

**Historiography**

I begin my historiography with Winthrop D. Jordan’s *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro 1550-1812*. Relying primarily on manuscripts as primary sources, Jordan composed an intellectual history on white attitudes towards the Negro, arguing that the sectarian character of Protestantism with its emphasis on distinctiveness from others and its abandonment of the ideal of Christian universality led to tribalism and the exclusions of Negroes from the community.\(^7\) Jordan discussed how from the beginning, vis-à-vis, the Negro concept embedded in the term Christian, seems to have conveyed much of the idea and feeling of “we” as against “they.” To be Christian was to be civilized rather than barbarous, English rather than African, white rather than black. The term Christian itself proved to have astonishing elasticity, for by the end of the seventeenth century it was being used to define a species of slavery that had altogether lost connection with explicit religious difference. In the 1680s, Englishmen pursued a secular national identity, and they gradually made the term Christian synonymous with being white.\(^8\)

On the other hand, Frank Snowden’s, *Before Color Prejudice* and *Blacks in Antiquity* emphasize the classical understanding of race and how in the third century


BCE, the strong bond that had united blacks and whites in the common worship of the Egyptian cult of Isis was reinforced by Christianity. Snowden describes how Christianity swept racial distinction aside, like the Isis cult. Scythians and especially Ethiopians figured prominently in the imagery and basic pronouncements of the early Christian doctrine. Statements of the environment theory had frequently cited Scythians and Ethiopians as example of man's physical diversity. Christianity was a religion that made unique truth claims; that would unite humankind in ways that other religions of the past failed to do.

Jordan and Snowden were concerned with identifying the origins of racism to blacks. More complex histories can be written when one examines the process surrounding the theological changes to infant baptism. Ivan Hannaford’s Race: The History of an Idea in the West, 750 BCE-1990s is a history of Western Civilization understanding of race. Hannaford explores the linguistic and intellectual understanding of the term throughout the centuries. Hannaford argues that before the seventeenth century there was no concept of the term as we understand it today. He claims that the separation of church from state and nature being seen as something independent from religion or ethics, lead to the modern conception of race and is the product of non-religious explanations for the genesis of man.

---

9 Originating in Egypt, Isis was worshiped as the ideal mother and wife as well as the patroness of nature and magic throughout the Roman Empire. She was the friend of slaves, sinners, artisans and the downtrodden, but she also listened to the prayers of the wealthy, maidens, aristocrats and rulers. Isis is often depicted as the mother of Horus, the falcon-headed deity associated with king and kingship (although in some traditions Horus's mother was Hathor). Isis is also known as the protector of the dead and goddess of children.

10 Frank Snowden, Before Color Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks, 99.
In *The Origins of Racism in the West*, Miriam Eliav-Feldon, Benjamin Isaac, and Joseph Ziegler follow the model set by Snowden and Hannaford, but they focus on the universalism of Christianity and its peculiarities. Feldon argues that early Christian universalizing arguments of the first three centuries constitute an unstable legacy for later discourses on human difference, including racialized and racist ones. Her essay challenges two common perceptions: that early Christianity has no relationship to later discourses about human difference widely recognized as racialized and racists, and that race and racism necessarily exclude ideas about mutability. Feldon places much of her attention on how the concepts of race and racism are defined and how they are plotted historically. Her ultimate concern is potential racism in early Christian universalizing theology. I disagree with Feldon because her understanding of Christians, as God’s chosen people, commits an anachronism in early Christians understanding of salvation. She gives very little attention to the sacrament of baptism itself and acts as a theologian when interpreting the New Testament scriptures out of its cultural context.

Rebecca A. Goetz’s *The Baptism of Early Virginia: How Christianity Created Race* looks to incorporate the social, political, and the theological relationships of Africans and Native Americans within Christianity in Virginia in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. She argues that hereditary heathenism remained a powerful ideology that meshed perfectly with the goals of slave societies for planters to agree to change it. Instead, planters cultivated Christianity as a tool for separation, oppression, and defined inferiority for Indians and Africans. Christianity preserved its astonishing illuminating power for Christian abolitionists and proslavery Christians alike. She points out that
slavery was not the product of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. She states that English North America shows that race was not a predictable product of colorization; but it was carefully invented and reinvented, and religious belief was a critical part of constructing and defining human variance.

My thesis, however, will focus on the theological differences of seventeenth century John Smyth of Nottinghamshire, from the early Christian exegesis of Irenaeus of Lyon and Origen of Alexandria. My basic argument is that Southern Baptists, contributed to the idea of race in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by its rejection of infant baptism.

Snowden, Hannaford, and Goetz prove that complex historical lessons can be discovered through an examination of what on the surface appears to be a simple narrative of race. While Snowden and Hannaford's works are the two most extensive accounts before color prejudice and race, both focus on assigning blame for racial discrimination to scientific explanations to the origins of man, natural biology, and secular history, rather than examining the process with an understanding of broader historical forces. When I look at the manuscripts describing the theology of infant baptism in the second century CE, I see a universal vision over what should be the uses of baptism. To understand the process that led to a shift in theological interpretation of baptism, one needs to explore the theological imaginations of those whose actions linked them to these novel ideas of the sacrament (i.e. The Baptists).

In *The Theology of John Smyth*, Jason K. Lee offers the most comprehensive historical and theological analysis of John Smyth’s theology. Some of the insights gained
from this study include the establishment of solid connections between Smyth and his Separatist, Baptists, Puritan, and Mennonite influences. This book gives an overview of the main elements of his thought that developed in the context of Smyth’s contemporary debates. This volume affords a detailed discussion of Smyth’s life and thought and enables me to answer questions about his purpose, his sources, and his influence on his successors.\textsuperscript{11} I shall draw a lot from Lee’s scholarship on Smyth to support for my thesis; that Baptists contributed to the idea of race through its rejection of infant baptism.

For the classical perspective of Christianity, John Behr’s \textit{Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity} illustrates to modern readers the great difference in worldview and assumptions of early Christian writers, like Irenaeus. That said, when dealing with the writings of the major figures of the first several centuries of church history, one must not submit to the temptation to reduce what is complex to the absolute history of dogma. Behr offers a truly constructive, contextual, holistic, and insightful portrait of Irenaeus of Lyon. Behr’s objective in the volume is evident: to unravel the early discourse on orthodoxy and heresy from the assumptions functioning within twentieth-century scholarship and their origins in the historicizing perspective of recent centuries, so that we can hear how second-century figures, such as Irenaeus, understood the debate on their own terms.\textsuperscript{12} Behr importantly clarifies that the schismatic attitude of those deemed heretical was not, initially, a consequence of the Church’s reaction, but of the heterodox


\textsuperscript{12} John Behr, \textit{Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity}. (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2013), 5.
party’s self-differentiation from what should be considered ‘mainstream’ Christianity (represented by the transmission of truth from Polycarp of Smyrna, specifically). This book will assist me in unpacking the complex theological and socio-geographical context of Irenaeus of Lyon.\footnote{13}

Peter W. Martens’s *Origen and Scripture: The Contours of the Exegetical Life* focuses on Origen’s presentation of the ideal exegete, rather than on extrapolated principals of exegetical technique. Martens moves beyond a theoretical model of Origen’s method of exegesis’ and provides a more comprehensive mosaic of Origen’s concept of exegesis as a way of life, not simply as a set of rules to be applied to a text.\footnote{14} Walter’s volume will assist me in the process of laying out a proper contextual and philological understanding of early Christian interpretation of scripture and baptism. Origen’s works gave several references to Ethiopians (i.e. dark-skinned people) and baptism, which will enable me to connect the three major concepts throughout my thesis—racism, slavery, and infant baptism.

For the purpose of this study, I define race as referring to dark and black-skinned people (i.e. Native Americans and Africans). Recognizing racial conflicts, in this sense, is vital to understanding the historical processes that changed, defined, and rejected infant baptism. These changes further altered the theological meaning of adult baptism within the Baptist community and how individuals defined themselves. Various


American Southern Baptist groups constantly altered the theological understanding behind infant and adult baptism to suit their needs and desires. I shall argue that changes from the second century’s Irenaeus of Lyon and Origen of Alexandria’s theological understanding and meaning of infant baptism, to the later rejection of infant baptism by Baptist theologian John Smyth, contributed to the idea of race in the eighteenth and nineteenth century North American South.

Chapter Outline

The first chapter (The Introduction) provides a brief review of the biographies of the theologians and their lives, as well as the scholarship that has addressed them to some degree. The second chapter (Slavery, Race, & Baptism), looks at Irenaeus of Lyon’s views on baptism and how he understood what a human being was on his own terms. This section will provide the reader with the historical and theological context on how his theology emerged on baptism, identity, and Irenaeus’s universal arguments for baptism. Chapter two also discusses Origen of Alexandria’s views on baptism and how he understood what a human being was on his own terms. This section will provide the reader with the historical and theological context in Alexandria, and on how his theology emerged on baptism, identity, and his stress on the Ethiopian baptized in (Acts) as a foreshadowing of the inclusion of blacks.

Chapter three (Planter vs. Slave Biblical Exegesis) looks at the Reformation rise of biblical literalism and believer baptism, leading up to and including John Smyth of
Nottinghamshire. This chapter connects the theology of John Smyth and his followers on believer’s baptism and Christianity within the religious context of the seventeenth century England and the Dutch Republic. Here I shall demonstrate to my readers how Smyth engaged with the surrounding Christian community from 1609-1612 CE in the Dutch Republic-specifically Holland. In this chapter, I will draw from letters written to Smyth to show how his theological interpretations were dividing the Protestant community that surrounded him; as he made further changes on what it meant to be a Christian in the seventeenth century. In this section, I shall provide examples from seventeenth through nineteenth century Virginia and North America where Smyth's theological understanding had fully manifested in Southern American communities. At the end of this section, I shall refer to Rebecca Goetz's, *The Baptism of Early Virginia*, to connect her argument that Christianity in the seventeenth and eighteenth century created race in early Virginia, with my claim that this creation began with the Baptists rejection of infant baptism.

Chapter four (*The Word Becomes Flesh in Virginia*) tackles the relationship of definitions of racism and race within Christianity. Here I will primarily use secondary sources to discuss the nature of persons, race, and change in early Christianity. I discuss planter religion and the emergence of the black interpretation of scripture, and discuss the connections between black Christians and second century Christian’s interpretation of Christianity.

I shall use passages here from Irenaeus of Lyon on baptism in both Greek and Latin, to discuss the nature of the practice in its historical context. In this chapter, I
discuss the theological understanding of infant baptism and its universalizing arguments by Irenaeus of Lyon and Origen of Alexandria. I shall begin with the importance of Irenaeus of Lyon and Origen of Alexandria’s exegesis and explanation for infant baptism and race in early Christian culture of the second century and then provide an overview on the effect of the arrival of John Smyth’s theology, and its impact to infant baptism and the cultural understanding of what it meant to be a Christian in seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries in North America. This chapter (largely based on primary sources) will set the scene for the following chapters which will provide a more in-depth analysis.

Chapter five (The Creation of Race in the American South) will pick up the narrative in 1609 through 1612, and I will explain how what was once a flourishing racially inclusive practice, was significantly reduced to a symbol.\(^\text{15}\) By 1609, John Smyth and his followers had very little understanding of the major impact their theological rejection of infant baptism would have for Africans and Native Americans in North America from the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries.

After looking over Irenaeus’s and Origen’s writings and comparing them to John Smyth’s, I agree with Rebecca A. Goetz that Protestant Christianity created or contributed the idea of race in Virginia. Where we differ, is that I claim the birth of this idea is connected to the Southern Baptists who rejected infant baptism. In order to understand the reasoning behind these introductions, I draw from Against Heresies by Irenaeus (books one and two), Origen’s Commentary on the Song of Songs, and John

\(^{15}\) When I use the term “symbol” in the early modern sense, I mean all that is happening is observable in baptism. The symbol of baptism, is only there as a type of souvenir or reminder of what a person did once, but never as an actual bearer of the holy or as the activation of something happening with salvific potential.
Smyth’s *The Works*. In these documents, I further demonstrate just how a change from the classical Christian theology Irenaeus and Origen and its inclusive understanding had unintended consequences for both black and dark-skinned people in seventeenth through nineteenth centuries in North America.

The *(Conclusion)* focuses on baptism and race. This section goes back over the concepts and connects them together, showing how the same Baptist doctrine can be read in two ways, empowering blacks while creating a justification for slavery. The conclusion also takes up the question of anachronism in speaking about race or racism for early Christianity of the first three centuries. Frank Snowden’s, *Before Color Prejudice* and Miriam Feldon, *The Origins of Racism in the West*, both address the issue of anachronism when discussing race in antiquity. The early Christian community of the first three centuries simply does not have the modern conception of race as I have defined it in my thesis (i.e. Dark and black-skinned people). As a historian, I question the plausibility of fully locating the exact cause of such a complicated issue as race. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that my argument can improve the understanding of origin of racial identity within North American Christendom as long as we recognize the anachronism while discussing such a complicated topic.
CHAPTER 2

SLAVERY, RACE, & BAPTISM

In *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies*, David Hart points out that in classical Rome, the original and primary meaning of the Latin word *persona* was “mask,” and as a legal term its use may well have followed from the wax funerary images by which persons of social significance were represented after their deaths and which families of rank were allowed to display as icons of their ancestral lineages.¹ Thus, Hart argues, that by extension, to have a *persona* was to have a face before Roman law that is to be recognized as one possessing rights and privileges before a court, or as being able to give testimony upon the strength of one’s own word, or simply as possessing a respectable social identity, of which jurists must be aware of.²

Hart later points out, that under Augustus (63BC-14CE), certain legal protections were extended to slaves, but of themselves, slaves had no real legal rights before the Roman law, and no proper means of appeal against their masters. Moreover, their word had no value in the eyes of Roman authorities. A slave, in Roman law, was completely without any “personal” dignity that, when called to testify before a duly appointed court, torture might be applied as one of the options. To borrow Hart’s phrase, the slave was man or women *non habens personam*: literally, “not having a *persona,*” or even “not having a face.” Before the Roman law, he or she was not any greater prominence-any

² Ibid.
greater countenance, one might say—before the Roman society at large. In a sense, the only face proper to a slave, at least as far as the cultural imagination of the ancient world went, was the peculiarly degrading “slave mask” worn by actors on the comic stage: a perfect manifest example of how anyone who was another’s property was naturally seen by Roman society. I agree with Hart, who argues, that the early modern version equivalent of the mask in North America or non habens persona would be against dark-skinned people.

Hart states, that when Paul of Tarsus wrote (Galatians 3:28-29), “that there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus,” Paul was thinking in terms of eschatology, not modern social morality or social philosophy. That said, he could hardly have known that Christians would ever be in a political or social position to shape the world they lived in, as they would be in 1776 in North America.³

During the time of the Christian Roman Emperor Justinian I (518-527), he called for reforms that made a considerable improvement in the lives of slaves, and their emancipation legally less complicated. In fact, long before Justinian’s Code, the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great (306-337) had made it illegal for slaveholders to separate married slaves by selling them to different masters and had eased the legal procedures for emancipation, permitting slaveholders to grant slaves their liberty simply by going to church and making a declaration of emancipation before the bishop.

One should note that the conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity did not result in the abolition of the institution of slavery, and did not seem to call it into serious

question either. Furthermore, there is no empirical method by which to determine whether slaveholders demonstrated noticeably greater compassion or liberality than their Pagan counterparts. In most cases, they most likely did not. All we can say with certainty is that, under Christian emperors, the law became more humane in contemporary eyes, at least politically, and that those who aspired to genuine Christian virtue in their homes would have had to pay attention to the commands of scripture and to regard their slaves as brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, as seen in the writings of Paul of Tarsus. Moreover, bonded slavery was a universally accepted characteristic of the ancient economy and of the ancient household; as well as, in the Roman world, it was universal. In the Roman Empire, slaves occupied all kinds of posts and professions: they were not only laborers but just as often craftsman, tutors, scribes, artists, entertainers, civil servants, administrators, architects, etcetera. The slave’s social station, in short, was one of the permanent realities of human existence; practically no one could conceive of a society that could function without a class of specific men and women as slaves. On the other hand, groups like the Stoics and the Christians criticized the reality of human enslavement, either in principle or in respect to its more cruel manifestations.

Even the apostle Paul of Tarsus, who was most likely the author of Philemon, made no explicit request for the emancipation of Philemon’s slave Onesimus, but Paul asked only that a baptized slaveholder recognize that his baptized slave was now in fact his brother in Christ as well, whom he ought not to treat as a mere human. At the center of Paul’s argument was that in Jesus Christ, the distinction between master and slave had been abolished, that is, the resurrection freed all of humanity in Christ. The resurrection of Christ, in Paul’s mind, provided new reality with the possibility of a society from
which that difference in humanity had been fully removed. Paul clearly did not presume
the freedom of all servants this side of God’s Kingdom. As yet, the explosive ideas of the
Christian gospel remained, for Paul and for many generations of Christians after him,
more a matter of eschatology than of social philosophy. And, of course, he could not have
imagined that Christians would ever be in a social or political position to shape the world
they lived in, as Christians would be in the 1700s-1900s North American.

With Paul’s ideas of the Resurrection in mind, however, Christians throughout the
centuries have often times failed to connect the logical conclusions of Paul’s theology on
slaves and masters. That said, one should not ignore the differences between pagan and
Christian attitudes toward slaves. If nothing else, the early Christian Church admitted
slaves to full participation in the community and allowed them full access to its mysteries
and sacraments, and required masters and slaves to worship and pray together as equal
participants of the one community of faith. The demand, in addition, that Christian
masters regard their slaves as family rather than chattel, and treat them with classical
ideas of justice, gentleness, and charity, is a frequent appeal in the writings of the greatest
of the church fathers- Gregory of Nyssa, Clement of Alexandria, John Chrysostom. One
can only speculate on how well individual Christian households may have closed the
inevitable fracture between command and action.

With this view of antiquity in mind it should become clear that the teachings of
Irenaeus of Lyon to pagan ears was not only blasphemous, but as David Hart points out, a
reorientation of the cosmic hierarchy that brought up the peasant, slave, or barbarian as
equals to the Roman emperors, in fact, in Irenaeus of Lyon’s view ‘All’ who partook in
the Christian life were related in a very deep way. In Against the Galileans, the Roman
Emperor Julian claimed that the Christians had, from the earliest days, swelled their ranks with the most spiteful, disreputable, and shameful of persons, while offering only baptism as a remedy for their contemptibility, as if mere water would cleanse the human soul. Eunapius turned away with repugnance from the base gods that the earth was now breeding as a result of Christianity’s rebellion of good order: men and women of the most appalling type, justly condemned, tortured, and executed for their offenses, but glorified after death as martyrs of the Christian faith, their offensive relics venerated in place of the old gods. This early attitude concerning Christians is comparable to white Baptists towards Black Baptists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when black slaves who died for their emancipation were considered a type of martyr of the true Christian faith.

I should point out that a Christian slaveholder’s Christian slaves were still slaves, even if they were also their master’s brothers or sister in Christ. And, after Constantine the Great, as the Christian Church in many cases became what it originally protested against—and not the forerunner of a virtuous society—that is, it learned all too easily to tolerate many of the injustices it allegedly condemned. What is interesting about the Great Church after the Emperor Constantine is not so much these new “casually baptized” bishops were at performing their beliefs but that these beliefs were expressed in antiquity in the first place.

For men like Irenaeus of Lyon and Origen of Alexandria, slavery was a mark of sin that would vanish completely in the next life; however, as Hart points out, it is quite anachronistic to speak of the abolition of slavery as an injustice as many of us understand

5 Ibid.
it today or to compare the ancient form of slavery with the slave systems that flourished in North America in the early modern period. The better question is how Irenaeus of Lyon and Origen of Alexandria understood slavery on their own terms. Basil of Caesarea (330-379) thought slavery was necessary because some men were incompetent of living virtuously. John Chrysostom (349-407) dreamt of a perfect, probably eschatological, humanity in which none would rule over another, celebrated the extension of legal rights and safeguards to slaves, and criticized Christian masters who ventured to degrade or beat their servants. Augustine of Hippo (354-430), saw slavery as part of the fallen world (i.e. original sin), and detested slavery but did not think it intelligent always to spare the rod, at least not when the good of the soul should take priority over the health of the flesh.⁶

In David Hart’s The Whole of Humanity, he discusses Gregory of Nyssa’s (335-394) fourth sermon on the Book of Ecclesiastes, which he addressed during Lent in 379 CE, and which comprises a long passage explicitly and energetically condemning slavery as an institution. That is to say, in this sermon Gregory does not simply treat slavery as an indulgence in which Christians ought not to indulge beyond the guidelines of the church, nor does he limit himself to condemning the inequalities and cruelties of which slaveholders were frequently guilty. That sort of chastisement one may expect in his homily, since moral teaching and instructions to repentance are part of the standard Lenten play book of any competent homilist.⁷

⁶ Hart, Atheist Delusions, 166-182.

Moreover, ever since 321 CE, when the Roman Emperor Constantine allowed the churches the power of legally certifying emancipations (the power of manumission in ecclesia), property-owning Christians had often taken Easter (Pascha) as an occasion for emancipating their slaves, and Gregory was no doubt hoping to inspire his parishioners to follow the tradition. Hart argues, that if all Gregory wanted to do was recommend emancipation as a spiritual purification or as an act of alms or of kindness, he could have done so more successfully by using a considerably more moderate tone than one actually finds in his homily. For there he directs his anger not at the abuse of slavery as an institution, like later American Colonial slave-owners, but at its use; he criticized his parishioners not for ill-treating their slaves but for their audacious attempt to imagine that they had the right to own other human beings in the first place. Irenaeus’s theology on baptism, slaves, and persons makes it clear that Irenaeus would agree with Gregory of Nyssa, the idea of infant baptism reaffirms the sacredness of ‘All’ human beings.⁸

Gregory goes on to interpret (Ecclesiastes 2:7) “I got me male and female slaves, and had my home-born slaves as well:” a text that would seem to suggest disapprovals against indulgence and sloth, and nothing further. However, Gregory goes well beyond mere disapprovals of indulgence. For a person at all, Gregory says, to presume mastery over another person is the grossest imaginable arrogance, a challenge to and a robbery of God, to whom alone all persons belong. Moreover, Gregory continues, for one person to deprive another of the freedom granted to all human beings by God is to violate and indeed to overturn the law of God, which explicitly gives us no such power over one another. At what cost, Gregory goes on to ask his congregation, could one ever be said to

⁸ Ibid.
have purchased the image of God—which is what each person is—as God alone possesses resources equal to such a treasure? In fact, says Gregory, directly linking his argument to the approaching Pascha (Easter) feast, since God’s greatest gift to us is the perfect freedom given to us by Christ’s saving action in time, and since God’s gifts entirely immutable, it lies not even in God’s power to enslave men and women.

Gregory goes on to say, it is known that, when a slave is bought, so are all of his or her worldly possessions; but God has given dominion over all of creation to each and every person, and there simply is no sum sufficient for the person of so vast an estate. So, Gregory tells his parish, that you may imagine that the exchange of coin and receipt of deed really endows you to the same illnesses, capable of the same joys, receivers of the same salvation, and subject to the same judgment of Christ. We are therefore equal in every respect, but—says Gregory—“you have divided our nature between slavery and mastery, and made it at once slave to itself and master over itself. Consequently, for Gregory is much like Irenaeus of Lyon, in that, he affirms human nature in the light of Christ’s Pascha and out community in his baptism, and participation and cooperation with his life. Put simply, Easter equals the emancipation of slavery.9

Three years after the Ecclesiastes sermon, Gregory of Nyssa wrote a treatise against the teachings of the “Semi-Arian” theologian Eunomius. At one point in his argument, Gregory notes that Eunomius claims that Christ could not really be God in the fullest sense, because Paul of Tarsus describes Christ as bearing the form of a slave. To this, Gregory’s infuriated response is to say that slavery, no less than sin, disease, or death, is a consequence of alienation from God, and that God in Christ assumes the

9 Chattel Slavery gradually disappeared in the Middle-Ages (N.B. most scholars say for primarily economic reasons).
greater slavery in which ‘All’ human beings are bound in order to cleanse slavery (along with every other evil) from our nature. In short, Christ defeated all evil and death when he passed as Irenaeus of Lyon said, through every age and gender, thus sanctifying humanity and ‘All’ of the material world and now humanity was being saved through and in Christ, both before, during, and after their baptisms.

To put this in a post-modern context, I must borrow Nietzsche phrase the “Will to power,” in Irenaeus’s and Origen’s context when Christ faced Pontius Pilot, he faced this “worldly will-to-power,” but when Christ disciples find that he rose from the dead, it proved him victorious over the greatest powers of the world. That is why in the works of both Irenaeus of Lyon and Origen of Alexandria the martyr represents the fully human being. Black Baptists would later recover this same perspective under the persecution and enslavement. For Irenaeus, the martyr’s very way of life mocked all worldly powers by second century Christians centering their faith around a cross; they flipped the classical world on its head. By living a life of asceticism and prayer early Christians were the first “new-atheist” that wanted to be emancipated in both mind and body from the world, yet still actively participating in its transformation. By following Christ in the classical world, Irenaeus of Lyon and Origen of Alexandria embraced this new-atheism that started their journey on ‘Becoming fully Human’ by their claim that Christ taught humanity both what is was to be human and what it was to be God by in the way that he died (i.e. self-emptying and donation). Thus, for second century Christian’s, baptism in a very real sense, was the starting point where humanity participated in Christ death and became part of the body of Christ (i.e. community). Persecuted black Baptists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries recovered a similar understanding of Christianity (i.e.
community and suffering martyr). I should note that both Irenaeus of Lyon and Gregory of Nyssa were considered Saints and key thinkers in the Church of England. Therefore they were influential in the inclusive understanding of Christian conversion and community.

**Attitudes towards Black & Dark Skinned Persons**

The Early Christian view of the Ethiopian was in the same tradition as the Greco-Roman outlook, indicated at first by the environmental approach of the Greeks to racial differences and developed in later ideas of the unity of mankind. The early Christian community used Ethiopia and their ‘blackness’ as their primary language of the conversion and as a means to emphasize their conviction that Christianity was for ‘All of mankind.’ Some scholars like Miriam Feldon, in *The Origins of Racism in the West* argue that early Christianity was so inclusive that their strong convictions that Christianity was a path for all, that this is what in fact made them aggressive, oppressive, and full of prejudice towards mankind as they developed the thought that they were the ‘possessors of truth.’ However, as we have seen with Irenaeus of Lyon, Origen of Alexandria, and Gregory of Nyssa, the theological view that was taught in the Early Christian Church was simply a conviction that came from an actual experience within their own community that Christianity was for everyone, but not against their will. This conviction did not make them more hateful and oppressive, but simply led them to have novel ideas about humanity and what it meant to be human. In fact, early Christian convictions led to commentary on the abuses of slavery and the dignity of ‘All
individuals,’ their convictions were radically different than the Classical past that one quickly sees why these early Christians were persecuted for being so counter-cultural within the Roman Empire. Early Christian ideas about humanity were the first assault against the pagan meta-narrative upon the entire cosmos on what it meant to be human. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, blacks in the American South rediscovered this early Christian inclusive theological understanding, using the ritual of baptism, the Bible, and conversion to shape their identity. Black slaves in the midst of slavery and persecution created a strong sense of community similar to Irenaeus and Origen.

The Life of Irenaeus of Lyon

Let us begin; by examining the second century, we may better understand the thought of Irenaeus of Lyon. Irenaeus is a key player in early Christian thought because he embodies and represents the first systematic treatise on the mainstream Christian faith. Also, Irenaeus gives us a glimpse of the worldview of persecuted Christianity and its heavy emphasis on community that is united through common suffering and death.

Born between the years 130 and 140, Irenaeus was allegedly martyred during the persecution of Septimus Servus, between 202 and 203. Though the place of his birth and way of death is debated within the scholarly community, Irenaeus’s insight into the

---

10 “Irenaeus’s claim that the transcendence of the divine love implies God’s immediacy may be a rejection of the ‘separate God’ of Gnosticism.” (See Osborn, xiv)

11 See Jerome’s commentary on Isaiah (Ch. 64). N.B. Irenaeus’s death is not mentioned in Jerome’s De viris illustribus, suggesting that the story may be an interpolation from Gallic traditions concerning the havoc of the persecutions in Lyons.
early Christian mind is not debatable. Thus, the story really begins in second century Gaul or *Gallia*.

In Lyon, in the middle of the second century, Irenaeus’s church was established. The community in Lyons was originally Greek and Greek speaking but included Romans whose Latin names occur among those of the martyred congregants.\(^\text{12}\) Irenaeus points out the Celtic element in the Lyons Church and it is clear that, although small, the community represented all ages, races, and social classes. The Christian Churches at Lyons and nearby Vienne were closely connected, while relations with Rome and Asia Minor were strong. Lyons was the focal point and certainly where Gaul came together: as one scholar has pointed out, “All the threads of Roman public service in this great region converged at Lyons and were gathered up at that center.”\(^\text{13}\)

As a young man, Irenaeus heard and met Polycarp of Smyrna (155/6), who was a disciple of John the Evangelists at the royal court of Smyrna.\(^\text{14}\) Scholars such as Eric Osborn, argue that Irenaeus’ report of Polycarp’s words on the decline of the times imply that Polycarp was an older man when Irenaeus heard him and that Irenaeus himself was young. A Moscow manuscript of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* states that Irenaeus was teaching in Rome at the time of Polycarp’s death.\(^\text{15}\) The main influence on Irenaeus during his youth was undoubtedly Polycarp of Smyrna.

---


\(^\text{13}\) James S. Reid, *The municipalities of the Roman Empire* (Cambridge, 1913), 179.


In the introduction to Irenaeus’s volume Against Heresies, he humbly claims to have no rhetoric or excellence of style; however, throughout his works he shows some rhetorical skills and knowledge of the works of Homer, Plato, Hesiod, and Pindar. Although he does not confront the philosophical tradition as do Origen and Clement of Alexandria, his account of God reveals his awareness of the Middle Platonic and Stoic philosophies of the day. He may have gone to Rome to study rhetoric and then gone to Lyons. However, Smyrna was a center of the Second Sophistic movement and his skills could have been developed at home. His attack on Sophists may be seen as turning sophistic arms against their owners; although the scholar Benoit considered that he ‘has not totally assimilated rhetoric.’ His dominating love of truth came through Justin the Martyr, from Socrates, Plato and Paul.

Irenaeus travelled through Rome to the great city of Lyons, positioned at the linking together of the Rhone and the Saone in the center of Celtic Gaul, which at that time was from Seine to the Garonne. During the persecution of the church at Lyons in 177 CE, Irenaeus carried a letter from the confessors in Lyons to Eleutherus, Bishop of Rome. It is possible that Irenaeus was already bishop when Pothinus died. This would explain why Irenaeus was not himself in prison at the time. Irenaeus’ journey, ‘for the peace of the churches,’ was on behalf of the confessors at Lyons. In the same year

16 Osborn, Irenaeus of Lyons, 33-104.

17 See Benoit, Introduction (58-9).


19 Osborn, Irenaeus of Lyons. 94.

20 H.E. 5.3.4. For the duration of my thesis, when I write ‘H.E.,’ I am referring to Irenaeus of Lyon’s volume Against Heresies.
Pothinus, Bishop of Lyons, died in prison, and Irenaeus succeeded him to his office. Irenaeus’ participation in contemporary controversies extended into Victor’s tenure as Bishop of Rome. Irenaeus’s *Against Heresies*\(^{21}\) was written at Lyons.

We have, in a letter, an extended account of the persecution at Lyons. The servants of Christ in Vienne and Lyons send to Asian and Phrygian brethren a greeting for ‘peace, grace and glory’ based on a common faith and hope in redemption.\(^{22}\) The violent sufferings of the martyrs are contrasted with their moderation and humanity.\(^{23}\) As noted, what united the second century Christian was the suffering and persecution, a similar context of suffering and persecution would play a role in black Baptist churches in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Moreover, Irenaeus tells us that the churches of Vienne and Lyons enjoy peace and concord because of the virtues of the martyrs. Vettius Epagathas, for instance, “possesses fullness of love to God and neighbor,” is fervent in the spirit and is the comforter of Christians because he has within him the comforter, the spirit. The fullness of his love is seen in his defense of his brothers, for whom he gives his life.\(^{24}\) The criterion of the true prophet is not asceticism but love of God and neighbor.\(^{25}\) The story of Blandina the slave gives the same pre-eminence to love.\(^{26}\) Pothinus was fortified by the power of the spirit with a burning desire to be a

\(^{21}\) The shorter title given to *Unmasking and overthrow of so-called knowledge*.

\(^{22}\) *H.E.* 5.1.3

\(^{23}\) *H.E.* 5.2.7

\(^{24}\) *H.E.* 5.1.9-10


\(^{26}\) *H.E.* 5.1.55-6
martyr. The martyrs had the Holy Spirit as their counselor, and Irenaeus came with their praise.

In the brief letter to Eleutherus, the martyrs command Irenaeus as brother, companion and ‘passionate for the covenant of Christ,’ a description reminiscent of Elijah, who was very zealous for the Lord God (1 Kings 19:14), and of Mattathias, who was zealous for the law (1 Macc. 2:27). Eusebius’ claimed that Irenaeus was a peacemaker in name and nature and that this is not simply a play on words but a fact native of Irenaeus’ life and work.

Irenaeus describes the difference between the Quartodeciman practice of the Asian churches and the other churches who persistently refused to end their fast on any other day than Sunday, the day of the resurrection of Christ, if the Quartodeciman practice could not claim the ancient and apostolic tradition. Polycrates of Ephesus found a basis for this position in Philip and John the Evangelists, who kept the fourteenth day according to the gospel and the rule of faith. Irenaeus himself thought that traditionally early Christians celebrated the mystery of the resurrection of Christ on the Lord’s Day, but he urged Victor not to reject those churches which hold to an ancient custom.

---

27 H.E. 5.1.29

28 See H.E. 5.4 or H.E. 5.3.3.

29 H.E. 5.4.2

30 Ibid.

31 H.E. 5.24.18 and H.E. 5.23-5

32 H.E. 5.24.6
Irenaeus goes on to talk of different Christian traditions of fasting which had their origin in the past. He maintains that the early Christians before him, without strictness, preserved and communicated their practice in straightforwardness; and regardless of their differences, they kept the peace. In unusual words, Irenaeus claims that ‘dissimilarity on fasting confirms the agreement on faith’; differences of practice had been tolerated because they did not compromise the essential unity of the faith. In the second passage which Eusebius cites, Irenaeus offers examples from history-Roman bishops before Soter had accepted the Quartodeciman practice. They did not observe this practice themselves, but maintained peace with those who did. Irenaeus gives the example of Polycarp and Anicetus. When Polycarp visited Rome, the bishop deferred to him in sacramental communion. Consequently peace should prevail rather than uniformity of practice. Matters of faith are different, because, as Irenaeus pointed out, there was one faith throughout the world.

I shall examine Irenaeus’s “Against Heresies” to give us insight into his theology and views on race, slave, age, and ethnicity. Moreover, what Irenaeus’s story tells us so far, is that he was more “post-modern” then many scholars want to believe—that he was interested in relativizing traditions for the sake of preserving the universal notions of the Gospel irrespective of one’s age, race, social-status, or tribe. For Irenaeus, the rhetoric of Christianity would always trump the dialectic because the most convincing argument they possessed was the rhetoric of their crucified Jew. This Christian story was told

---

33 Osborn, Irenaeus of Lyons, 6.

34 H.E. 1.10.1,2.
within their own micro-narrative, that supposedly Christ came to break though all boundaries, thus saving ‘All’.

What was interesting to Irenaeus was that this “crucified Jew” was a radical departure from the Greco-Roman Gods because he seemed to transcend the ancient meta-narrative of power and violence through a Roman cross. Irenaeus kept an open mind while maintaining diversity of practice. It is clear while reading Irenaeus that unity of the community is the most important aspect of the early Christian Church. Slaves of all races were a part of the community as well, and for Irenaeus, many of these slaves, such as Blandina, embodied the community’s faith in their martyrdom. Persecution and the ritual of baptism brought the early Christian community together; black slaves in the early modern period recovered this same sense of community in the American South.

**IRENAEUS OF LYON ON BAPTISM**

In Irenaeus’ explanation of Paul of Tarsus’s words that a truly spiritual disciple judges all and is himself judged by no one (1 Cor. 2:15), a reference to the Montanist controversy has been recognized: he who has received the spirit of God stands in succession to the prophets whose history of salvation he interprets. The truly spiritual disciple confronts the departures from the inclusive tradition, or the heretics who reject the truth of the church. As John Behr points out, for Irenaeus, the truly spiritual disciple also judges false prophets, those who cause schism in the church, who lack the love of

---

35 *H.E.* 4.33.
God, and who divide the great and glorious community or body of Christ; these strain at a gnat and swallow a camel.\(^{36}\)

Irenaeus goes on to speak about the supreme gift of love that joins the martyr to the true prophet and the truly spiritual disciple. To borrow a phrase from the scholar John Behr, there is a “Shocking Truth” to Irenaeus’s Orthodoxy and that is that anything that causes the division or schism within the community is heresy from the original teaching of Christ, the Apostles, and their followers. Likewise, clearly something like racial and slave issues in the modern age would be seen as heresy to Irenaeus’s notion of the ‘canon of truth’. This chapter looks at Irenaeus of Lyon’s views on baptism and how he understood what a human being was on his own terms. This section will provide the reader with the historical and theological context on how his theology emerged on baptism, slaves, race, and identity, as well as his inclusive arguments for baptism.

In Irenaeus’s *Against Heresies*, book one,\(^{37}\) he provides an examination of how, on the basis of a ‘hypothesis’ or ‘presupposition’, the school of Valentinus has gone off course from Apostolic tradition.\(^{38}\) He argues that they use passages from the writings of Paul of Tarsus and the evangelists, especially John, the interpretation of whose Preface is given in their own words on three kinds of substances-material, physic, and spiritual-and corresponding to this different types of human beings.\(^{39}\) Irenaeus goes on to point out that there are some who hold several views about the Christ, that the birth, baptism, and

\(^{36}\) *H.E.* 4.33.7.

\(^{37}\) *H.E.*, 1.8-9.

\(^{38}\) *H.E.* 1. Pref.2.

\(^{39}\) *H.E.* 1.8.5. and *H.E.* 1.6-7.1.
suffering refer to a physic Christ, the son of a Demiurge, in distinction to the Savior. This
description then concludes, in the Latin version: ‘Such are the views of Ptolemaeus.’\(^{40}\)
Irenaeus goes on to give his own contrasting interpretation of the Preface of John the
Evangelists and his argument that those who have received ‘the canon of truth’ through
baptism are able to reconstruct the various scriptural passages to their suitable dwelling in
the scriptural mosaic depicting Christ.\(^{41}\)

Irenaeus goes on to say: ‘The Church, though dispersed throughout the whole
world, even to the ends of the earth, has received from the apostles and their disciples this
faith,’ in one God, one Christ, and the Holy Spirit who is made known by the prophets
the economies of God worked by Christ.\(^{42}\) He continues by stressing that the Church has
preserved this faith throughout the world, for, while languages and expressions differ,
‘the import of the tradition’ is the same, as those who have reflected further on matters
and have spoken more fully have not changed the ‘assumption’ or ‘hypothesis’, by
introducing another God or another Christ or another Only-begotten, but brought out
further aspects of the same ‘hypothesis’.\(^{43}\) This image of the Church maintains

\(^{40}\) *H.E.* 1.8.5.

\(^{41}\) *H.E.* 1.9.

\(^{42}\) *Ecclesia, et quidem in universum mundum disseminata, diligenter custodit, quasi unam
  domum inhabitans: et similiter credit iis, videlicet quasi unam animam habens et unum cor, et
  consonanter haec praedicat, et docet, et tradit, quasi unum possidens os. H.E. 1.10.1.*

\(^{43}\) *Ecclesia enim et quidem per universum orbum usque as fines terrae disseminata, et ab
  Apostolis, et discipulis eorum accepit eam fidem, que est in unum Deum, Patrem omnipotem, qui
  fecit caelum et terram, et mare, et omnia quae in eis sunt: et in unum Christium Jesum filium Dei,
  incarnatum pro nostra salute: et in Scriptum Sanctum, qui per Prohetas praedicavit dispositiones
  Dei, et adventum et eam, quae est ex Virgine generationem, et passionem, et resurrectionem a
  mortuis, et in carne in coelis ascensionem dilecti Jesu Christi Domini nostril, et de coelis in
  Gloria Patris adventum ejus, ad recapitulanda universa, et resuscitandum omnem carnem
  humani generis, ut Christo Jesu Domino nostro, et Deo, et Salvatori, et Regi, secundum placitum*
unfailingy and universally, though not statically but dynamically, the faith received from
the apostles, and provides the contrasting background for the purpose of the main section:
‘Let us now look at the unstable opinions of these men, and how, since there are some
two or three of them, they do not say the same things about the same subject but
contradict themselves in regard to things and names.’ Irenaeus goes on to say that they
‘modified the principals of the heresy called “Gnostic” to the particular character of his
own school.

In book three, Irenaeus dedicated this section to discussing the unity of the one
Jesus Christ He begins by noting that there are some who treat ‘Jesus’ as a ‘vessel of
Christ’ who descended from above upon him, or say that he only suffered only in
appearance, or, as the Valentinians, that the ‘Savior’ descended upon ‘the Jesus of the
economy’. With these teachings in mind, Irenaeus proposed to ‘to take into account the
entire mind of the apostle’s regarding our Lord Jesus Christ.’ He begins with a very
brief comment on John the Evangelists reminding the reader that he has already
‘adequately proved’ that John the Evangelists knew one and the same Word of God, and
that he was the Only-begotten and that he became incarnate for our salvation,’ referring
to his treatment of the Preface of John in book one.

---

*Patris invisibilis omne genu curvet coelestium et terrestrium, et infernorum, et omnis lingua
confiteatur ei, etei, et judicium justum in omnibus faciat. H.E. 1.10.*

44 *H.E. 1.11.1.*
45 *H.E. 1.11.1.*
46 *H.E. 3.16-21.9.*
47 *H.E. 3.16.1.*
48 *H.E. 3.16.2, cf. 1.8.5-9.3.*
He then examines passages from Matthew relating to the birth of Christ the Savior, with a validation from Paul’s letters to the Romans and Galatians that the prophets did indeed promise that the Son, the one Jesus Christ, would be of the seed of David, appointed Son of God by the resurrection from the dead.\(^{49}\) This followed by texts from Mark and Luke (though without mentioning the letter’s name), showing again that ‘the Gospel therefore knew of no other son of Man but him who was born of the Virgin Mary, who suffered, and no Christ who flew away from Jesus before the Passion, but him who was born it knew as Jesus Christ the Son of God and that his same suffered and rose again.’\(^{50}\) This affirmation of the Gospels is rounded off by further discussion of John, this time citing from the Gospel, which was written ‘that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that believing you might have eternal life in his name,’ and the Epistle with its warning about the Antichrist who ‘denies that Jesus is the Christ.’\(^{51}\)

Irenaeus argued that there is but one Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior, as established by these scriptural witnesses, rather than the multiplicity of figures according to their ‘varying hypothesis’, is then the subject of an extended theological reflection.\(^{52}\) ‘There is therefore,’ Irenaeus argues, ‘one God the father and One Christ Jesus, who is coming throughout the whole economy, recapitulating all things in himself…so that he might draw all things to himself at the proper time.’\(^{53}\) It was not a Savior’ or ‘Christ’ who

\(^{49}\) *H.E.* 3.16.2-3, citing Rom. 1:1-4, 9; Gal 4:4-5.

\(^{50}\) *H.E.* 3.16.3-5.


\(^{52}\) *H.E.* 3.16.6-18.7.

\(^{53}\) *H.E.* 3.16.6.
descended upon Jesus, but the Holy Spirit who descended upon the One Jesus Christ at
his baptism, so that, becoming accustomed in this way to dwell in the human race, the
Spirit might then dwell in human beings, ‘renewing them from their old ways into the
newness of Christ as the suffering one that is of primary importance for Irenaeus, and to
which he brings back his dispute showing how it opens a way for others to enter into the
life that Christ gives. Paul of Tarsus, Irenaeus said, made it clear that he ‘knew of no
other Christ besides him alone, who both suffered and was buried, and rose again, who
also was born, and whom he speaks of as human.’54 And likewise: ‘The Lord himself,
too, makes it evident who it was that suffered,’ by asking ‘who do men say that I am?’55

In response to Peter’s confession, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,’
by later speaking of how Jesus must go to Jerusalem, suffer, be crucified, and rise again.
This suffering is, moreover, that which will come upon all those who follow Christ, as
they take up the same Cross, no alternative was specified, and is seen most particularly in
those who ‘follow the paths of the Lord’s Passion, having become martyrs of the
Suffering One.’56 He concludes this sequences of reflections with the argument that, if
Christ was to destroy sin and death, then he needed to be made that very same thing as
the one he would save: ‘What he did appear, that Jesus also was: God recapitulated in
himself the ancient formation of man, that he might kill sin, deprive death of its power,
and vivify the human being: and therefore his works are true.’57 The ‘vivification’ that

54 H.E. 3.18.3.
56 H.E. 3.18.4-5.
57 H.E.3.18.7.
Christ provides is the life given to those who suffer with Christ, identifying themselves with him.

John Behr in his *Irenaeus of Lyon: Identifying Christianity* may help us to understand what Irenaeus means by ‘canon’ and ‘hypothesis’:

This appeal to a ‘canon’ brings out another dimension of the word ‘hypothesis’. Besides its use in a literary context, considered earlier, the term is also used with a theoretical sense. According to Aristotle, ‘hypotheses’ are the starting points or first principals (αρχαι) of demonstrations. For instance, the goal of health is presupposed as a ‘hypothesis’ by a doctor, who then deliberates on how it is to be attained, just as mathematicians hypothesize certain axioms and then proceed with their demonstrations. In both cases, these hypotheses are tentative; if the goal proves to be unattainable or if the conclusions derived from the supposition turn out to be manifestly false, then the hypothesis in question must be rejected. Since the time of Plato, however, philosophy has aimed at discovering the ultimate first principals. But, as Aristotle concedes, it is impossible to expect demonstrations of the first principles themselves: first principals cannot themselves be proved, otherwise they would be dependent upon something prior to them, and so the enquirer would be led into an infinite regress. As Clement of Alexandria points out, this means that the search for the first principals of demonstration ends up with indemonstrable faith. While themselves not being demonstrable, the first principals, grasped by faith, are the basis for subsequent demonstrations, and are also used to evaluate other claims to truth, and in this way act as a ‘canon’.

Originally this term meant a straight line, a rule by which others lines could be judged. Irenaeus followed the Hellenistic tradition of Epicurus and Plato that in order to have any knowledge one must establish a standard or criterion to work from, thus avoiding an infinite regression. Because these Hellenistic thinkers thought that ‘preconceptions’ generic notions synthesized out repeated sense perceptions, later held to be innate would ultimately facilitate knowledge and act as criteria. Behr points out that “the ‘self-evidence’ of the sense perceptions for the Epicureans, and the clarity of the cognitive impressions for the Stoics, provided the infallible criterion for examining what truly exists.”

With Behr’s understanding of this criterion or standard in mind, it becomes clear to the reader that ‘canon of truth’ that he is referring to is simply the expression of a

---

hypothesis, drawing out the presupposition needed for seeing Christ revealed in and through the Gospel, the apostolic preaching ‘according to Scripture.’

The ‘canon’ of faith or truth is thus not an arbitrary metaphysical principal, or set of inherited doctrines, which must be maintained, but an attempt to articulate the hypothesis of the Christian faith, which is the harmony produced by the image of Christ revealed in the scriptures.\(^{59}\)

In Irenaeus’s work *The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, he starts his writings by providing a concise framework of the Christian faith he claims was handed down by the elders who had known the apostles, defined in the three articles of the ‘canon of faith’ through which the baptismal rebirth manifest itself.\(^{60}\) He goes on to remind his readers of the apostolic dialogues in Acts, the narrative of God’s work of salvation concludes in Christ,\(^{61}\) and, second, to demonstrate that what the apostles proclaimed to be fulfilled in Christ was indeed foretold in Scripture.\(^{62}\) Irenaeus wanted

\(^{59}\) *Hanc praedicationem cum acceperit, et hanc fide, quemadmodum praedixiximus, Ecclesia, et quidem in universum mundum disseminata, diligenter custodit, quasi unam domum inhabitans: et similitur credit is, videlicet quasi unam animam habens et unum cor, et consonanter haec praedicat, et docet, et tradit, quasi unum possidens os. Nam et si in mundo loquelaec dissimiles sunt, sed tamen virtus traditionis una et eadem est. Et nequehae que in Germania sunt fundatae ecclesiæ, aliter credunt, aut aliter tradunt: neque hae quae in Hiberis sunt, neque hae in Celtis, neque hae que in Orient, neque hae quae in AEgypto, neque hae que in Libya, neqwu hae in medio mundi sunt constitutae: sed sicut sol creatura Dei in univero mundo unus et idem est; sic et (lumen) praedicatio veritatis, ubique lucet, et illuminat omnes homines, qui volunt ad cognitionem veritatis venire. Et neque is qui valde praevelet in sermone, ex iis qui praesunt ecclesiis, alia quam haec sunt dicet: nemo enim super magisterum est: neque infirmus in dicendo deminorabit traditionem. Cum enim una et eadem fides sit, neque is qui multum de ea potest dicere ampliat, neque is qui minus deminorat. (H.E. 1.10.3). The term canon was used by Paul in (Gal 6:16)*

\(^{60}\) *Dem. 3-7.*

\(^{61}\) *Dem. 8-42a.*

\(^{62}\) *Dem. 42b-97.*
his readers to understand that although Christ was uncreated, co-eternal, and co-equal with God, that his identity was just now being revealed to us, before Irenaeus claims Christ’s identity was not known to him.\(^{63}\) Irenaeus goes on to say that Christ presence was known, anticipated, and spoken of throughout the divine economy by the prophets.\(^{64}\)

For Irenaeus, Christ’s incarnation, death, and resurrection expressed the eschatological definiteness and completeness of the Gospel.\(^{65}\) The work of God was concluded and brought to completion in the Cross of Christ: “it is finished” (φιλισμενο) as Christ himself said on the Cross (John 19:30). For Irenaeus, Christ on the cross saying, “it is finished” was to complete the process begun in (Genesis 1:26) when God used the subjunctive and said: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” What was finished for Irenaeus was the process of making a human being (i.e. Christ) was finished. If one goes back to the creation narrative told in (Genesis 1), God used an injunction and said over and over again, “Let there be and it was good,” or “Dixitque Deus: Fiat, quod esset bona” or the Greek, “και επεν ο θεος, φως οτι καλον.” When Irenaeus read the account of creation he noticed that until (John 19:30) when Christ on the cross says, “It is finished,” we have yet to see a human being or know how to become one. Moreover, if early Christians who accepted the apostolic ‘hypothesis’ wanted to become human beings, the process required their own “fiat,” “επεν,” or “Let there be.” Thus, cooperation before, during and after baptism was essential for all ages and all races (Jude 3).\(^{66}\)

\(^{63}\) Dem. 43.

\(^{64}\) Dem. 44-5.

\(^{65}\) H.E. 4.26.2

\(^{66}\) H.E. 4.20.2.
Irenaeus goes on to say, “That the dry earth cannot be made into a body or bear fruit unless it receives the willing Rain from above.” Some scholars, such as John Behr, have suggested the ‘power’ spoken of by Irenaeus in his *Demonstration* said that the ‘Spirit of God or the Life creating spirit’ mentioned in (Gen. 1:2), understood as *anima mundi* rather than a ‘Personal Spirit’. This ‘Rain’ that Irenaeus refers to is an implicit attempt to discuss the importance of baptism in regards to the journey of salvation as synonymous with mankind giving his or her own ‘*fiat*’ regardless of race.

In the *Demonstrations*, Irenaeus expounds further on the action of God taking mud from the earth to fashion his handiwork. After the opening chapters, in which Irenaeus presents the rule to truth and various materials pertaining to angels, Irenaeus begins his discussion of God’s handiwork;

He formed the human being with his own Hands, taking the purest, the finest [elements] of the earth, mixing with the earth, in due measure, his own command; and because he outlined the handiwork his own arrangement, in order that what would be seen should be godlike, for the human being was placed upon the earth fashioned in the image of God; and that he might be alive, ‘he breathed into his face a breath of life [Gen. 2:7]: so that both according to the inspiration and according to the formation, the human being was like God. Accordingly, he was free and master of himself, having been made by God in this way, [in order] that he should rule over everything upon the earth. And this great created world, prepared by God before the making of the human being, was given to the human being as [his] domain, having everything in it.

In another passage Irenaeus commented on these words of Christ to Paul of Tarsus he noted about the flesh:

```
One cannot enumerate all the harmonious structure of the human being, which was not made without the great wisdom of God. Whatever
```

---

67 *H.E.* 3.17.2.

68 *Dem.* 11.

69 *Dem* 11.
participants in the art and wisdom of God also participant in his power. The flesh, therefore, is not without part in the art, the wisdom and the power of God, but his power, which produces life, is made perfect in weakness, that is, in the flesh.\textsuperscript{70}

The point here that Irenaeus wants to make is that through matter and creation, human beings are being saved and must render to God their own ‘fiat’ and cooperate with him to partake in the next step of human evolution.

Irenaeus comments further:

For that reason, as I have already said, he combined and united the human being to God; for unless the human being had overcome the enemy, the enemy would not have been legitimately conquered. And, again, if it had been God who had freely given salvation, we could never have possessed it firmly. And if the human being had been united to God, he could never have become a partaker of incorruptibility. For it was inescapable upon the Mediator between God and humans [1 Tim. 2:15], by his kinship to both, to bring both to friendship and harmony, and to brings about that God would take the human to Himself and that the human give itself to God. For in what way could we be partakers of the adoption of sons, unless we had received through the Son participation in Himself, unless his Word had not entered into communion with us by becoming flesh? Therefore he also passed through every stage of life restoring all to communion with God…It behooved him who was to put sin to death and redeem the human being under the power of death that he should himself be made that very thing which he was, that, human, who had been drawn into slavery by sin and held bound by death, so that sin should be destroyed by a human being, and that the human being should go forth from the dead. For just as the though the disobedience of the one human being, who was fashioned first from untilled soil, many were made sinners and lost life, so it was necessary that by the obedience of one human being, who was the first born of the Virgin [\textit{qui primus ex Virgine natus est}], that many should be made just and receive salvation [cf. Rom. 5;19]. Thus, when, was the Word of God made human, as Moses also says, ‘God, true are his works’ [Deut. 32.4]. But if he appeared to be, that he also was: God, recapitulating in himself the ancient formation of the human being, that he might kill sin, deprive death of its power, and vivify the human being; and therefore his works are true.\textsuperscript{71}

\textsuperscript{70} \textit{H.E.} 5.3.1-3 and \textit{H.E.} 5.3.2-3.

\textsuperscript{71} \textit{H.E.} 3.18.7.
Recapitulating the ancient formation of the human being, and therefore also passing through every stage of human life, by his obedience unto death, Christ undoes the slavery of sin and the bondage in death, into which Adam, molded from the untilled soil, had drawn the human race, and in doing so, Christ vivifies the human being. Irenaeus goes on to say:

‘He therefore passed through every age, becoming an infant for infants, thus sanctifying infants, a child for children, a youth for youths, an man for old men, offering to each an example appropriate to their age.\(^\text{72}\)

Here Irenaeus really lays the seed for my argument, that in Early Christianity, the faith was for everyone irrespective of one’s race, social status, age, or ethnic background. The way Irenaeus has discussed ‘canon,’ ‘axiom,’ or ‘hypothesis’ when one works out his theology to its logical ends you are left with a universal faith that transcends biology or secular history. Consequently, the identity for Irenaeus and his followers is found in both baptism and infant baptism as human beings give their daily moment to moment ‘fiat’, until their death; thus, imitating Christ in His obedience to his father by death on the cross. For Irenaeus, anyone who is willing to surrender and cooperate with the ‘canon,’ ‘axiom,’ or ‘hypothesis’, which is the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ, witnessed by the apostles (Acts 17), and handed down by their disciples’ word and epistle

(2 Thessalonians 2:15), to the Church transcends all earthly forms of identity and power, while still being a part of the earth. Because after all, as Paul of Tarsus would say in (Acts.17:28) ‘For in him we live, and move, and have our being.’ The early Christians seem to be panentheistic.\(^\text{73}\)

It is at this point that we will see in (Chapter III) continuity of thought in Origen of Alexandria in his; *On First Principals*. Here Origen defends the ‘hypotheses’ against his opponents, and later on in my thesis we will see a rapid departure from this early Christian universalist understanding of baptism, to the later rejection infant baptism by Southern Baptists in the modern period, as they used the ‘Bible alone’ as both their ‘canon,’ ‘axiom,’ and ‘hypotheses’.

Before I close on this chapter, I would like to mention a few more ideas that may bring clarity to Irenaeus’s theology on baptism. In regards to ‘the fall of man’ in Genesis, Irenaeus argues that when the human race lost in Adam the image of God (Genesis 3), they did not lose the Spirit that was breathed into them (Genesis 2:7), for the Spirit was present, and continued giving the breath of life, and continuously thereafter, together with Christ, preparing the human race to be perfected in Christ and by the life-creating Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:6). John Behr points out in his volume on *Irenaeus* “that the arc of the economy moves from animation (temporary life) to vivification (eternal life).” The eternal life as Irenaeus continues to argue, can only be received by accepting the ‘hypothesis’ witnessed by the apostles, and humanity giving their own ‘fiat’; thus

---

\(^\text{73}\) Panentheism (meaning "all-in-God," from the Ancient Greek πᾶν πᾶν ("all"), ἐν ("in") and Ὁ ὃς Theós ("God")) Is a belief system which posits that the divine – whether as a single God, number of gods, or other form of "cosmic animating force”– interpenetrates every part of the universe and extends, timelessly (and, presumably, spacelessly) beyond it. Unlike pantheism, which holds that the divine and the universe are identical, panentheism maintains a distinction between the divine and non-divine and the significance of both.
salvation is a process in his eyes, open to any race or age (i.e. All). Irenaeus would build this argument based on Paul’s passage: “In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28)

John Behr articulates Irenaeus beautifully when he says:

Nor, finally, is it simply that human beings became mortal for they were always mortal, that is, capable of death, even had they retained the ‘strength’ of the breath and had not died. What happened to the human race in Adam is, specifically, that it became subject to mortality, caught in sin and death, unable to escape from the strong man who had beguiled them under ‘the pretext of immortality.’ They lost, as the passage cited above suggests, the ability to live like God, for the Word as yet had not shown himself and his life in this world. Yet, when Christ does so, it is in fact by using death to conquer death. ‘Likewise’ to God is thus manifest in the way that human creatures live the life given to them, if, that is, they do so in the manner revealed by Christ, by laying down their life, rather than trying to preserve their own life (of the breath) in perpetuity. Since this had not yet been clearly shown, though with hindsight, as we have seen, the Law and the Prophets speak of this throughout, Adam, though a model of the one to come, had as yet no one on whom to model himself, and so lost this ‘likeness’.  

This passage from Behr’s volume on Irenaeus gives us tremendous insight on the identity of human beings in the world of Irenaeus. It should be remembered that Irenaeus would have taught these very basics views to supplement the meaning of the sacraments and what purpose they served in the Church at Lyon. I hope the reader, at this points sees how this theology may appeal to a second century culture surrounded by death, persecution, and also how the early Christian church built a community that transcended earthly racial identities, by sanctifying matter and emphasizing that the Christian faith was for ‘All


peoples’, again all it called for was acceptance of the ‘hypothesis’, baptism, and a ‘fiat’ on the part of the individual. As to the infant, youth, or child this ‘fiat’ would be cultivated by an adult who helped raise the person as they aged, continuing to give a ‘fiat’ to their death. As we have seen in Adam, at any point we can deny or reject this ‘fiat’, it is not forced.

Two more passages from Irenaeus culminate what it is to be human. First he notes:

How then will you be a god, when you are not yet made human? How perfect, when you have only just begun? How immortal, when in mortal nature you did not obey the Creator? It is necessary for you first to hold the rank of human, and then to participate in the glory of God. For you do not create God, but God creates you. If, then, you are the work of God, await the Hand of God, who does everything at the appropriate time, the appropriate time for you, who are being made. Offer to him your heart, soft and malleable, and retain the form with which the Fashioner shaped you, having in yourself his Water, lest you turn dry and lose the imprint of His fingers. By guarding this conformation, you will ascend to perfection; the mud in you will be veiled by the art of God. His Hand created your substance; it will make you golden, inside and out, with pure gold and silver, and so adorn you that the King himself will desire your beauty. But if, becoming hardened, you reject his art and being ungrateful towards him, because he made you a human being, ungrateful that is towards God, you have lost at once both his art and life. For to create is the characteristic of the goodness of God; to be created is characteristic of the nature of the human. If, therefore, you offer to him what is yours, that is, faith in him and subjection, you will receive his art and become a perfect work of God. But if you do not believe in him, and escape from his Hands, the cause of imperfection will be in you who did not obey, and not in him who called you. For he sent messengers to call people to the feast; but those who did not surrender deprive themselves of his royal banquet.75

Here we see that for Irenaeus, salvation is not instantaneous and requires cooperation on the part of human beings. His theology is non-dualistic, emphasizing both the flesh and the spirit at all times. I should mention here that Irenaeus saw the Virgin Mary as the new

Eve by her saying ‘yes’ to God, and thus giving her own ‘fiat’.\textsuperscript{76} Moreover, Irenaeus goes on to make a typological argument that if all of humanity died in Eve, they would be saved in the Virgin’s womb, which Irenaeus says is a ‘type ‘for the church being born again out from the Virgin, to have a chance at eternal life. Thus, to Irenaeus, as Eve was the Mother of the living, Mary is the Mother of the Church (i.e. those who live in Christ (Gal. 3:27)).

For Irenaeus, the Glory of God is a Human Being or as David B. Hart wrote in his \textit{Beauty and the Infinite; The Aesthetics of Christian Truth}, Irenaeus seems to have overcome the postmodern tendency to translate itself back into a dogmatic meta-narrative. For example, Hart says, “the truth of no truths becomes, inevitably, truth; a way of naming being, language, and culture that guards the boundaries of thought against claims it has not validated.”\textsuperscript{77} Consequently, for early Christian thought, such as Irenaeus and Origen, Christian thought as they articulate it already sits in what might be considered a “postmodern” position. According to Hart, “that of a story, thoroughly dependent upon a sequence of historical events to which the only access is the report and practice of believers, a story whose truthfulness may be urged –even enacted-but never proved simply by the process of scrupulous dialectic.\textsuperscript{78}

Thus, the metaphysics for Irenaeus, Origen, and what Galen called ‘The Great Church’, is a crucified Jew, born of a Virgin, who rose from the dead, who awaits the ‘fiat’ of humanity to make them fully human beings, transcending identities that are

\textsuperscript{76} H.E. 3.22.4.

\textsuperscript{77} Hart, \textit{Beauty and the Infinite}, 7.

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 7-8.
embedded in the world, such as slave, Jew, male, female, race and ethnicity. For Irenaeus, what becomes clear is that contrary to the modern understanding of self-determined or autonomous humans beings in the social realm may never be equal—one may be born a slave or in poverty. What is important to Irenaeus, however, is that ‘All-people’ who accept the hypothesis given to them by the apostles give their own fiat or let there be.

Perhaps we should conclude with this brief quote from Irenaeus;

For it is affirmed by the Lord that as ‘the flesh is weak,’ so ‘the spirit is willing’ [Matt. 26:41], that is, is able to complete what it wills. If, for that reason, anyone mixes the willingness of the Spirit as an impetus to the weakness of the flesh, it necessarily follows that what is strong will prevail over what is weak, so that the weakness of the flesh will be consumed by the strength of the Spirit, and such a one will no longer be carnal but spiritual because of the communion of the Spirit. In this means, therefore, the martyrs bear witness and look down on death: not after the weakness of the flesh is absorbed, it manifests the Spirit as potent; and again, when the Spirit absorbs the weakness, it inherits the flesh for itself, and from both of these is made a living human being: living, without a doubt, because of the participation of the Spirit, and human, because of the nature of the flesh.79

THE LIFE OF ORIGEN OF ALEXANDRIA

Origen of Alexandria, 184/185 – 253/254, he was a scholar and early Christian theologian that spent the first half of his career in Alexandria (Egypt). Origen is a key player in my thesis because he lays out the ideal interpreter of scripture in his writings. He gives us insight on the ideal exegete or interpreter of Christian scripture before Christianity was the mainstream religion of the Roman Empire. His main works that I

79 H.E. 5.9.2.
shall examine throughout my thesis are; *On First Principals* and his *Commentary on Song of Songs*. These works will give us insight into his theology and his view on race, slaves, and dark-skinned people and how he understood their Christian identity before and after their baptism.\(^8^0\) Also, by examining his writings we may compare them to how later black and white Baptist read the Bible. Origen also tells us the importance of dark-skinned or black people (i.e. Ethiopians) and the inclusiveness of the early Christian message. The black Baptist church of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries relates to both Irenaeus and Origen because of their emphasis on a balance between suffering, joy, and community in the midst of persecution.

One could argue that no other figure in the Greek-speaking world had an influence comparable to Origen. He was a prolific writer in multiple branches of theology, including textual criticism, biblical exegesis and hermeneutics, philosophical theology, preaching, and spirituality. Some of his later teachings were rejected by later councils, such as the pre-existence of souls, the final reconciliation of all creatures, including perhaps even the devil (the *apokatastasis*), and the subordination of the Son of God to God the Father.

According to Eusebius, Origen was born in Alexandria to Christian parents (N.B. his age of baptism) and was the eldest of seven children. He was educated by his father, Leonides of Alexandria, who gave him a standard Hellenistic education (i.e. grammar, logic, and rhetoric) but also had him study the Christian scriptures. The name of his mother is unknown. To help support his family Origen worked as a *grammatikos*, a routine instructor of language and literature. It should be noted that Origen grew up in

\(^8^0\) Ibid., 132-142.
Alexandria, the Bible Belt of the ancient world. There were many unorthodox Christian teachers and many prominent Pagan and Jewish thinkers. This helps us to understand how Origen’s theology developed in a diverse setting under multiple views of what it was to be both human and Christian in the second century, which all connects to the Christian identity found in baptism. Origen’s works also provide us with insight into his view on slaves, blacks, and dark-skinned people based on his frequent encounters with all three groups.

In 202 CE, Origen's father was martyred in the outbreak of the persecution during the reign of Septimius Severus. A story reported by Eusebius has it that Origen wished to follow him in martyrdom but was stopped only by his mother hiding his clothes. The death of Leonides left the family of nine impoverished when their property was apprehended. Origen, however, was taken under the protection of a woman of wealth and standing, but as her household already included a heretic named Paul, the strictly orthodox Origen seems to have remained with her only a short time.

Eusebius, our primary witness to Origen's life, says that in 203 CE, Origen recovered the Catechetical School of Alexandria where Clément of Alexandria had once taught but had been driven out during the persecution under Septimus Severus. Many modern scholars, however, doubt that Clément’s school had been an official ecclesiastical institution as Origen's was and thus deny continuity between the two schools. But the persecution still continued, and the young teacher Origen visited imprisoned Christians, attended the law courts, and consoled the convicted, Origen, however, was preserved from persecution because the persecution was probably limited only to converts to Christianity. His reputation and the number of his students increased so that the Bishop
Demetrius of Alexandria made him limit himself to the instruction in Christian doctrine only.

Origen, to be entirely self-regulating, sold his library for a sum which acquired him a daily income of 4 obols, on which he lived on as a result of exercising the utmost self-discipline. Origen taught throughout the day, and devoted the greater part of the night to the study of the Bible and lived a life of rigid asceticism. From the years 210-220, Origen’s reputation for piety, holiness, and spiritual teachings grew around Alexandria. Because of his reputation and controversial teachings, the bishop of Alexandria Demetrius began to act against him.\(^81\) Later, in Origen’s thirties, he was made a priest in Palestine by a Bishop of Caesarea.

The remainder of Origen’s life can be summarized briefly here. Eventually he settled in at Caesarea in Palestine and made it his home, sometime before 240 CE. His intervening years were marked by much traveling, in the course of which he visited Athens, Ephesus, Antioch, Caesarea in Cappadocia, and also Tyre, with which he appears to have been associated more certainly. His reputation in general seemed to remain unharmed, and in later times he established a School at Caesarea, to which he attracted some of the most brilliant Christian students of that day, such as Gregory Thaumaturgus, who afterwards became bishops that helped mold the theology within Christendom.\(^82\)

Origen wrote many works including many biblical commentaries and he learned Hebrew and composed the *Hexapla*. I should point out that much controversy followed Origen both during and after his death when he was condemned in the sixth century. The


s

scholar Rowan Williams argues that if Saint Augustine could be called ‘the father of both reformations’ (Catholic and Protestant), Origen could rightly be seen as the father of both sides of the great theological debates of the fourth century.

In 250 CE, the emperor Decius renewed the state of persecution of Christians. Origen was imprisoned at some point and tortured; although dates and details were obviously uncertain, Eusebius suggests that he was released but died shortly afterwards, in 253 or 254 CE. He was buried in Tyre, where his grave was still visited in the Middle-Ages.\(^83\)

To transition and build a bridge across a thousand year of history, I shall layout several key concepts which I base my argument upon throughout my thesis. To start, we must be reminded that in Classical-Antiquity, slavery in both Ancient Greece and Rome was not based on skin-color. It is certain that Classical Athens had the largest slave population, with as many as 80,000 slaves in the 6th and 5th centuries BC; two to four-fifths of the population were slaves. As the Roman Empire expanded outward, entire populations were enslaved, thus creating an abundance of slaves of all skin-colors from all over Europe and the Mediterranean. Greeks, Berbers, Germans, Britons, Illyrians, Thracians, Gauls, Jews, Arabs, and many more were slaves and used not only for labor, but also for entertainment (e.g. gladiators and sex slaves). By the late Republican Era, slavery had become a vital to the wealth of the Roman Empire, as well as a very significant part of Roman society. At the least, some 25% of the population of Ancient Rome was enslaved. Scholar’s today estimate that the number of slaves in the Roman Empire ranged from 60 million to 100 million, with 400,000 in the city of Rome.

In the late medieval world, all skin-colors could be slaves of the Roman Empire. There was no concept of racial superiority as it was understood in the 1800-1900s in North America. That said, most slaves were slaves of war. In Britain, slavery continued to be practiced following the fall of Rome and sections of Hywel the Good's laws dealt with slaves in medieval Wales. The trade particularly picked up after the Viking invasions, with major markets at Chester and Bristol supplied by Danish, Mercian, and Welsh raiding of one another's borderlands. At the time of the Domesday Book (1086), nearly 10% of the English populations were slaves. Slavery in early medieval Europe was so common that the Roman Catholic Church repeatedly prohibited it — or at least the transfer of Christian slaves to non-Christian lands was prohibited at (e.g. the Council of Koblenz (922), the Council of London (1102), and the Council of Armagh (1171)). In 1452, Pope Nicholas V issued the papal bull Dum Diversas, granting the kings of Spain and Portugal the right to reduce any "Saracens (antiquated term referring to Muslims), pagans and any other unbelievers" to permanent slavery, legitimizing the slave trade as a result of war. The approval of slavery under these conditions was reaffirmed and extended in his Romanus Pontifex bull of 1455. However, Pope Paul III prohibited the enslavement of the Native Americans in 1537 in his papal bull Sublimus Dei.\(^84\)

Approximately 10–20% of the rural population of Carolingian Europe consisted of slaves. Slavery largely disappeared from Western Europe by the later Middle-Ages. The slave trade became illegal in England in 1102, but England went on to become very active in the lucrative Atlantic slave trade from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth century.

---

Henry VIII is generally credited with initiating the English Reformation – the process of transforming England from a Catholic country to a Protestant one. In any case, between 1532 and 1537, Henry instituted a number of statutes that dealt with the relationship between king and pope and hence the structure of the nascent Church of England.

**ORIGEN OF ALEXANDRIA ON BAPTISM**

In the second century, Origen gave his outlook on the purpose of baptism and black or dark-skinned saying persons: “may be born in the middle of the Hebrews, with whom he finds instruction in divine law, or among the Greeks, men of no lesser learning, or among the Ethiopians, who consume human flesh, or among the Scythians, who practice parricide approved by law, or among the Taurians, who sacrifice strangers.” Nevertheless, all whom God created He created equal and alike. And, Origen continues, the variety among rational creatures originates not from the will of the Creator but from the will of the individual, which in some cases provokes progress by imitation of God or reduces to failure through carelessness.85

Origen seems to have built his viewpoint on dark-skinned people through his exegetical readings of passages like (Jeremiah 13:23), “Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? Then may ye also do good, that are habituated to do evil.” This gives us insight that in Early Christian understanding race was recognized as a natural quality of the human person. The eunuch, prepared for baptism by reading of the

85 Origen, *De principiis* 2.9.5-6 (Rufinus’ translation), *GCS*, Origen 5.169-170.
prophet, was often used as a metaphor the Ethiopian was washed white after his baptism. This however, seems to refer only to the sin and conversion in each person. 

A pioneer in exegesis and in textual criticism of the Bible, Origen stated that at first we are like Ethiopians in our souls but that we shall be purified in order that we may become illumined, in accordance with the verse from the Song of Solomon: “Who is she that cometh up having been made white?” In another place, Origen contrasts the Ethiopian’s natural blackness, caused by the sun’s rays, with blackness of the soul, which, he says, is the traditional northern-southern. Perhaps the Ethiopian-Scythian, contrast is obvious from his contrast between the blackness of the skin and that of the soul. The perceptible sun, Origen continues, blackens and burns bodies near it but does not burn at all those bodies which are distant from it when it is at the apex of His Glory but looks suspiciously at those who walk antagonistic to Him.

The Ethiopian appears frequently in early Christian interpretations of a second passage from the Song of Solomon, the familiar “I am black and beautiful,” in the Septuagint, not “but,” as in the Vulgate. “I am black, and beautiful, O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon. Do not look at me

---


87 See Irenaeus 4.20.12 and Origen’s *Hortumiae in Jeremia 11.5 (GCS, Origen 3.84.85)"

88 *Commentarius in Canticum Canticorum* 2.379 (GCS, Origen 8.127) and 2.377 (GCS), Origen 8.125-126)

89 *Commentarius in Canticum Canticorum* 2.360 (GCS, Origen 8.113) *Origen Hortumiae in Jeremia 11.6 (GCS, Origen 3.84) and Hortumiae in Canticum Canticorum 1.6 (GCS, Origen 8.35)*
because I am blackened, because the sun has looked upon me.” Origen’s comments on these verses in part are as follows:

Furthermore we ask in what way is she black and in what way just without whiteness. She has repented of her iniquities; conversion has imparted beauty upon her and therefore she is sung as “beautiful.” But because she is not yet purified of all the impurity of her sins nor purified unto salvation, she is said to be “black” but she does not continue in her black color-she becomes white. Therefore when she rises to greater things and begins to climb from the lowly to the lofty, it is said of her “who is she that comes up having been made white?”…If, in addition, you do not repent, be attentive, in case your soul be called “black” and disgraceful because you continue in the same passions. But if you repent, your soul will be “black” because of your former sins, but because your contrition your soul will have something of what I might call an Ethiopian beauty.”

In further exegesis of the same passage from the Song of Solomon Origen makes, among others, these points which appear in similar or revised form in other writers commenting on the words of the Bride to the young maidens of Jerusalem:

The Bride who speaks signifies the church gathered from among the Gentiles; her body, black externally, lacks neither natural beauty nor that developed practice; the daughters of an earthly Jerusalem, upon seeing the Church of the Gentiles, look down on her because she cannot boast the noble blood of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the Bride’s reply is that she is black and that though she cannot point to ancestry from illustrious men, she is all the same beautiful, for in her is the image of God; she is black by reason of her lowly starting point but is beautiful through repentance and faith; the daughters of Jerusalem in rebuking her on account of her blackness should not forget what Mary suffered when she spoke against Moses because he had married a black Ethiopian women.

A discussion of the Church which comes of the Gentiles and calls herself black and beautiful necessitates, in the judgment of Origen, a collection of passages from the

---


91 *Homiliae in Canticum Canticorum 1.6 (GCS, Origen 8.36)*

92 *Commentarius in Canticum Canticorum 2.360-362 (GCS, Origen 8.113-115)*
Scriptures which foretell the mystery. Origen says that several passages suggest themselves to him as being in accordance with “I am black and beautiful.” In this connection Origen first cites with brief comment and then presents a detailed exegesis of the following: 93

Moses’ marriage to the Ethiopian; 94 the visit of the Queen of Sheba of Solomon; 95 Ethiopia shall stretch out her hands to God”; 96 “from beyond the rivers of Ethiopia will I receive my dispersed ones; they shall bring me sacrifice”; 97 the Ethiopian eunuch Abdimelch. 98

Origen, in the passage in question first discussed the marriage of Moses to the

Ethiopian women 99 because of whom Mary and Aaron spoke against Moses in these verses: “Has the Lord actually spoken only through Moses? Has he not articulated Himself through us also?” If their distress had been resentment about the Ethiopian woman, says Origen, Mary and Aaron ought to have said, “Moses, you should not have married an Ethiopian wife, and one descended from Ham; you should have married someone from your own race.” Since, however, they did not say this, continues Origen, they appear to have implicitly stated what Moses had done in terms of the mystery-Moses, the Spiritual Law, had come into union with the Church gathered from among the Gentiles. Mary illustrates the forsaken Synagogue and Aaron, the priesthood that saw

---


94 Cf. (Num. 12.1-16).


96 Psalms 68.31.

97 Cf. Sophinias 3.10.

98 Cf. Jer. 38.7-13. Abdimelech=Ebedmelech in RSV.

their kingdom taken away from them and given to a nation bringing forth its fruits. And never did Moses, in spite of his many, wonderful accomplishments, receive from God such high admiration as when he married the Ethiopian women. In this relationship the Lord said of Moses, “he is trusted with my entire house; with him I speak against my servant Moses?” The black and beautiful women, Origen argues, is the same as the dark or black Ethiopian woman whom Moses married, although the daughters of Jerusalem (i.e. the people and their priests) speak of evil of Moses (the Spiritual Law, the Word of God, and the Christ) for his having married the Ethiopian woman.

The Queen of Sheba, according to Origen’s exegesis of the passage from 1 Kings, by her official visit to Solomon offers an essential equivalent to the person of the Church, who comes to Christ from out the Gentiles. In fulfillment of the type exemplified by the Queen of Sheba, an Ethiopian, the Church comes from the Gentiles to hear the wisdom of the true Solomon and the true lover of Peace. She came to Jerusalem with a great following, not with a single nation as the Synagogue before her with Hebrews only, but she was escorted by the races of the whole world offering gifts to Christ. When this black and beautiful Queen had seen all in the House of the King of Peace, she articulated her wonder. Nevertheless, Origen concludes, that when the Queen comes to the heavenly Jerusalem, she will see wonders more abundant and impressive.

---

100 Cf. Num. 12.7-8.

101 Commentarius in Canticum Canticorum 1.6 (Origen 8.36-37); Origen Homiliae in Numeros 6.4 (GCS, Origen 7.35-36) and 7.2 (GCS, Origen 7.38-41); also see Irenaeus Contra Haereses, 4.20.12.

102 Commentarius in Canticum Canticorum 2.367-370 (GCS, Origen 8.118-121).
Origen, in his collation of scriptures concerning Ethiopians, argues that, “princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall stretch out her hands to God” and “from beyond the rivers of Ethiopia will I receive my carefully chosen ones?”¹⁰³ The hands of Ethiopia, that is, the people of the Gentiles, in approaching God surpassed those to whom God’s oracles had first been given. Israel by its disappointment had opened the way for the triumph of the Gentiles. It was then that the prophecy of the Psalms was fulfilled and that the “black one” became beautiful, although the daughters of Jerusalem envied and despised her.

Those from beyond the rivers of Ethiopia whom the Lord receives are, according to Origen, those who, because darkened with many serious iniquities and tainted with the dye of wickedness, have become black and dark.¹⁰⁴ The Lord, however, in Origen’s exegesis, accepts even these if they offer sacrifices to God humbly and in the spirit of contrition and repentance. Since the rivers of Ethiopia are a symbol for the Gentiles, says Origen, the prophecy may also signify those who will come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles comes in, and therefore, all Israel will be saved.”¹⁰⁵

One may ask, is Origen’s account of Abdimelech’s lifting of Jeremiah from the cistern, significant?¹⁰⁶ I argue yes, because as Frank Snowden points out, that according to Paul of Tarsus this Ethiopian is said to be a eunuch either because he had himself a eunuch for the kingdom of heaven or because he had himself no seed of wickedness. He

¹⁰³ Origen, ibid., 2.372-373 (GCS, 8.122-123); CF. Psalms 67.32.

¹⁰⁴ Commentarius in Canticum Canticorum 2.373-374 (GCS, Origen 8.123)

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Commentarius in Canticum Canticorum 2.373-374 (GCS, Origen 8.123)
is a servant of kings, his name meaning “servant of kings,” because a wise servant rules over foolish masters. Abdimelech, a foreigner of dark and immoral race,\(^{107}\) signifies the people of the Gentiles. It is the people of this race who, Origen says, have faith in the resurrection from the dead of Him whom the princes had given over to death and who by their faith remember and bring Him back from hades. It is the eunuch, then, Origen argues, who can be said by his faith in the resurrection of Christ to have drawn Him from the cistern.

Early Christian theologians, represented by Irenaeus and Origen, taught salvation was for everyone regardless of one’s race or age. To them, baptism mysteriously united ‘all’ men, women, and children in a community or the body of Christ. Origen of Alexandria viewed the Ethiopian and dark-skinned people the same traditional way dark-skinned people were viewed in the Greco-Roman culture, both in language and in imagery. For writers like Irenaeus and Origen, it made no difference whether one was as racially different as the Scythian or the Ethiopian; of no importance was the region of the world or the cultural group from which a man came. Color was insignificant; in fact, we have seen that they regarded as black all men who had not been illumined by God’s life-creating spirit and considered all men, regardless of the color of the skin, as potential Christians. Yet as Irenaeus points out, until we give our own ‘fiat’ or let there be, we are still mud waiting to be fashioned into fully human as Christ was. Ethiopians and dark-skinned people were by all means to be embraced, for the Church, in the words of Augustine, was to reach even the Ethiopians, the remotest and blackest of men. All who were Christians were the same kind of men and women.

\(^{107}\) Abdimelech’s humble origin is similar to that of the black women of ignoble birth as presented in discussions of the Song of Solomon (n. 20 supra).
THE LIFE OF JOHN SMYTH OF NOTTINGHAMSHIRE

In 1517 Martin Luther addressed many of the issues within the Roman Catholic Church in his Ninety-Five Theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences. Luther’s actions are widely regarded as the initial catalyst for the Protestant Reformation. The disputation protests against clerical abuses, especially nepotism, simony, usury, pluralism, and the sale of indulgences. As mentioned in the introduction, the Baptists inherited Martin Luther’s idea of “Sola Scriptura” or the “Bible Alone” as their theological axiom in their interpretation of scripture. Throughout the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in North America, the Baptist began to see the Bible as the infallible word of God and that the Bible could be understood by the empowerment of all its believers. Moreover, Baptists believed in “Sola Gratia” or “Grace Alone,” and “Sola Fide” or “Faith Alone” in regards to Christian salvation. Baptists, throughout the course of the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, worked out Luther’s principals to its logical conclusions. Therefore, three ideas distinguished the Baptists from other Protestants groups throughout their history; they believed in the empowerment of all believers, which stated that the entire congregation was involved in the authoritative structure of the church. They believed in believer’s baptism, therefore they rejected infant baptism. Lastly, they believed in regenerate (i.e. born again) church membership. These views would prove divisive between black and white Southern Baptists.

The next theologian I shall examine is John Smyth, who is arguably one of the most intriguing figures in Baptist history. Though most renowned as a pioneer of the
General Baptists, Smyth was actually a Baptist for less than two years. His pilgrimage of faith included stages as a Puritan, a Separatist, a Baptist, and a Mennonite.\footnote{The terms “Puritan,” “Separatist,” “Baptist” and “Mennonite” are used throughout my thesis in reference to Smyth. “Puritan” refers to those of Reformed theology who remained in the Church of England though often in disagreement with its official positions. “Separatists” are those who held a similar theology as the Puritans, but saw the corruption of the Church of England as irreparable. Therefore, they founded independent congregations outside the authority of the Church of England. “Baptist” is used for those groups or individuals (mainly English) who accept the practice of believers’ baptism but maintain a distinct existence from Continental “Anabaptists.” “Mennonite” refers to the Anabaptists of the Dutch tradition. Primarily in Smyth’s context, Mennonite and Waterlander Mennonite are used interchangeably.} John Smyth was born approximately the year 1570 in Nottinghamshire, England, and to this day much of his early life remains unknown. He is thought to have been the son of John Smyth, a yeoman of Sturton-le-Steeple, Nottinghamshire.\footnote{B.R. White, “John Smyth,” Biographical Dictionary of Seventeenth-Century Radicals, ed. Richard L. Greaves and Robert Zaller (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1984) 3:186; J.R. Coggins, “The Theological Position of John Smyth,” The Baptist Quarterly 30, 1984, 247.}

John Smyth of Nottinghamshire is a major figure in the theological development of both Baptist and Anabaptist. Smyth embraced the theological axioms of Martin Luther throughout the course of his Baptist life in way that sheds light on the American Southern Baptist race controversies. What the reader is to keep in mind while observing Smyth’s life and theology, is that the “rejection of infant baptism” is the common thread. While witnessing Smyth’s theological journey we see the gradual process of Smyth working out Luther’s axioms. During Smyth’s time at Cambridge, he entered as sizar in Christ’s College, Cambridge in the Easter term of 1586. He received his Bachelor of Arts in 1590, Master of Arts in 1593, and served as a fellow at the college from 1594 to 1598.\footnote{John Venn and J.A. Venn, Alumni Cantabrigienses: a Biographical List of All Known Students, Graduates and Holders of Office at the University of Cambridge from the Earliest Times to 1900, 4:101.} He was most likely ordained by 1595 because his fellowship required that ordination be done...
within a year of appointment. Smyth does not give an exact date, but he does point out that his ordination was performed by Bishop William Wickham upon his appointment as fellow.\textsuperscript{111}

In 1594 in England, Smyth was ordained as an Anglican priest. He preached in the city of Lincoln in 1600 to 1602. A few years after his ordination, he broke with the Church of England and left for Holland (i.e. Dutch Republic) where he and his small congregation began to study the Bible enthusiastically. I shall provide more of the historical and religious context of the Dutch Republic where Smyth found himself during his experimentation with various Protestant sects and his views on slaves, race, and dark-skinned people.

In 1609, Smyth, along with a group in Holland, came to believe in believer’s baptism (as opposed to infant baptism), and they organized to form one of the earliest Baptist churches in Europe. Smyth and his followers believed that baptism was a sign of obedience to God (Mt. 28:19-20). It is here where Smyth clearly departs from the early theological understanding of baptism from Irenaeus of Lyon, Origen of Alexandria, and Medieval theology. Smyth’s community also believed that baptism by immersion was symbolic of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in a spiritual or inner way; however the sacrament itself carried no salvific significance. I shall later demonstrate how this change in this meaning would prove fatal for people of color in the seventeenth and eighteenth century North America.

In the beginning, Smyth was closely aligned with his Anglican tradition because of his acceptance of their theology and the Book of Common Prayer. As time passed, his views evolved. Smyth insisted that true worship was from the inner heart and that any form of reading from a book in worship was an invention of sinful man. This rejection of the liturgy remains strong among many Baptists and Non-Denominational groups today. According to Smyth, prayer, singing and preaching had to be completely spontaneous. He went so far with this mentality that he would not allow the reading of the Bible during worship on the grounds that a translation was "...the worke of a man’s witt...& therefore not to be brought into the worship of God to be read." This idea stemmed from the belief that worship should be ordered by the Spirit.

Second, Smyth introduced a twofold church leadership, that of pastor and deacon. This was a departure from the traditional Anglican hierarchy of bishop, priest, and deacon, and the Presbyterian trifold leadership of Pastor-Elder, Lay-Elders, and Deacons.

Third, was his newfound position on baptism. Having been baptized as infants, Smyth’s followers realized that they would have to be re-baptized. Since there was no other minister to administer baptism, Smyth baptized himself (for which this reason he was called "the Se-Baptist," from the Latin word se [one] self”) and then proceeded to baptize his congregation. Dr. John Clifford said,

in 1606 on March 24, “this night at midnight elder John Morton baptized John Smyth, vicar of Gainsborough, in the River Don. It was so dark we were obliged to have torch lights. Elder Brewster prayed, Mister Smith made a good confession; walked to Epworth in his cold clothes, but received no harm. The distance was over two miles. All of our friends were present. To the triune God be praise.
Before his death in Holland in 1612, Smyth moved away from his Baptist views and began trying to bring his congregation into the Mennonite church. This brought about a separation between Smyth and a group led by Thomas Helwys. The churches that descended from Smyth and Helwys were of the General Baptist influence, holding Arminian view, that Christianity was for all conscious believing adults, and the Particular Baptists were those who held Calvinist of both original sin and double predestination. Smyth eventually rejected the doctrine of original sin and asserted the right of every Christian to hold his own religious views. Among Smyth's works, is The Differences of the Churches of the Separation probably 1608 or 1609.

In order to completely understand the life of John Smyth, it is important not to divorce historical research from his theological interpretations. A discussion of Smyth’s life and thought enables us to answer the questions about his purpose, his sources, and his influence on his successors (i.e. Southern Baptists). Smyth’s profound impact on the General Baptist tradition surfaced later with his debates with Thomas Helwys and eventually these Baptist ideas would resurface in North America in the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. Thomas Helwys who held Particular or Reformed Baptists views urged Smyth to receive his congregation into his church and recognize their baptism as valid. Smyth ignored Helwys’s baptism, stating that they were baptized by the false Church of England. Helwys later accused Smyth of committing a vital error in his interpretation of baptism. Smyth had moved forward to a new truth in their baptism, and Helwys saw his appeal to the Mennonites as a return to an old position of secessionism. Helwys, who I shall discuss in Chapter IV, refused to take what he saw as a backward step. Smyth had instilled in his congregation the belief that they were to pursue
truth perpetually. After the revelation of truth, radical obedience to the Bible was the only proper response to truth in Smyth’s vision of church. In doing this, the General Baptist and Radical Protestant churches carried the spirit of their pioneer, John Smyth into seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries across the Atlantic to North America.

In the seventeenth century, Protestant Christianity had worked its way to its logical conclusions from the Protestant Reformation’s theology of *sola fida* (by faith alone), *sola gratia* (by grace alone), and *sola scriptura* (by the Bible alone). John Smyth of Nottinghamshire embodied this theology in all respects. In the course of his life John Smyth was an Anglican, Puritan, Separatists, Mennonite, and a Baptist. Smyth’s life demonstrates the zeal and fervor of the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation, that is, to find the true church, unmarked by the corruptions and the traditions of man (i.e. Roman Catholics & the Church of England). In Smyth’s quest for Biblical truth, Smyth had departed from the apostolic traditions of Irenaeus of Lyon and Origen of Alexandria. Within this apostolic tradition was a particular approach and theological understanding. Both the Roman Catholics and the Church of England had inherited this early apostolic understanding and approach to the sacrament of infant and adult baptism. Smyth’s zeal to depart from this tradition and to reject its theological approach and understanding on baptism had unintended consequences.

In Smyth’s quest for Biblical truth, he departed from the ancient notion of the first three centuries CE, on what it meant to be a Christian and what it meant to be human. These two concepts of humanity and Christianity were blended together in baptism and reaffirmed in the practice of infant baptism, thus there was no separation between the
two. Throughout the history of Christianity, baptism was the starting point for how people identified themselves and understood their place in the world. Smyth’s theological understanding altered the meaning of the sacrament of baptism, which in early Christianity was the universal tool which united people beyond age, race, or ethnicity. What Smyth did not realize, was that the early Christian theological understanding of baptism was rooted in the ritual of infant baptism. That is to say that the early Christian faith of Irenaeus of Lyon and Origen of Alexandria was for all, regardless of race, social status, tribe, or skin-color. In time, Smyth’s theological approach to the Bible would contribute to the idea of racial superiority in the eighteenth through nineteenth centuries in North America by its rejection of infant baptism. Blacks and Native Americans became perpetual infants of the mind in the eyes of many whites in the eighteenth and nineteenth century.

The theological, social, and political climate for Smyth in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was far from ideal, in the sense that Smyth sought to practice his faith according to his own conscience. Smyth was responsible for organizing the first group of English Baptists, and it is a subject of much debate as to which group of radical Protestants (i.e. Separatist or Mennonites) contributed the most to the groundwork and world in which Smyth found himself. The best way to find continuity of thought in the radical Protestant community is by observing confessions of faith and other doctrinal

---

112 Again, when I use the term “race” I am not referring to the treatment of the Jews throughout history. I am primarily referring to dark and black-skinned people. Ivan Hannaford, in his volume *Race: The History of an Idea in the West* provides an etymological chart on the concept of race. The word “race” entered Western language late, coming into general use in Northern Europe about the middle of the sixteenth century. There is no word bearing a resemblance to it in Hebrew, Greek, or Roman literature. In 1910, W.W. Skeat proposed as its primary meaning: lineage, family, and breed."
statements. For example, if one looks at Smyth’s views on covenant ecclesiology expressed in his various works, one can see a clear connection to the Separatist covenants.

After the Protestant reforms in the sixteenth century that took place during the reign of Edward VI (1537-1553) came to an abrupt end, Queen Mary (1553-1558) ascended the throne and restored Protestantism, and in time the religious landscape changed drastically. Protestants of the established Church were attacked by many groups both within and outside its walls, by groups such as the Puritans and the Separatists. Men like William Bradford (a Separatist), John Foxe (a Puritan), and Robert Browne (a Separatist) critiqued several elements of the established Church of England that they saw as papist or Roman Catholic. B.R. White argues that Robert Browne’s emphasis was on local church covenant and full separation of the established Church of England was Browne’s main influence on John Smyth and can be seen in his debates with John Robinson (1575-1625).

The most common reasons for departure from the Church of England, as seen in the works of Robert Browne, were that Anglicans had replaced the scriptural pattern of worship with the liturgy of The Book of Common Prayer; the next accusation was the church’s membership (i.e. they argued that people were accepted without repentance); the third charge was that the Church of England maintained the same hierarchical structure as the Roman Catholic Church; and the lastly Anglican church lack of discipline to follow

---


114 White, The English Separatist Tradition, 125.
the scriptures. Robert Browne at this time wanted a more rigorous catechetical process, which would significantly alter the inclusive tradition of the Church of England.

The only way to follow this narrative is by understanding that “ideas have wings as well as legs.” That is, that the ideas themselves are empirical evidence for the influence that various radical Protestants groups had on each other from England, the Dutch Republic (i.e. Amsterdam & the Netherlands), to the North Americas. These influences on Smyth were certainly a product of various Christian groups being mixed together by interaction with lay people, or through influence of the printed page of various ministers and the various Puritan ministers who attended Cambridge with John Smyth.

In the sixteenth century on the English side, Smyth was influenced by several Puritans and Separatists. Among these influences were Robert Browne (1550–1633), Henry Barrow (1550–1593), John Greenwood (1577–1593), Francis Johnson (1563–1618), and Henry Ainsworth (1571–1622). One of the strongest contributions to Smyth’s theology was “A True Confession” presented in 1596 by Francis Johnson and Henry Ainsworth to support the Separatist cause. The Separatists confession consisted of forty-five articles of Separatist teachings and church policy against those Churches they saw as unchristian. The theology of this confession is Protestant Reformed in nature with predestination, election and original sin all being defended in the first five articles. The Christology of the confession also demonstrates the Puritan roots of the Separatist. The confession rejected the established churches and hierarchy, favored elections of ministers

---

115 Lee, the Theology of John Smyth, 12-14.

by the congregation, and discusses Christ as Priest, King, and Prophet of the true church. The confession ends by stating that the believers are the church. In 1617, Francis Johnson published his last book, *A Christian Plea*, where he criticized Ainsworth and called for an independent congregation with a Presbyterian government. Johnson assisted as the Amsterdam congregation’s pastor for twenty-five years. Under his leadership, the congregation at one time grew to have as many as 300 members. Later, most of his congregation died on a voyage to Virginia in 1619.

Both Johnson and Ainsworth had extensive contact with John Smyth. Johnson especially had a heavy influence on Smyth in his days at University of Cambridge. However, later in their careers, Johnson and Ainsworth would become chief adversaries for John Smyth. In the early seventeenth century, both men published tracts against Smyth and his supporters. The main idea that Smyth seemed to inherit from the early English Separatist tradition was the basic principal that authority belonged to Christ and those who submitted themselves to this covenant through baptism and belief. This heavy emphasis on belief is another departure from Irenaeus of Lyon and Origen of Alexandria who believed that because Christ was both man and God, at His baptism in the Jordan (Matt 3:13) Christ sanctified the waters and at His resurrection ‘All’ were saved in him, all that was needed was one’s ‘fiat’ throughout life, salvation was a journey in early Christianity, as opposed to a one time ‘mental affirmation’ when one was an adult.

---


118 Lee, 18-19.

On the Dutch side of Smyth’s theological development, many scholars, such as B.R. White, argue that the Baptists developed from the English Separatist tradition with very little influence of Anabaptist. In contrast, some scholars, such as James Coggins, argue that although Baptists had origins in Separatism, the influence of the Anabaptist, especially the Mennonites, had a vivid impact on their development. Irvin Horst argues that both Separatist and Baptists were influenced by Anabaptist in England and that this influence was strengthened by their immigration to the (Dutch Republic). Horst suggests that many Anabaptist doctrines can be shown to be in existence in the same area where the English Separatist was strongest. The peculiar Christology held by many of the Dutch Anabaptists was among these doctrines.\(^\text{120}\) E.A. Paynes claims: “The contacts of John Smyth with the Mennonites are well known. But the early English Baptists provided only one of many bridges by which the ideas of the continental radicals passed over into Britain and the new lands across the Atlantic.”\(^\text{121}\)

In his *Development of Dutch Anabaptist Though and Practice*, William Keeney mentions three aspects of theology that were shared amongst the Dutch Anabaptists. He observes that they held that the Old Testament was fulfilled in the New Testament, that a true church is made up of believers only, and that many held controversial incarnational beliefs.\(^\text{122}\) Robert Friedmann adds another aspect of Anabaptist thought: their strong sense that the best way to relate to God is through the community of believers.\(^\text{123}\) His

\(^{120}\) Horst, *The Radical Brethren*, 51-52, 92.


\(^{122}\) William E. Keeney, *The Development of Dutch Anabaptist Though and Practice from 1539 to 1564* (Nieuwkoop: B De Graaf, 1968) 192-96.
beliefs that the New Testament is the fulfillment of the Old Testament and that the church is for believers only are major aspects in his theology. Smyth was also accused of holding many of the same troublesome incarnational beliefs. For example, the Melchiorite or “heavenly flesh” theory stated that Christ did not receive human flesh from Mary, but brought it with him from heaven.

The Melchiorite theological idea would be fatal for the universal and inclusive arguments of baptism for Irenaeus of Lyon. According Irenaeus, he received from the Christian tradition from Polycarp of Smyrna, who received the teaching from John the Evangelists, who received it from Christ. When Christ was baptized, Irenaeus claimed that, Christ sanctified or blessed the waters, because he was fully human and fully God. The Church of England would inherit this theological idea as well.

To Irenaeus, if Christ, was not fully human and fully God than humanity was not being saved, healed, or united in community after all. Because, remember a key concept for Irenaeus was that Christ was fully human and fully God and that He passed through every age, thus sanctifying humanity itself and offering them the potential to give their own fiat or let there be, in order to become what he is. Humanity was united in Christ. Or as Athanasius of Alexandria (298-373) said, “God became Man so that We might become God.” Consequently, to the early Christians, Christ had to be fully man and fully God in order for their idea of salvation and community to work. The heavenly

---


124 H.E. 5.3.1-3 and H.E. 5.3.2-3.

flesh theory would be problematic for early Christians because that would deny Christ’s humanity.

The fourth characteristic would seem to have less similarity with Smyth’s views until one takes into account his thoughts on the local church covenant. Throughout much of his career, Smyth believed that the local church covenant was the appropriate response to God’s offer of the covenant of grace. In other words, the proper way to relate to God was through the covenanted community of believers.

C.A. Snyder notes one additional characteristic of Anabaptists that has an apparent similarity with John Smyth. Along with realizing that the Old Testament found fulfillment in the New Testament, Snyder argues, that many Anabaptists interpreted the Old Testament as a “figure or type” for the New Testament church. This typological or figurative approach found many adherents among the Anabaptists and was the dominant approach for Smyth. These thoughts, along with Smyth’s denunciation of Calvinism and the Christian magistracy, suggest possible evidence for Mennonite influence.

Ministers and theologians such as Caspar Schwenkfeld (1489-1561), influenced Smyth through his stress on the spiritual interpretation of the inner over the outer meaning of salvation and the Old (Outer) & New (Inner) Testament;

The Old Covenant consisted entirely in external, perishable services…In short all that pertained to it was external, temporal, typical, and figurative. The other is called the New Covenant…It is called new because it rests on better promises than the old, consists of Spiritual, abiding riches and promises.  

---


127 Schultz, *Caspar Schwenckfeld von Ossig*, 190; Corpus Schenckfeldianorum 4:419-25.
In Schwenfeld’s Christology, he believed Christ had received his flesh from Mary, but the flesh underwent a process of deification.\footnote{128}{Weigelt, “Caspar von Schwenkfeld,” 221.}

Melchior Hofmann (1495-1543) had an indirect influence on Smyth primarily through his views on his Christology and use of typology and allegory which stated that Christ did not receive his flesh from Mary in a natural way.\footnote{129}{Klaus Deppermann, “Melchior Hofman: Contradictions between Lutheran Loyalty to Government and Apocalyptic Dreams,” in Profiles of Radical Reformers, ed. Hans-Jurgen Goertz (Scottdale PA: Herald Press, 1982) 186.} His views were similar to Schwenckfeld’s because he argued that Christ brought His flesh from heaven.\footnote{130}{Snyder, Anabaptist History and Theology, 357-63.} His views were accepted by many of the Dutch Anabaptists. I should point out here that at this point, because these radical Protestants ministers stated that one must believe in order to be saved, that meant people needed to read the Bible for themselves. Consequently, men like Hofmann would argue, “Scripture is not a matter for everybody—to unravel all such involved snarls and cables, to untie such knots—but only for those to whom God has given the power.”\footnote{131}{Melchior Hofmann, The Ordinance of God, trans. George H. Williams, in Spiritual and Anabaptists Writers, 203.} What Smyth inherited in Hoffmann is the idea that members of the church, “wed and bind themselves to the Lord Jesus Christ, publicly, through that true sign of the Covenant, the water bath and baptism.”\footnote{132}{Hofmann, The Ordinance of God, 186-87; Cornelius Krahn, Dutch Anabaptism: Origin, Spread, and Thought (1450-1600) (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968), 191.} To both Smyth and Hofmann, the “covenant of baptism” was what the church does to commit itself to Christ.\footnote{133}{Hofmann, The Ordinance of God, 187.}
and Hofmann, Jesus of Nazareth covenanted himself to the Father through his baptism.\footnote{Hofmann, \textit{The Ordinance of God}, 189-90.} This served as a “figurative or typological” example to his followers. Therefore all believers needed to “covenant to betroth themselves to the Lord Jesus Christ, under the covenant of God.”\footnote{Hofmann, \textit{The Ordinance of God}, 190.} They would then be prepared to follow Christ in obedience as a covenanted body. It was through the Mennonites that the ideas of John Smyth came into indirect contact with Schwenkfeld and Hofmann.

After, Philip Menno Simmons (1496-1561) influenced John Smyth through his theology which rejected infant baptism through his study of the Bible.\footnote{Krahn, \textit{Dutch Anabaptism}, 171-172.} His theology was similar to Schwenkfeld and his incarnational views similar to Hofmann’s.\footnote{Pater, \textit{Karlstadt as the Father of the Baptist Movements}, 252.} Simons held that Christ had drawn nourishment from Mary while in the womb. Simons believed that the Word became flesh, but did not take His flesh from Mary.\footnote{Simons, \textit{Complete Writings}, 431.} Dirk Philips (1504-1568) influenced Smyth through his Melchiorite Christology and he views the typological meaning of the Old Testament as the ceremonial shadow for the New Testaments deeper spiritual meaning.\footnote{Keeney, “Dirk Philips, a Biography,” 36.} Although Smyth was never in direct contact with Caspar Schwenkfeld, Melchior Hofmann, Menno Simons and Dirk Philips, their ideas lived on through the Mennonite community.
Lubbert Gerrits (1534-1612) and Hans de Ries (1553-1638) confirm a doctrinal relationship that ties the early Dutch Anabaptists to the Waterlander Mennonites, who were contemporary with Smyth and whose congregation Smyth tried to join. It is perhaps primarily through Lubbert Gerrits (1534-1612) and Hans de Ries (1553-1638) that much of the Mennonite thought was passed on to Smyth and therefore to the early General (i.e. Arminian) and Particular (i.e. Calvinist) Baptists as they traveled with their ‘ideas’ across the Atlantic to North America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The tolerance of Gerrits and Ries as well as Ries’s spiritual views on his Christology seem to have found fertile ground in the mind of John Smyth. Moreover, in 1612, Gerrits encouraged Ries to merge Smyth’s English congregation with the Dutch Waterlander Mennonites (Flemish, Frisian, and High-German). Smyth’s interactions with the Separatist tradition perhaps prepared him for his eventual move to the Mennonites.

**JOHN SMYTH OF NOTTINGHAMSHIRE ON BAPTISM**

Smyth early on argued that because of original sin, Christ received his flesh from heaven and not from Mary.\(^{140}\) Smyth used a typological approach to interpret the meaning of baptism. He argued that infant baptism was not a type to Old Testament circumcision, but those that held on the ritual of infant baptism were not reading into the spiritual “inner-circumcision that Paul of Tarsus refers to.\(^{141}\) Smyth thought that the church should be made up of believers only because infants could not repent and believe.

\(^{140}\) Cf. Simons, *Complete Writings*, 796, 825.

\(^{141}\) Cf. Simons, *Complete Writings*, 133.
He argued that the Bible stated that only Christ could take away sin through one’s belief and obedience, not the water of baptism. Consequently, to Smyth, outward baptism demonstrates that a person has experienced the inner baptism and belongs to the church. The inner baptism is what brings salvation and outward baptism comes as obedience to Christ in this new relationship.

The Protestant teachings of the Baptists both Particular (i.e. Calvinist) and General (i.e. Arminian) now stated that individuals should wait until they are intellectually prepared to choose baptism; being a Christian became a choice in seventeenth-century England, the Dutch Republic and in North America. As we shall see, this stress on choice, in regards to one’s religion, would prove fatal for people of color in the modern age.

In Smyth’s Baptist work *The Character of the Beast*, Smyth addressed his views on election and said that the Bible taught that some things pertaining to “Gods secreat election, & not of mans knowledge” and that some people are “invisibly elect& beloved of God.” Smyth also confirms that although some people demonstrate the true faith, they could belong to God “invisibly as aperteyning to the L. election.” These Calvinist views held in Smyth’s Baptist stage, give us insight into the mind of the early Baptists community. Because Smyth’s theology never existed in a vacuum, he would constantly change his theological views in religiously shifting environment. Later on in the colonies,

---


these election and predestination theological views would act as water poured unto ideas of hereditary heathenism in North America.

Smyth goes on to give an account in *The Character of the Beast* on how infants relate to election and how they were affected by original sin. Here Smyth argued that an infant should not be baptized. He argued that only God understands the salvific plan for infants. “If it be said that infants have a kind of Faith wrought in them invisibly, & after an unseen manner: I say what God worketh invisibly, & secretly we dispute not nor regard.”\(^{146}\) Smyth argues that because infant’s faith cannot be validated, infants must be refused baptism. They cannot prove their invisible faith or demonstrate visible faith. Smyth goes on to say that infants and unbelievers were outside of the community. Smyth’s idea that infants should be denied baptism placed infants outside the community of believer’s because they could not prove or demonstrate their invisible faith.

This would be problematic for blacks in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in North America. Because the white Southern Baptists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries thought that slavery was the predestined fait for blacks, obedience to whites was what proved and demonstrated their Christianity. When blacks began to rebel and request for their freedom, white Southern Baptist saw this as proving to them that their inner faith was invalid. In the nineteenth century, when blacks began to rebel against the institution of slavery, white Southern Baptists concluded that blacks were incapable of becoming Christian (i.e. hereditary heathens). This resulted in the illegalization of black literacy and the idea that blacks were perpetual infants of the mind-a people that must be ruled and taught to obey if they were to be truly Christian.

\(^{146}\) Smyth, *Works* 2:603. “Unseen” has been emended.
Later in Smyth’s theological journey as a Baptist he rejected his Calvinist views yet maintained his position on infant baptism. He said:

[A]lthough I will not say that Children are damned, yet I dare say that they are borne & dead in trespasses & sinners, & that they doe not nor cannot shew any sparke of grace to mee, & therfor although I dare not say this or that infant is not vnder the election of God, yet I dare say that never in the Earth is actually seased [seized] of the New Testament which is onely atteyned by confession of sinne & Faith.\[147\]

By rejecting infant baptism Smyth had departed from the mainstream Christian tradition. He argued that:

[I]nfants being borne in sinne, cannot nor doe not declare their regeneration at al to vs: & so wth them wee have nothing to doe: & whereas you say natural corruption is not imputed to infants no more then to men believing, let it bee so, & yet you cannot defend that without the opinion of vniversal redemption, & then I say, that if the infants of the Faithful being delivered from their natural corruption may have therefore bee baptized, then al infants shal be baptized who are pertakers of the same benefit, even the infants of Turkes.\[148\]

Later in Smyth’s General Baptists stage in article 2 of Corde Credimus he stated “That there is no original sin (lie., no sin of origin or descent ), but all sin is actual and voluntary, viz., a word, a deed, or a design against the law of God; and therefore, infants are without sin.”\[149\] Smyth articulated his later Arminian view when he said that, “God created man with freedome of will, so that he had habilitie to chuse the good, and eschew the evil, or to chuse the evil, and refuse the good.”\[150\] For Smyth the primary good was to be able to consciously choose was faith. Over time, Smyth thought that in order for man to be saved, he had to have freewill, so that he could come to Christ voluntarily.

\[147\] Smyth, Works 2:640.

\[148\] Smyth, Works 2:682, 728, and 735.

\[149\] Smyth, Works 2:682.

\[150\] Smyth, Works 2:734.
In *Argumenta Contra Baptismum Infantum*, Smyth argued, “Christ does not save infants from their own sins, but impedes and restrains from infants the sin of someone else.”¹⁵¹ For that reason, according to Smyth infants were in a sort of “grace period” until they were able to give conscious consent and demonstrate their faith to the community. Smyth’s ideas that some were outside of the community and that one could interpret the Bible on their own, plus his ideas on freewill, resulted in a faith that essentially thought that it could save itself. Smyth wrote “onlie this is It which I held, the seeing ther was no church to whome wee could Joyne with a Good conscience to haue baptisne from them, therof wee might baptize our selues.”¹⁵² “[A] man cannot baptise others into the Church, himself being out of the Church: Therefore it is Lawfull for a man to baptize himself together with others in communion.”¹⁵³ Smyth’s theological approach placed all the authority and power to the empowerment of all individual believers. In later eighteenth and nineteenth century North America, this idea would give significant power to the proslavery Baptists over blacks.

Because Smyth’s theology was anti-authoritative in nature, later nineteenth Baptist communities that embraced the empowerment of all believers’ had no authoritative figure to regulate the treatment of black slaves in the American South. Smyth’s anti-authoritative views can be seen in his beliefs on the Church of England. He states:

[T]ruly for my part I hold it as lawful to retaine the Church & Ministery of England, as to retaine the baptisme of England I wil yield to the truth of the


¹⁵³ Smyth, *Works* 2:660
Church & ministry of England: & I wil confesse I have been a Schismatique, &
returne & acknowledge my error: but because I know the ministry & Church of
England is false, therfor it mist needs be that the baptisme which is the forme of
the Church is false essentially: & therefore having Seperated justly from the
Church & Ministry of England for falsehood of them, I must needs also Seperate
from the baptisme which is false, for the Church is false because baptisme the
form of the Church is false: & if baptisme the forme of the Church of England be
true, the Church of England is true also. Smyth said, “If weetherfor being
formerly decaved in the way of Pedobaptistry, now doe embrace the truth in the
true Christian Apostolique baptisme: Then let no man impute this as a fault vnto
vs.”

Smyth later challenged the Separatists to make their separation complete. He wrote that
they that do Separate from England as from a false Chu. Must of necessity
Separate from the baptisme of England false, & so account the baptisme of infants
false baptisme: Therefor the Separation must either goe back to England, or go
forward to true baptisme.

In The Character of the Beast, Smyth used the church fathers Eusebius and
Tertullian to argue against the practice of infant baptism claiming that it was not
practiced in the early Church. Smyth’s Corde Credimus shows that he agreed with
Mennonites on believer’s baptism, and that he later rejected Reformed views: which was
a contemporary debate throughout the Netherlands on Arminianism. Smyth throughout
his career used typology as one of his main methods to approach the Bible. He wrote, the
carnal covenant or old testament being the “type” and the spiritual covenant or new
testament being the “truth.”

154 Smyth, Works 2:664-64.
155 Smyth, Works 2:564. “Man” has been emended
156 Stephan Brachlow, “Puritan Theology and General Baptist Origins,” Baptist Quarterly
31 (October 1985):179.
To Smyth baptism was just a type or shadow that pointed to a higher spiritual truth. In his Mennonite work *Argumenta Contra Baptismum Infantum*, where he said that faith, repentance, and conversion are the “body and substance” whereas the Old Testament ceremonies are “mere shadows.”

In Smyth’s debate with Richard Clyfton, Smyth argues that infants cannot be a part of the New Testament church even though they were part of the Old Testament church. He states, “The constitution, viz: the matter & forme of the Church of the Old Testament is the type. The constitution or matter of the Church of the new testament is the truth.” Therefore, Smyth argued that the New Testament church is for believers only. In his debate with Richard Clyfton, Smyth argued that it is improper to consider circumcision in the Old Testament as a type for baptism in the New Testament. Instead Smyth said that the carnal infants of the Old Testament are a type for the “Spiritual infants of the new Testament, that is, regenerate baptized believers.”

Smyth affirmed his dualist convictions when he wrote, “That the preaching of the word, and ministerie of the sacraments, representeth the ministery of Christ in the spirit: who teacheth baptiseth, and feedeth the regenerate, by the holie spirit inwardlie and invisblie.” In *Argumenta Contra Baptismum Infantum*, Smyth stated that infants should not be baptized because they could not experience the inward baptism of the heart.

---


Smyth the spiritual was the most real and important. He writes, “Therefore the brilliance and self-respect of the New Testament sacraments do not consist in the outward sign, but in the person who partakes in the sacrament.”\footnote{Smyth, \textit{Works} 2:720.} Smyth’s inward over the outward emphasis, displays his influence from Hans de Reis.\footnote{Reis, “A Short Confession of Faith” 15-18}

Smyth discussed the differences and nature of the two covenants. One is carnal and the other is spiritual. He said:

\begin{quote}
[F]irst distinguishing the two covenants or testaments…one covenant was made with Abraham & his carnal seed & of that covenant was circumcision a seale: another covenant made with Abraham & his Spiritual seed, & of that covenant the holy Spirit of promise is the sale.\footnote{Smyth, \textit{Works} 2:579. “Abraham” has been emended.}
\end{quote}

Smyth continued to acknowledge the fact that circumcision was part of God’s covenant in the Old Testament, but continued to emphasize that the practice was an outer and lesser carnal expression of the Jews. The covenant was spiritual and required repentance and faith; therefore infants cannot and should not be baptized.\footnote{“Because circumcision did not aperteyne to Abraham & his infants as a seale of everlasting covenat of life & Salvation, but of the external temporary covenant of the land of Canaan…it doth not follow that baptisme belongs to the Faythful & their carnal infants as a seale of the Spiritual covenant of the New Testament made in respect of Christ.” Smyth, \textit{Works} 2:587 and 2:585.} Smyth argued that, “the outward church visible, consists of penitent persoons onely, and of such as beleewing in Christ, bring fourth fruits worthie amendment of lyfe.”\footnote{Smyth, \textit{Works} 2:744.} Richard Clyfton and several
Protestant groups (i.e. Separatist, Puritans, and Anglicans) were shocked at Smyth’s radical departure from the mainstream tradition, arguing that he was creating a church worthy of only himself. John Robinson provides the clearest account. He wrote:

I have heard from themselves, on this manner: Mr. Smyth, Mr. Helwisse, and the rest, having utterly dissolved and disclaimed their former church state and ministry, came together to erect a new church by baptism…And after some straining of courtesy who should begin…Mr. Smyth baptized himself first himself, and next Mr. Helwisse, and so the rest, making particular confessions....These things thus being, all wise men will think that he had small cause to be so much enamored of his own baptism, or so highly to despise other men’s for the unorderly or otherwise unlawful administration of it.\footnote{Robinson, The Works of John Robinson 3:168-69; Smyth Works 2:757.}

Smyth displayed some of his Reformed views in Character of the Beast saying some people are “Gods secreat election, & not of mans knowledge” and that some people are “invisibly elect & beloved of God.”\footnote{Smyth, Works 2:596 and 677.} Smyth also confirms that although some people demonstrate trues faith, they could belong to God “invisibly as apereyning to the L. election.”\footnote{Smyth, Works 2:677.}

Richard Clyfton responded to Smyth in his The Plea for Infants and Elder People where he used Smyth’s universal redemption theory and rejection of original sin, to argue that infants should be baptized to be a part of the covenant or community. He responds:

As concerning that opinion of general redemption, I reject as an error. But as touching the imputing of natural corruption to infants; thus I mean, that as the children of the faithful are to us within Gods covenant, as wel as their parents, because of the promise made to the faithful and their seed: so of us they are to be esteemed of, as pertakers of the promise, whereof the not imputing of sinne is one.\footnote{Clyfton, The Plea for infants and Elder People, 146.}
Clyfton concludes by stating that infants inherit the original sin of their parents, and that their parents are a part of the New Testament covenant, therefore, children should be baptized to be included in the community if their parents are faithful Christians.

Smyth later declared in *Argumenta Contra Baptismum Infantum*, that Christ death breaks any grip of original sin, so infants remain in innocence. He argued that they are not guilty of any sin until they make their own sinful choices. Smyth writes:

Infants do not have sins which can be purified, they still remain in their purity, for the passage and flow of original sin is cut off by Christ death, who is the Lamb slain from the beginning of the world…Christ does not save infants from their own sins, but inhibits and restrains from infants the sin of someone else…therefore infants should not to receive water baptism in their own person, since water baptism should be dispensed only to those, who have a need of the blood of Christ for their sins to be cleansed.\(^{173}\)

Smyth’s views on church authority are another idea that the Baptists carried with them across the Atlantic and into North America. In article 16, *Corde Credimus* Smyth said:

That the church of Christ has power given to themselves of announcing the word, administering the sacraments, appointing ministers, renouncing them, and also excommunicating; but the last appeal is to the brethren or body of the church.\(^{174}\)

\(^{173}\) *Infantes non habent peccata quae possunt expurgari, in innocentia sua adhuc permant, cursus enim atque fluxus peccati originalis intercipitur per Christi mortem, qui agnus occisus est ab intio mundi…Christus non servat nfantes a peccatis suis, sed impedit et prohibit ab infantibus peccatum unum alterius…infants ergo non debe[n]t in corpore suo baptismum aquae suscipere, cum aquae baptismus ijs solis dispensum debet, qui sanguine Christi opus habent ad peccata sua propria abluenda.* Smyth, Works 2:728.

\(^{174}\) *Ecclesiam Christi habere postestatem sibi delegatam, verbumanuntiandi, sacramenta administrandi, ministros constituendi et abdecendi, denique excommunicandi:ultimam autem provocationem esse as fratres, sive corpus ecclesiae.* Smyth, Works 2:683.
The strong dichotomy of matters religious and political was carried over across the Atlantic in the seventeenth century by ministers like Roger Williams (1603-1683) who was an English Protestant theologian who was an early proponent of religious freedom and the separation of church and state. In 1636, he began the colony of Providence Plantation, which provided a shelter for religious minorities. Williams started the first Baptist church in America, the First Baptist Church of Providence, and was arguably the first abolitionist in North America. Williams like Smyth, also began his career at Cambridge as Anglican, Puritan, Separatist, and later a Baptist. Williams like Smyth advocated for a strong separation from church and state. William’s and Smyth’s ideas on church and state is articulated by Smyth:

However, I assert that Christ is a spiritual king and His church is a spiritual kingdom, and all the servants of the church are spiritual servants; its weapons are spiritual, its laws spiritual, its punishments spiritual, its rewards spiritual, its soldiers spiritual, its warfare spiritual; and, therefore, I do not see how the church of Christ can administer that external and fleshly commonwealth.  

Both John Smyth and Roger Williams were persecuted and silenced as religious minorities in England. This strong argument for separation of church and state presented by John Smyth, alongside his teaching that infants were outside of the Church and don’t need baptism, presents to us the very seeds that the southern slave owners and churches used in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to justify slavery and to see black and dark-skinned people as an inferior species who was outside of the church. Smyth creates a dilemma for future Baptists in regards to both slaves and race. For example, if the slaves were predestined by God to be dark-skinned and cursed by God in (Genesis 9), the logical conclusion for the white Southern Baptists was that blacks were inferior and

would never be their equals or only their equals in this extreme spiritual manner. Second, if the church and state were separated to the extent presented by Smyth and later Williams, was racial superiority and slavery a State or a civil matter? Third, if the empowerment of all believers could both read and interpret the Bible on their own and the Southern Baptist authority came from the empowerment of all its believers,’ and blacks having been predestined and cursed by God to be both black and slave-then how would the black community’s perspective be heard?

Many of these questions were answered by black Baptists ministers, such as, Nat Turner-who claimed that both slavery and racial superiority were unbiblical. As blacks rebelled, the concept of hereditary heathenism was reaffirmed in the minds of white Southern Baptists. Again, although white and black Baptists had worshiped to some degree before, even in the same space, many white Southern Baptists continued to see blacks as inferior. I should note that this sense of racial superiority was also the product of the North American desire to identify with something other than religion, as result of the separation of church and state became a reality after the Declaration of Independence in 1776.

Moreover, as Southern Baptists looked elsewhere then their religion for their identity, skin-color seemed the most plausible. This deviation from the classical Christian identity that began in one’s baptism was the unintended consequence of ‘the Bible Alone’ and ‘empowerment of all believers’ in the American South. The Baptists for the first time in eighteenth century American South had a healthy mix of Calvinism and Arminianism in their theology. Baptists were no longer the religious minority as they were in colonial America or England. Consequently, the Bible was read in an entirely
different political, economic, and social context then it was in the second century with Irenaeus of Lyon, Origen of Alexandria. When Southern white Baptists saw slave in the Old Test or imperatives of obedience voiced by Paul of Tarsus in the New Testament, they inevitably thought of black and Indians.

When Thomas Jefferson and company composed the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and black slaves began hearing the message that they were given human or civil rights by their creator, this message, alongside the emancipatory message in the Bible (e.g. Israelites fleeing Egypt) cultivated a spirit of rebellion in Virginia. Black slaves began to see themselves as equal to whites and desired their freedom. In the American Civil War white Southern Baptists fought for the continuation of slavery, and racial superiority for the Confederate States. After Lincoln wrote the Emancipation Proclamation 1863, white Southern Baptists had to come to terms with black as their social, religious, and political equals. This was problematic for Baptist who before had enjoyed the benefits of England’s union of church and state, even in the midst of persecution.

As North America became more secular, it became unclear to Southern Baptists where a church who said that blacks were predestined to be slaves and inferior, and a state that said that persons have rights could no longer appeal to one another. John Smyth’s dream of a spiritual church was perfect breeding ground for the implementation for white Southern Baptists. With the Black Codes issued in (1800–1866) which denied blacks all American civil rights, and later the Jim Crow Laws enacted (1865-1965) which segregated blacks and white in the public square. In the nineteenth century, many white Southern Baptists saw racial segregation was merely a civil problem and not a church
issue. With the strong dichotomy of the spiritual from the political, and blacks perceived as infant of the mind who were incapable of obedience, white Southern Baptists were able to separate their moral Biblical teaching from the politics.
CHAPTER 3

PLANTER VS. SLAVE BIBLICAL EXEGESIS

The original Atlantic slave trade had nothing to do with race or skin-color as in the modern understanding, but over time, for example, in colonial Virginia, the Anglican colonial planters began to associate skin-color with immutable moral, behavioral, and intellectual characteristics that many believed made African and Native American people incapable of becoming fully Christian. Christian and white became synonymous terms in early colonial Virginia, as did, hereditary heathen and dark-skin or African. Because in early colonial Virginia there was confusion with the status of baptized Christian slaves, over time the planters and slave owners began to neglect the baptism and conversion of their slaves, fearing that slaves would desire to be free.

This neglect reaffirms my argument that the Anglican planters still had the classical universal understanding of baptism and community. Planters ignored their African and Native American slaves’ conversions, because to be Christian was to be free. That is, one could not rule over one’s brother or sister in Christ. Later in Virginia laws were passed in the 1700s which stated that baptized slaves were still slaves and not free—that it was possible to be both a slave and a Christian. The planters of Virginia in the early seventeenth century were part of the Church of England, which was highly influenced by the theological thought of Irenaeus of Lyon and his universal and communal notions of the Christian faith.
Not sharing these elements of the classical understanding of salvation from theologians like Irenaeus of Lyon and Origen of Alexandria on the Holy Spirit, and participation within the community, many Protestants groups such as the Baptists, looked elsewhere than baptism for their identity and now looked to novel notions of species and race for their communal understanding.¹ In their quest for separation of church and state in the 1800s in Virginia, evangelical Baptists embraced these innovative explanations of identity outside of baptism, in the search for a more secular identity. The rejection of infant baptism and the theological approach which made this rejection possible by the evangelical Baptists, planted the seed for racial superiority in North American Christendom.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, white Southern Baptists used the Curse of Ham in (Genesis 9:18-27) to justify both slavery and racial superiority in their quest to sanctify ‘whiteness’. In this Old Testament passage, Noah cursed Ham’s son Canaan for seeing him drunk and naked off wine. In the same passage, Noah said that Ham’s son Canaan will be cursed and made a slave to his brothers Shem and Japheth. When white Southern Baptists read (Genesis 9:18-27), they took Noah’s curse to Canaan to mean Africans or Blacks, Shem to mean Native Americans, and Japheth to mean whites. Noah elaborated on the verse: “And he said, blessed be the Lord God of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant. God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant.” In this verse, the American Southern white Baptists literal exegesis took Shem’s tent to stand for the Native American’s, and Japheth they saw as themselves (i.e. white Southerners). Josiah Priest (1788–1861) wrote in 1852 that

¹ Ibid., 184-185.
Japheth [was] a blue eyed white man, and Ham a wooly headed black man” and he went on to explain that Ham’s “whole character and nature” were deficient, which led to the hereditary heathenism curse of slavery.²

This Baptist theological approach to the Christian Bible, leading to the rejection of infant baptism for the symbolic believer’s baptism, made the conversion of black slaves in North America simply pointless in regards to racial or Christian equality. Even if African American slaves were baptized into white evangelical Baptists Churches in the eighteenth century, their theological exegesis kept black Christians as an inferior species. This was contrary to the early Church of the second century, where slaves like Blandina were considered Saints and equals in the eyes of Irenaeus of Lyon.

After the American Revolutionary War (1775–1783) and the Declaration of Independence from Great Britain (1776), combined with the idea that American society had human rights became a political reality, proslavery American Southern white Baptists now had to deal with a theological issue of slavery and racial superiority that was no longer endorsed by their respective colonies. On January 1, 1802, Thomas Jefferson addressed a letter to the Danbury Baptist Association in Connecticut and published in a Massachusetts newspaper where he stated that the American Constitution stressed a "separation of church and state." African American slaves began to demand that they had “rights” and desired their freedom from bondage. Evangelical Baptists, prior to this point, baptized blacks in order to make them better slaves, but the socio-political landscape began to change across North America. In 1831, black Baptists preachers like Nat Turner appeared in Virginia. Turner taught African American slaves in Southampton Virginia,

that slavery and racial superiority were unbiblical, thus blacks needed to rebel. In Nat Turners Rebellion, rebel slaves killed somewhere between 56-65 people.\(^3\) At this point in time, white Baptists feared free blacks like Nat Turner and seemed to be clueless of the Bible’s emancipatory power.

This was one of the consequences behind a baptism that was purely symbolic and carried no transcending power, as opposed to baptism of Irenaeus of Lyon’s time. Irenaeus’s churches baptism made all Christians equal heirs to God’s kingdom and its promises. Later on, to the surprise of white Southern Baptists, black ministers like Nat Turner began to read the Bible for themselves (i.e. *Sola Scriptura*) and had drawn radically different conclusions about slavery and racial superiority. Black Baptist ministers like Nat Turner argued that African American slaves were both equal to whites and should be freed from their bondage. Turner’s free rebellious spirit would result in the illegalization of blacks to learn to read or write in eighteenth century Virginia. This would reaffirm white Southern Baptists convictions that blacks where hereditary heathens, thus incapable of becoming fully Christians in the community.

The American Southern Baptist’s theological interpretation of scripture stated who and when someone was a professed or conscious Christian, therefore they rejected infant baptism in exchange for believer’s baptism, approved race-based chattel slavery and racial superiority on the approval of the empowerment of all its believers, and taught members to submit to the rule of the church on issues of slavery, segregation, and reaffirmed racial superiority on the basis of the “Bible Alone.” I should point out that the Baptists rejection of infant baptism and the theological approach that made it possible

---

\(^3\) Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission Staff (July 1973). "National Register of Historic Places Inventory/Nomination: Belmont." Virginia Department of Historic Resources.
was the necessary seed needed for segregation by its dismissal of the earlier second
century universal notion that included all colors and ages as equal inheritors to Christ’s
promises. What is interesting about the Church of England from whom the Baptists
separated is that Anglicans continued this idea of universal Christianity and infant
baptism emphasized by Irenaeus of Lyon, who they recognized as a Saint. The Church of
England often persecuted Baptists for their rejection of infant baptism as a threat to the
stability of England. The English fear of the Baptists makes my point clear; that rooted in
the sacrament of baptism were theological ideas which united all peoples beyond age and
race into a community.

After the American Civil War (1861-1865) and the Emancipation Proclamation
(1863), white Southern Baptists had to come to terms with the once enslaved African
Americans as their social equals. Many evangelical Baptists before the American Civil
War worshiped together even though blacks were usually segregated in various sections
of the church. Evangelical Baptists continued to support slavery and racial superiority as
a Biblically sanctioned practice. What is strange in the story of the Southern Baptists, is
that their theological approach both made and unmade the idea of race. By African
American Baptists protesting against the institution of slavery, they not only embodied
and recovered the ascetic-martyr Christianity of Irenaeus of Lyon and Origen of
Alexandria, who also lived in a time of Christian persecution in the Roman Empire, but
they fully manifested the teachings of theologians like Gregory of Nyssa (335-394), who
argued that to rule over human beings was a Christian vice.

When one looks at the historical evidence, it would appear that there was
something to Irenaeus of Lyon’s hypothesis or Origen of Alexandria’s biblical exegesis.
The emancipation of Blacks, Dark-skinned people, Indians, and slave and race narratives does not seem possible without the rejection of believer’s baptism and its “Bible Alone” exegesis. One could argue that without the Old Testament narrative of the Israelites fleeing Egypt or Irenaeus of Lyon’s theology on Christ, which the enslaved people seemed to pick up intuitively, as the early second century Christians did. What is clear however is that without the Baptists rejection of infant baptism and the theological approach that made that possible, racial superiority may not have existed or defeated. The early Christian and Black Baptist narrative provides was reconstructed in a way that collapsed the biblical meta-narrative of the slave and race.

The theology of John Smyth of Nottinghamshire had unintended consequences by its rejection of infant baptism, empowerment of all believer’s, and “Bible Alone” approach that made it possible to divide Christians in racial communities. The Southern Baptist used Smyth’s theology to state who was a Christian. John Smyth’s early zeal to find the true interpretation of scripture and the problems with ‘the Bible Alone’ theology in a society where church and state are separate, proved to be problematic as the cultural context began to shift after the American Revolution. At that point, the Church of England had a hard time ensuring its theological interpretations based on the Church Fathers and theologians like Irenaeus of Lyon and Origen of Alexandria. The American Southern Baptists spirit slowly turned to the self-baptizing or individualist theology of John Smyth of Nottinghamshire, dividing the Christian community based on color alone. Smyth’s self-baptizing approach to scripture and baptism continued the idea that believers could save themselves and interpret Christian scripture without authority.

---

4 N.B. John Smyth, a Baptist, baptized himself because he found that the churches around him were all false.
CHAPTER 4

THE WORD BECOMES FLESH IN VIRGINIA

In the mid-1600s, Anglican Reverend Morgan Godwyn arrived in Virginia. He was one of the uncommon ministers from the Church of England willing to pastor a colonial parish in the Americas. Godwyn’s later writings suggest an antagonistic personality; appalled by Anglo-Virginians’ abandonment to proselytize their enslaved property, he challenged his colonial congregation on its treatment of enslaved people. He pushed the colonial church to baptize its slaves and performed at least two such baptisms himself in colonial Virginia. His actions infuriated his planter congregation, Godwyn later called to mind in his writings. Godwyn, to be sure of, relied on slave labor himself to support his livelihood and most likely left Virginia for Barbados around this time due to his disapproval from the colonies. Nevertheless, he pursued the baptism of his slaves (N.B. adults, children, and infants) in both Virginia and Barbados.

Godwyn returned to England and in 1681 he pronounced a striking accusation of the contentious religious and racial categories in England’s American Colonies. He wrote; “These two words, *Negro and Slave*, being by accustom grown Homogeneous and

---


Convertible; even as *Negro, and Christian, Englishman, and Heathen*, are by the like corrupt Custom and Partiality made *Opposites*; thereby as it were implying, that the one could be *Christians*, nor the *Infidels.* What scandalized Godwyn was when the planters saw slave in the Bible, they thought *Negro or Heathen*, and when they saw Christian, the planters thought English (i.e. white-skin). This was a complete departure from the universal notions of Irenaeus of Lyon or Origen of Alexandria. Nevertheless, by this point, the Anglo-Virginians were already in the seventeenth century departing from the English notion that to be baptized meant freedom (i.e. physically and spiritually) and some form of civil rights. I argue that this departure from the original inclusivity of the Church of England tells us that the early Anglo-Virginian planters still equated baptism with freedom. Consequently, they neglected the catechizing or conversion of their slaves.  

Godwyn and other English ministers came from a worldview of Christianity that emphasized the universality of Christianity, closer in nature to the early Christian theology of Irenaeus of Lyon and Origen of Alexandria. Where the English differed from the early Christian view was its political advantage and power to convert through law and at times force. This version of universalism contradicted the theology of Irenaeus of Lyon. Irenaeus of Lyon and Origen of Alexandria thought that all should be saved, however they could not have imagined Christianity with the political and social power that it had in sixteenth and seventeenth England or in the American colonies.

---

3 Ibid.

Throughout the seventeenth century, the planters throughout the American colonies and the Anglican missionaries manifested conflicting interests.\(^5\) The problem for the planters was that the blacks and Indians began to associate Christian baptism with freedom, thus making them bad slaves. The planters began to look at the behaviors of the blacks and Indians, concluding that they were incapable of Christianity.\(^6\) At this time in the seventeenth century, Godwyn and others used the term ‘race’ to refer to common characteristics of people having the same descent. Godwyn wrote of planters who believed that enslaved Africans were predestined to slavery and heathenism because of the biblical Noah’s delinquent son Ham “who, they [planters] say, was together with his whole Family and Race,\(^7\) cursed by his father Noah.” Godwyn alluded to an interpretation of Genesis that suggested that descendants of Ham were permanently cursed because their ancestor had mocked his father, Noah. Godwyn dismissed this exegesis as the result of planters’ “wild reasoning’s.”\(^8\) This theology found fertile ground

\(^5\)Ibid.

\(^6\)Ibid.

\(^7\) In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, race simply indicated common descent (of people, animals, or plants), but by the middle of the eighteenth century, the word had evolved to connote classification by descent, common physical characteristics (e.g., skin color), or common cultural and ethnic traits.

\(^8\) Morgan Godwyn, *The Negro’s and Indians Advocate, Suing for their Admission into the Church.* Manuscript. Huntington Library, 1680. *Early English Books Online* 1680-1685. Wing / 916:09,174. [Http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.882003&res_id=xri:ebo&rft_id=xri:ebo:citation:12226654] (accessed April 8, 2015). Godwyn also noted that some planters insisted that enslaved blacks were of “a flock different from Adam’s” or perhaps also were the descendants not of Ham but rather of Cain, who in the Bible was cursed. Although, “Curse of Ham” theories were present in colonial Virginia in the seventeenth centuries the authoritative structure of the Anglican Church made it difficult to carry this theory out to the degree white Southern Baptists did in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in North America.
in the Southern Baptists community in the nineteenth century due to its lay-theology and empowerment of all its believers.

Godwyn’s experience of the New World gives us insight into the evolving views of Christianity among the planters. The Anglo-Virginians outside of England laid the seeds for Christianity as something that was hereditary. Subsequently, Christianity in the planters’ worldview was something inherited for white-skinned people. This view on hereditary Christianity was foreign to Godwyn and the ministers from the Church of England because, although they practiced and endorsed slavery, the Church of England thought that Christianity was for “all” irrespective of one’s age or race (i.e. skin color). Godwyn himself quoted (Acts 17:26): “That God hath made [of one Blood] all nations of Men, for to dwell all upon the face of the Earth.”

Initially, when the English settled at Jamestown in 1607, many were hopeful of the conversion of the Native Americans. However, in 1622 an Indian assault caused many of the Anglo-Virginians to have doubts about the possibility of Indians to converting to Christianity. What the Church of England had in common with the early Christians of the second century, was the idea that humanity descended from Adam (i.e. monogenesis). This was the biblical basis for the universalization of the Christian faith by the Church of England in the New World. To be clear, the English originally saw the Indians and dark-skinned people they met in the New World as Pagan, but they did not think that the Blacks and Native Indians were incapable of Christianity or salvation.

In 1619, enslaved Africans first appeared in Virginia records. John Rolfe noted in a letter that the governor purchased “20. and Odd Negreos” from a passing Dutch ship in

9 Ibid.
August of that year. Englishmen in Virginia most likely looked upon enslaved Africans as potential Christians as well.\textsuperscript{10} By 1624, the Virginia Company formally abandoned its efforts to Christianize the Indians.\textsuperscript{11}

In 1683, Presbyterian minister Richard Baxter (1615-1691), embodied the Anglo-Puritan world when he wrote, “We are all the offspring of Righteous Noe [Noah], and yet that maketh not the Infants of Heathens baptizable or pardoned.”\textsuperscript{12} The idea of universal ancestry favored by almost all Christians that emphasized all living humans as the descendants of Noah after the flood prevented pagan children from becoming Christian. It was this nascent idea about the heritability of Christianity and heathenism that gave English colonists in the New World an opening to deny Christianity and its associated privileges to African and Indians. To the surprise of the planters, the Indians and Africans began to use Christian baptism as a means for undermining racial differentiation. Christianity was both making and un-making the idea of race through baptism.

In the English colonial world, to be baptized not only brought one into the community, but it also enabled the individual to participate in English society and politics. So, groups like the Quakers who professed that all people had an inner light, and Presbyterians who rejected the Book of Common Prayer, were seen as hostile to the order

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{12} Richard Baxter, The catechizing of families a teacher of householders how to teach their households: useful also to school-masters and tutors of youth for those that are past the common small chatechisms, and would grow to a more rooted faith, and to the fuller understanding of all that is commonly needful to a safe, holy comfortable and profitable life (London, 1683), 407.
\end{flushright}
of English society. John Smyth of Nottinghamshire is a good example of why the Dissenters were seen as politically and socially dangerous in English society, because in early Modern England ideas were judged like people. Ideas created both division and unity in a given society. This is not unusual, if we recall that both Irenaeus of Lyon and Origen of Alexandria believed that in order to be a part of the correct apostolic faith and catholic faith, one had to work from a ‘hypothesis, axiom, or criterion of truth.’ The Church of England simply worked from the Nicene Creed as their axiom, and the dissenters worked from their axiom; the Bible.

Although the Quakers rejected infant baptism, their notion of a universal human light, was closer to theology of the early Christians (1st-4th centuries), in the sense that all individuals were seen as created beings of the Divine. The Presbyterians on the other hand, who held Reformed views of predestination and the elect, ipso facto thought some individuals were called to be saved and others were not and certainly this excluded some heredity heathens (i.e. Blacks and Indians). What made the Church of England so successful was that one could hold traditional Anglican views, alongside more Calvinistic or Reformed views. That is to say, that the English church tried to avoid schism by allowing flexibility within its theology.

As the planter-elites became increasingly worried about their slaves’ association with baptism and freedom a 1667 law was enacted so that burgesses would take more care to determine the sincerity of the conversion.¹³ This effectively undid the universal theology of Irenaeus of Lyon and Origen of Alexandria. Stating who should be baptized

was the political manifestation of Smyth’s theology which rejected infant baptism and questioned the ‘truth’ of other people’s Christianity. Both Irenaeus of Lyon and Origen of Alexandria were both critical of those who departed from the ancient ‘hypothesis’ given to them by Christ to the Apostles. John Behr argues, “those who left the main stream church, presented theologies that were more exclusive (e.g. the Gnostics) that supposed some to have a secret knowledge.”

In the 1705 Virginia Law of Servants and Slaves, the ideal was reiterated that baptism of “servants” could not result in freedom at any age. Only the English could be truly Christians—this was a New World innovation that would have profound consequences for people of color in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The 1689 and 1705 acts meant toleration of and protection for Protestant dissenters. In short, these laws were a fundamental step in the Anglo-Virginians journey to comprehend human difference by identifying themselves as Protestant Christians and their African and Indian slaves as incapable of Christian conversion. To be Christian, was to be white.

By 1750, enslaved people were beginning to discover evangelical Protestantism. Presbyterians and Baptists, and later Methodists, introduced a Christianity that was somewhat different from the more inclusive Anglo-Virginian Anglicanism. Prepped by their familiarity with Anglicanism, enslaved people took the opportunities afforded by Evangelical Protestant preachers to explore Christianity in other forms.

---


16 Hening, III, 447-50, 298.
In order to get us across the Atlantic, we must recall that the roots of the Baptist and the Southern Baptist denominations go back to the Reformation era in England in the sixteenth century. Reformers of the time returned to 'the Bible alone' as their sole authority. In the early seventeenth century, John Smyth of Nottinghamshire was a strong promoter of adult or believer’s baptism, which had a heavy emphasis on the spiritual nature of the New Testament, as opposed to the Old Testament’s material nature. In 1638, Smyth’s theology was aboard many ships that traveled to the New World. Roger Williams (1636-1683) and company, came to America to escape religious persecution in England. Williams established the First Baptist Church in America in Providence, Rhode Island. Because of their radical ideas about adult or believer's baptism, even in the New World Baptists suffered religious persecution.

By the mid-eighteenth century, the number of Baptists increased greatly as a result of the First Great Awakening (1731-1755) pioneered by Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758). In the eighteenth century, the Baptist faith spread its beliefs in North Carolina, leading to the establishment of 42 churches in the North Carolina area. The reader should keep in mind that the reason why Baptists are called Baptists is because of their acceptance of believer’s baptism only. That is, only conscious adults could enter the faith. Edwards and his followers believed in emotional conversion, membership in a community, accountability and adult baptism by immersion. The North Carolina Baptists followers were referred to as Separate Baptists. The Regular Baptists resided primarily in the North. In the late 1700's and early 1800's, as Baptists began to organize and expand, they formed missionary societies to spread the Christian lifestyle to others. These mission
societies eventually led to other organizational structures that would define and make a
denomination of Southern Baptists.

As the slaves of Virginia began to read, they identified themselves as the Israelites
who desired to flee Egypt in the Old Testament. The Old Testament narrative of the
Israelites fleeing Egypt for the Promised Land provided the story to see themselves as the
suffering martyrs under persecution just like Irenaeus and Origen. Again, the main point
here is that the Baptist theological approach made it possible for one to see oneself in the
narrative.

After the American Revolution (1765-1783), the slaves had reintroduced and
recovered the Christian faith of Irenaeus of Lyon and Origen of Alexandria, that is, the
ideal Christian was a martyr or one who suffered for the community. This form of black-
Christianity was naturally ascetic. The minister Samuel Davies reported hearing the
slaves at prayer past midnight. This new form of black-Christianity focused on both the
spiritual and the rejection of slavery.  

By the 1830's, tension began to mount between the
Northern and Southern Baptists. One issue that severely divided the Baptists was the
possibility of black slaves’ conversion to Christianity.

The Northern Baptists believed that the Bible did not condone slavery or racial
superiority. The Southern Baptists argued that God intended for races to be separate and
for the continuation of Slavery after the American Revolution in 1776. Southern Baptists
complained that they were not receiving money for mission work. The Baptist Home
Mission Society declared that a person could not be a missionary and wish to keep his

---

slaves as chattel. Consequently, the Baptists in the South met in May of 1845 and organized the Southern Baptist Convention.
CHAPTER 5

THE CREATION OF RACE IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH

In the second century, baptism for both infants and adults was a Christian ritual that united people and transcended identities based on age, race, and social-status. As mentioned, this idea was inherited and institutionalized by the Church of England and continued in both its Catholic and Protestant identities. When the Anglican’s arrived in the Americas, specifically Virginia in 1609, they had an interest in baptizing the Native Indian population. As time went on and the religious plurality shifted in the First Great Awakening, evangelicals spread the Christian faith to both Native Indians and Africans. Over the course of time, the concept of hereditary heathenism had resurfaced, and white Southern Baptists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries began to advocate for a proslavery Christianity. The Southern Baptists theological understanding and approach made the dismissal of infant baptism possible by rejecting traditional Christian creeds (e.g. Nicene Creed) and their emphasis on inclusivity, which began in the waters of baptism. Christians were united both spiritually and politically by the sacrament of infant baptism. Anyone who was outside of baptism was not just to be outside of the Church, but outside of the state or colony (i.e. community).

Baptism in the early seventeenth centuries had been the accepted route to freedom in the English Atlantic, but during 1667, the Anglo-Virginians altered the law’s to solidify the planter’s notion of racial superiority and difference. Baptism was redefined for political purposes. Land owners knew that the Church of England wanted to convert
their slaves, however the planters found this to conflict with their personal interests and technically one could not rule another Christian in the exploitive way that they intended.

When John Smyth of Nottinghamshire stated that only believers were inside of the spiritual New Testament church and carnal infants were not, this was a deviation from mainstream Nicene Christian history. Stating who was essentially Christian enough or intellectually prepared to join the church, scandalized the Protestant world that continued to practice infant baptism.¹ Smyth was convinced of this ideal of “Christian enough” so much that he baptized himself. He claimed that he baptized himself because everyone else was a part of a false church. This “Christian enough” perspective, evidenced through one’s inner (i.e. Born Again) heart, was ambiguous to the later inheritors of the Baptists tradition in the American South in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Because, as predestined inferior blacks converted to the Baptist faith, white Southern Baptists were simply convinced of Biblically sanctioned racial superiority (Genesis 9).

Because Southern Baptists were committed to the idea that blacks were hereditary heathens predestined to servitude, when blacks began to rebel, as in the case of Nat Turner, Southern Baptists, knew their theology made blacks “infants of the mind.” After all, only infants were outside of the church. Moreover, white Southern Baptists contributed to the idea of blacks as infants of the mind by outlawing slaves to read or write. These laws were passed by proslavery Christians with the hopes that blacks would not be able to understand Christianity. Therefore blacks would be outside of the church until they were able to understand or submit to the Baptist faith. The General Assembly

---
¹ Anglicans, Presbyterians, Puritans, Methodist, continued to baptize infants.
also passed a law restricting all blacks from holding religious meetings without the presence of a licensed white minister present.²

Throughout the course of the eighteenth century, white Southern Baptists had converted and worshiped alongside blacks and Indians. After the First Great Awakening, evangelical Baptists spread their faith across the North American South. Southern Baptists began to use the Curse of Ham in (Genesis 9) to justify both slavery and the inferiority of blacks and Indians. Because Southern white Baptists advocated for a proslavery Christianity, the ideal black Christian was an obedient slave, who was aware of his or her inferior place within the community. In order to be a Baptist in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, one of the key tenets for a valid baptism required consent. Because in the Baptist community baptism was seen as an act of obedience to God, which followed from an individual’s inner baptism or immediate emotional inner personal conversion experience: good black Christians were seen as those who were obedient to their master’s and recognized their place in society.

The rebellion of free black ministers like Nat Turner created obstacles because white Southern Baptists thought that good black Christians were those who were obedient to whites. When blacks were not obedient or rebellious, they were not Christians in many Southern eyes. The solution to this problem was already embedded in the idea that certain types of people were considered outside of the Baptist’s community; Pagans, unbelievers, and infants-blacks could only be one of these. Blacks were seen as a people who simply could not become Christian, and if they claimed that they were, white Southern Baptists

expected blacks to show the consent of their baptism by demonstrating their submission to white authority. Blacks had two choices in the end: either continue as “infants of the mind,” or show consent to the Baptists church by obedience and submission to white Southern Baptists.

In 1822, Richard Furman, a minister of First Baptist Church, Charleston, had composed an eloquent defense of slavery and racial superiority. “Had the holding of slaves been a moral evil,” Furman wrote, “it cannot be supposed, that the inspired Apostles, who feared not the faces of men, and were ready to lay down their lives in the cause of their God, would have tolerated it.”³ After the American Civil War, the Academy Baptist Church, Mississippi, called a conference in 1869 “for the purpose of organizing the colored people of Academy into separate church by unanimous request from them.”⁴ By the 1870s, nearly all African Americans had left white Baptist Churches. Black Baptists, for the first time, had their own autonomous congregations with their own ministers.

In 1891, the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention stated that “Nothing is plainer, of the colored people, to anyone who knows this race than its perfect willingness to accept a subordinate place, provided there be confidence that in that position of subordination it will receive justice and kindness.”⁵ This attitude resulted in

---


Jim Crow Laws, depriving African Americans of the right to vote and establishing racial segregation from the last years of the nineteenth century onwards. Southern white Baptists were often their most passionate supporters.

This new dispensation in the American South was often enforced by systematic terrorism. The Ku Klux Klan was the best known organization that enforced racist terror on African Americans. “Belonged to the Ku Klux Klan,” ran the epitaph of a Confederate veteran, “a deacon in the Baptist Church and Master Mason for forty years.” By the nineteenth century, Baptists were split in the American South over race. The idea of blacks as infants of the mind, incapable of being full Christian due to their childish disobedience to white authority was taken u by the white Southern Baptists Churches.

---

CONCLUSION

To recapitulate, in the first three centuries CE, the sacrament of baptism proved to be a universal tool which united people beyond age, race, or ethnicity as we understand it today. To put it simply, the theological understanding of baptism was reaffirmed by the sacrament of infant baptism. That is to say that the Christian faith was for all, irrespective of one’s age, race, or social status. The main point of my thesis is how Baptists contributed to the idea of race in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries by its rejection of infant baptism. For the purpose of this study, I looked at second century CE theologians Irenaeus of Lyons (130 CE-202) and Origen of Alexandria (184-254) and compared their thoughts to the theological interpretation of John Smyth of Nottinghamshire (1570-1612), and how his theology influenced racist thought within Christendom in North America.

Once Radical Protestant groups rejected the inclusive baptismal theology of Irenaeus Lyon and Origen of Alexandria, the incarnational and communal elements that once united mainstream Nicene Christianity would lead to racial divisions in the modern period. Once the Baptists had rejected the classical understanding of salvation, many Southern Baptists looked elsewhere than baptism and religion for their identity and now looked to novel notions of species and race, particularly after the American Revolution. These innovative explanations of identity outside of baptism and religion led to racism within Christendom in eighteenth and nineteenth century North America.

As the Baptist community grew in the middle of the eighteenth century, John Smyth of Nottinghamshire’s theology entered the Southern Baptist community. By the
nineteenth century, African American’s overwhelmingly embraced the Baptists faith. Many people within the white Baptist’s community began to formulate arguments for proslavery Christianity citing biblical slavery.

As the African Americans were learning to read and write in the nineteenth century, hereditary heathenism became a less coherent worldview. In the 1800s, an enslaved man named Gabriel led a group of Christians (i.e. God’s chosen people) in a rebellion against slavery claiming that it was non-biblical. At the end of this rebellion, enslaved people were hanged. The role of Christianity in this rebellion was more explicit than in Nat Turner’s rebellion in 1831. Nat Turner (1800-1831) a Baptist preacher, who later described prophetic experiences as part of his inspiration for rebellion, claimed that, a few years before his rebellion, “I saw white spirits and black rolled in the Heavens, and blood flowed in the streams.”1 Turner’s rebellion put Virginia’s Baptists churches on the defensive and resulted in legislation that forbade slave owners to teach their slaves to read and write. Further legislation also required the presence of a white minister at black religious gatherings.2

As a response to the challenges posed to slavery by black Baptists as well as northern abolitionists, southern planters in Virginia developed a systematic proslavery Christianity. They used biblical accounts of slavery and rejected infant baptism much like John Smyth of Nottinghamshire. What the proslavery Baptist and other Evangelicals

---


inherited from Smyth was a desire to seek the literal interpretation of scripture, rejection of infant baptism, and a rejection of ecclesiastical structure. This opened up the door for exegesis of scripture with no hypotheses; just the Bible read at face value by lay-theologians (i.e. empowerment of all believers). The proslavery Baptist’s lay-theologians created a complex ‘Bible alone’, ‘Grace alone’, and ‘faith alone’ exegesis similar to the radical Protestants, such as John Smyth of Nottinghamshire. The problem was that their theology embraced the idea that blacks were an inferior race, predestined infants, and hereditary heathens. As I demonstrated in the case of Origen of Alexandria’s Commentary on *The Song of Songs*, dark-skinned people were a part of apostolic mission of early Christianity. Irenaeus of Lyon argued that God became fully man in Christ and passed through every age, thus sanctifying every age and every person. By being baptized in the early Christian view, one simply received his modern ‘vaccinations’ so to speak: baptism didn’t save one’s soul, it simply began the process of becoming fully human (i.e. Christ). The process of salvation was not enacted by color or racial superiority, but by one’s willingness to give a *fiat* or *let there be* -to die before one actually died and realized that there was no death in Christ.

When one looks at the historical evidence, it would appear that there was something to Irenaeus of Lyon’s hypothesis or Origen of Alexandria’s biblical exegesis. The emancipation of Blacks and race narratives seems incomplete without examining the rejection of infant baptism. One could argue that without the Old Testaments narrative of the Israelites fleeing Egypt or Irenaeus of Lyon’s theology on Christ, which the enslaved people seemed to recover this theological worldview of the second century; to be
provocative, slavery and racism would not have started and would not have ended without the Baptists theological approach.

By the 1800s, black and white Christians challenged hereditary heathenism and the institution of slavery. By the nineteenth century, the slaves embraced a theological worldview that recovered the ‘axiom’ or Christian worldview of Irenaeus of Lyon, Origen of Alexandria, and Gregory of Nyssa. The theology of John Smyth of Nottinghamshire had unintended consequences by his rejection of infant baptism. The Southern Baptists used his theology to state who should be or who was a Christian. Smyth’s zeal to find the true exegesis of scripture and the problems with ‘the Bible Alone’ theology proved to be problematic as the cultural context began to shift after the American Revolution. At that point, the Church of England had a hard time ensuring its theological interpretations from abroad and the American spirit slowly turned to the self-baptizing or individualist theology of John Smyth of Nottinghamshire. One is left perplexed when studying the issues of race in Virginia. The amount of abolitionists, both black and white, who were killed in the wake of the twentieth century; men like Dr. Martin Luther King and historical events like the Underground Railroad, simply leaves the reader to quote Irenaeus’s phrase: “Gloria Dei est vivens homo,” “The Glory of God is a Human Being, fully alive;” a ‘martyr’ who dies for Christ or dies daily in a life of repentance.

African American Baptists who were once considered perpetual infants by many white Southern Baptists had used the same theological approach that contributed to the creation of race to deconstruct it with the same Bible Alone approach. What is shocking

---

is how the black empowerment of all its believers saw itself in the Biblical narratives. Like the early Christians of the second century, black Baptists, such as Nat Turner, reintroduced the suffering ascetic Christianity of classical antiquity to the white Baptist community. To quote Tertullian of Carthage (160-225 CE), “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.” That is, the blood of the black Baptist martyrs is the seed of the Baptist church.

---

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources


----. *An Advertisement or Admonition, unto the Congregations.* N.p., 1611.


Secondary Sources

Books


**Dissertation and Theses**


Articles & Book Reviews


