

BAPTISM

Protestant Perspective Most Fundamental Christians believe that baptism is only a symbolic washing and perform it because Jesus was baptized himself. People can be re-baptized to give public testimony of their renewed faith in a new church.

Catholic Perspective Catholics believe that baptism is a sacrament instituted by Christ. Through baptism, all sin, original and actual, is wiped away, and it is only to be performed once in life.

Wash Away Original Sin

As pointed out in Romans 5:18-6:4, through Adam we inherit *original sin*. Jesus is the second Adam through whom the grace of divine sonship has been restored. Paul says we have "*died to sin*". To what sin we have died? This is the sin to which we have died through baptism, according to Romans 6. This is why the Catholic Church teaches that the stain of the old Adam's original sin is washed away through the waters of baptism by Jesus, the new Adam.

Forgiveness of Sins and the Holy Spirit

In Acts 2:37-39, when Peter preached his first sermon at Pentecost, he highlighted three key elements of baptism. First, everybody is called to *repent* and be *baptized* for the *forgiveness of sins*. Second, through baptism we *receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*. Third, these promises included all future generations.

Necessity of Baptism

In John 3:5-8, Jesus challenged Nicodemus and said, "*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.*" The passage immediately following Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus is the only place in the New Testament that records Jesus' baptizing others (John 3:22). Since Jesus made baptism a condition for entering heaven, it is necessary for salvation normatively.

Peter is also blunt on this issue: "Baptism now saves you" (1 Pet 3:21). Baptism is the gateway into the Church.

Washing of Regeneration

Protestants assume spiritual rebirth occurs when someone came to a conscious desire to accept Jesus Christ as his personal Savior. However, the Bible rarely uses this term – regeneration – and when it does, it refers to it as the *washing of regeneration*.

Titus 3:5 tells us that we are saved "*by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit,*" which refers to baptism.

In 1 Cor 6:11, Paul also links baptism with both being justified and being sanctified or made holy. After listing a number of wicked acts for which people will not inherit the kingdom of God, he writes, "*And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.*"

History

John the Baptist's baptism was only a symbolic washing, but Jesus' baptism would give the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11). At the time of the Reformation, many Protestants rejected baptism as a sacrament of regeneration because it did not fit with their new notion of justification by faith alone.

The writings of the early Church Fathers show that they all taught that water baptism regenerates. Justin Martyr, Irenaeus and Tertullian all quoted John 3:5 to point out that Jesus would not have made baptism a condition for entering heaven if it were only symbolic.

Infant Baptism

Protestants believe that baptism is symbolic. Since an infant cannot accept Jesus as Lord and Savior, baptism is meaningless for him. Moreover, nowhere in the New Testament do we read of children being baptized.

However, no Bible passage prohibits infant baptism either. On the other hand, several household baptisms are recorded (Acts 16:15; 16:33; 18:8; 1 Cor 1:16). Most probably there were infants or children in those households.

In Peter's sermon in Acts 2, he declared that the promise of salvation through baptism was "to you and to your children and to all that are far off". To hear this with Jewish ears, an infant getting baptized in the New Covenant is parallel to an 8-day-old child given circumcision in the Old Covenant. Children have always been included in salvation by their parents' faith. It was simply understood back in those days.

The Early Church Baptizes Children

Hippolytus, in *Apostolic Tradition* (215 A.D.), wrote, "Baptize first the children, and if they can speak for themselves let them do so. Otherwise, let their parents or other relatives speak for them." Origen, in his *Homilies on Leviticus* (A.D. 248), also pointed out "baptism is given even to infants".

In fact, the only reported controversy on the subject was a 3rd-century debate over whether or not to delay baptism until the 8th day after birth, like its Old Testament equivalent, circumcision (Cyprian's *Letters*, A.D. 253).

READING

Of Water and the Spirit (*This Rock*, December 2000)

The Promise Is to You and To Your Children (*This Rock*, March 2000)

Further Research

- Since Jesus has no sins, why did he receive baptism?
- Is baptism all we need to be saved? Why?
- Is re-baptism valid? Why?
- What is meant by "baptism of desire" and "baptism of blood"? Why does the Church consider them valid?