

# BAPTISM

Italicized below are the **Authoritative statements of Roman Catholic Teaching** on baptism. These documents carry the official authorization of the Vatican.

## **The Council of Trent**

Session VII: On the Sacraments in General

*Canon V. If anyone saith, that baptism is free, that is not necessary unto salvation: let him be anathema.*

Note of definition: *anathema*: a-nath-e-ma n

1) a curse from a religious authority that denounces something or excommunicates somebody; 2. any forceful curse or denunciation.  
Encarta® World English Dictionary

## **The Question and Answer Catholic Catechism**

1140. *What is baptism?*

*Baptism is the sacrament of spiritual rebirth. Through the symbolic action of washing with water and the use of appropriate ritual words, the baptized person is cleansed of all his sins and incorporated into Christ. It was foretold in Ezekiel, 'I shall pour clean water over you and you will be cleansed; I shall cleanse you of all your defilement and all your idols. I shall give you a new heart, and put a new spirit in you' (Ezekiel 36:25-26).*

1151. *What are the effects of baptism?*

*The effects of baptism are the removal of the guilt of sin and all punishment due to sin, conferral of the grace of regeneration and the infused virtues, incorporation into Christ and his Church, receiving the baptismal character and the right to heaven.*

1152. *What sins does baptism take away?*

*Baptism remits the guilt of all sins, that is, it takes away all sins, whether original sin as inherited from Adam at conception, or actual sin as incurred by each person on reaching the age of reason. No matter how frequent or how grave the actual sins may be, their guilt is all removed at baptism. All of this is the pure gift of God, since St. Paul writes, 'It was for no reason except his own compassion that he saved us, by means of the cleansing water of rebirth' (Titus 3:5).*

## **BAPTISM**

In our study of the different teaching of Roman Catholicism, we have come back again and again to a basic principle of biblical interpretation: since the Bible is the infallible Word of God, it cannot contradict itself. God himself is its author and therefore the Bible is internally consistent.

This cannot be emphasized enough, for the neglect of this principle has led the Roman Catholic Church into false teaching and error with respect to the Mass, the Priesthood, Penance, Confession, and the Eucharist. Its entire scheme of salvation is built upon incorrect interpretation of Scripture. This is nowhere more evident than in its teaching on baptism.

From the authoritative sources it is evident that the Roman Catholic Church teaches that when anyone is baptized with water, they are regenerated or born again. By means of water baptism they become Christians. They are born into the family of God and become children of God.

The technical theological term for this teaching is ‘baptismal regeneration’. But this teaching is in direct opposition to the teaching of the Word of God.

For example, in 1 John 3:9 we are told the following: ‘No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.’

This verse states quite plainly that when an individual is born of God, he or she will not practice sin. This does not mean that those who are born of God will live perfect lives, but they will not live in sin. Sin will not be the habitual practice of their lives, for in receiving a new heart they receive a completely new disposition which is oriented toward holiness. Nor is this the isolated teaching of just one verse of Scripture, but a major emphasis of the entire New Testament (see for example Romans 8:4-9, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, Ephesians 2:1-10; 5:5, Galatians 5:19-21, James 2:14-26, 1 John 2:3-4, 15-16; 3:6-10, 14; 4:7-8).

This means that if water baptism causes an individual to be born of God (or regenerated), then every individual who is baptized will live a life of holiness before God. They will not practice sin.

But our own experience and observation of the lives of many who have been baptized by water prove that water baptism does not bring about new birth. There are multitudes of people who have been baptized, and yet live in sin. They practice sin.

I speak from personal experience. I was baptized in the Roman Catholic Church as an infant, and yet as I grew older my life was marked by very obvious sin. I practiced sin. I was immoral, rebellious, a liar. I cursed. I swore. I told filthy jokes, read impure literature, lived for myself, and was practically an alcoholic by the time I was nineteen years old. And yet I had been baptized. But obviously, according to the Word of God, baptism did not cause me to be born again, for one who is truly born again does not practice sin. My experience can be multiplied countless times in the experience of others who have been baptized by water, but whose lives have never been changed.

Water baptism does not bring about the new birth. To teach that it does is to contradict the testimony of Scripture as well as the practical experience and testimony of many who have been baptized. But what about those passages of Scripture that seem to indicate that baptism does indeed produce spiritual life in the heart of a man or woman and causes them to be born again?

When the Bible refers to baptism, it does not always mean water baptism. The Scriptures teach that in addition to water baptism, there is also Spirit baptism, which has nothing to do with water. In this baptism of the Holy Spirit, a person who formerly was separated from Christ is united to him, so that he and Christ become one. Their lives are joined together in an indissoluble union. Paul speaks of this when he says that ‘by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body’ (1 Cor. 12:13). Our lives become united to Christ through the baptizing work of the Holy Spirit. But again, this is a spiritual union which is effected by a spiritual baptism, of which water baptism is an outward sign.

This concept of Spirit baptism that is distinct from and independent of water baptism can be seen plainly in the analogy of circumcision. The Word of God tells us that circumcision was instituted by God as a sign and seal of his covenant with Abraham: ‘...and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised’ (Rom. 4:11). D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones gives this explanation of the meaning of circumcision:

What, then, are the reasons why circumcision was ever given? First, circumcision was an outward sign given to Abraham as a seal of the righteousness which he had received fourteen years before. Now to ‘seal’ means to authenticate. This is illustrated elsewhere in the Scriptures. You remember that we are told in John 6, verse 27—‘for him hath God the Father sealed’. All commentators are agreed that that statement refers to our Lord’s baptism, and it means that at His baptism He was publicly sealed with the sign of the descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove upon Him. The word ‘seal’ is used in exactly the same way in referring to the Holy Spirit in Ephesians 1:13, 14, ‘In whom also after that ye believed (or having believed), ye were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise, which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of His glory.’ The Holy Spirit seals to us God’s promise of our ultimate redemption and of our receiving our great inheritance in glory. Having

the Holy Spirit I know that all that God promises to me is already mine in a very real sense. It is sealed to me. What the Apostle is saying here is that in the same way circumcision was given to Abraham as a sign to authenticate the imputation of righteousness to him fourteen years before.

In other words the teaching is, that circumcision of itself did not do anything to Abraham. The real reason for it was that Abraham should have the promise made sure to him; it was to seal it to him. And so we are right in saying that circumcision played no part in Abraham's justification. Indeed it is exactly the other way round. Justification is the basis upon which circumcision is given (Romans: Atonement and Justification, 1970, pp. 184-85).

Circumcision was meant to be nothing more than a sign and a seal. An outward sign of the inward reality of faith which was already in Abraham's heart, and a seal to him of the promise of God. Romans 4:9-12 makes it clear that circumcision was not the cause of Abraham's regeneration and justification, for he had been justified by faith before he was circumcised. And the argument of Paul in this fourth chapter of Romans is that forgiveness and acceptance with God come solely by faith completely independent of circumcision. He makes this argument because by the time of Christ the Jews had perverted the meaning of circumcision to the point of teaching that circumcision was the effectual state of a person's becoming a child of God. But Paul shows the fallacy of this teaching, not only in the example of Abraham, but also by drawing a distinction between outward physical circumcision and an inner spiritual circumcision which is accomplished in the heart by the Spirit:

For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God (Rom. 2:28-29).

Physical circumcision does not make one a true Jew. A spiritual circumcision in the heart, by the Spirit, is what brings this to pass. As Paul points out here, it is possible to be physically circumcised, yet not spiritually circumcised, and therefore not truly a child of God. True circumcision is a thing of the heart, and the outward physical rite is to signify spiritual reality in the heart. Charles Hodge makes this point when he says:

It [circumcision] signifies the cleansing from sin, just as baptism now does. Thus we read even in the Old Testament of the circumcision of the heart. (Deut. x. 16; Jer. iv. 4; Ezek. xliv. 7). Therefore uncircumcised lips are impure lips, and an uncircumcised heart is an unclean heart. (Ex. vi. 12; Lev. xxvi. 41. See, also, Acts vii. 51). Paul says the true circumcision is not that which is outward in the flesh; but that which is inward, of the heart, by the Spirit (Rom. ii. 28, 29)...Its main design was to signify and seal the promise of deliverance from sin through the redemption to be effected by the promised seed of Abraham (Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology, 1873, Volume III, pp. 554-55).

That which is true for the Jew and circumcision is also true for the Christian and baptism. Simply substitute the word 'Christian' for the word 'Jew' and the word 'baptism' for the word 'circumcision' in Romans 2:28-29:

For he is not a Christian who is one outwardly; neither is baptism that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Christian who is one inwardly; and baptism is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.

The Jews believed that physical circumcision made one a child of God. Paul denies this and insists that there must be a spiritual circumcision of the heart by the Holy Spirit. The Roman Catholic Church falls into the same error as the Jews by teaching that the physical external rite of water baptism will bring about regeneration and constitute the one baptized a child of God. But it is not physical baptism that brings about the new birth. That can be accomplished only by a baptism with the Spirit by which we are permanently united to the person of Christ. Charles Hodge makes the following comment:

God is a Spirit, and He requires those who worship Him, to worship Him in spirit and in truth. External rites are declared to be nothing... 'He is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.' (Rom. ii. 28, 29). This is not merely a fact, but a principle. What St. Paul here says of circumcision and of Jews, may be said, and is substantially said by St. Peter in reference to baptism and Christianity. A man who is a Christian outwardly only, is not a Christian; and the baptism which saves, is not the washing of the body with water, but the conversion of the soul (1 Peter iii, 21). The idea that a man's state before God depends on anything external, on birth, on membership in any visible organization, or on any outward rite or ceremony, is utterly abhorrent to the religion of the Bible (Systematic Theology, Volume III, p. 521).

Just as circumcision was as sign and seal to Abraham of the spiritual transformation that had taken place in his heart, so baptism in this New Testament dispensation is a sign and seal of a spiritual transformation that takes place in the heart by the Holy Spirit. It is public testimony to the washing from sin and new life which is found in him. But water baptism does not effect this inward change of regeneration; it is simply the public testimony to the fact that such a transformation take place by the grace of God.

It is plain that baptism cannot by the ordinary means of regeneration, or the channel of conveying in the first instance the benefits of redemption to the souls of men, because, in the case of adults, faith and repentance are the conditions of baptism. But faith and repentance, according to the Scriptures, are the fruits of regeneration. He who exercises repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ is in a state of salvation before baptism and therefore in a state of regeneration. Regeneration consequently precedes baptism, and cannot be its effect, according to the ordinance of God. That the Apostles did require the profession of faith and repentance before baptism, cannot be denied. This is plain, not only from their recorded practice but also from the nature of the ordinance. Baptism is a profession of faith in the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit; not of a faith to be obtained through the ordinance, but of a faith already entertained. When the Eunuch applied to Philip for baptism, he said: 'If thou believest with all thine heart thou mayest.' Of those who heard Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost it is said, 'they that gladly received his word were baptized.' (Acts ii. 41) (Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology, Volume III, p. 601).

As has already been pointed out, Abraham was a justified man long before he was circumcised. In the same way a true Christian is one who has received an inner Spirit baptism before the actual rite of water baptism is applied. An individual does not submit to water baptism in order to experience regeneration, but does so because regeneration has already taken place. We see this further illustrated for us in the first chapter of the Gospel of John:

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God (Jn. 1:12-13).

John refers here to being born of God and becoming children of God. He is speaking about the new birth. He says very clearly that the new birth is directly related to receiving Jesus Christ and believing on him. The new birth is not dependent on water baptism but on a work of the Spirit which results in a person's receiving Jesus Christ into his life. Regeneration can never be dissociated from Jesus Christ himself and coming into a personal relationship with him as Lord and Savior. The Word of God tells us that the two conditions which must

be fulfilled if an individual is to come into a relationship with Jesus Christ are those of repentance and faith, in which an individual turns from sin and embraces Jesus Christ and his all-sufficient sacrifice.

#### ROMANS 6:3-5

One of the major passages of Scripture which the Roman Catholic Church uses to support its teaching that water baptism results in regeneration is Romans 6:3-5. Those verses read as follows:

Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection.

These verses do indeed speak of baptism. But we need to keep in mind that when the Scripture uses the term 'baptism' it always carries the idea of Spirit baptism as its underlying reality. The apostle Peter makes this clear when he says, 'And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ' (1 Pet. 3:21). Peter is careful to guard his readers from the mistaken notion that salvation is derived simply from the application of water to physical flesh, when he specifically says 'not the removal of dirt from the flesh'. And he goes on to connect baptism with the idea of 'an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ'. There is obviously more to be understood in the use of the term 'baptism' than just the administering of water. Matthew Henry brings this out in his comments on this passage:

Noah's salvation in the ark upon the water prefigured the salvation of all good Christians in the church by baptism; that temporal salvation by the ark was a type, the antitype whereunto is the eternal salvation of believers by baptism, to prevent mistakes about which the apostle declares what he means by saving baptism; not the outward ceremony of washing with water, which, in itself, does no more than put away the filth of the flesh, but it is that baptism wherein there is a faithful answer or restipulation of a resolved good conscience, engaging in believe in , and be entirely devoted to, God, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, renouncing at the same time the flesh, the world, and the devil. The baptismal covenant, made and kept, will certainly save us. Washing is the visible sign; this is the thing signified.

The apostle shows the efficacy of baptism to salvation depends not upon the work done, but upon the resurrection of Christ, which supposes his death, and is the foundation of our faith and hope, to which we are rendered conformable by dying to sin, and rising again to holiness and newness of life...The external participation of baptism will save no man without an answerable good conscience and conversation. There must be the answer of a good conscience towards God (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Volume 6, pp. 1026-27).

Here in Romans 6 Paul refers not just to baptism with water, but also to the spiritual reality which underlies the sign of water baptism—the identification with Christ that takes place when an individual is baptized by the Holy Spirit in to Christ and the newness of life that results from regeneration. He is not merely describing water baptism here, for the whole point of this chapter is that those who are baptized into Christ, which is what water baptism signifies, are freed from sin and they walk in newness of life as slaves of righteousness (Rom. 6:4, 17-

18). But again, this is not something which is effected through water baptism; it is a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of a man or woman.

When Spirit baptism takes place, that individual is joined to Christ and he is identified with Jesus in his death, burial and resurrection. The very life of Christ becomes his life and he is born again. And the result of this union is a completely changed life. The context of Roman's 6:3-5 has to do with the impossibility of a Christian living under the domination of sin. The two preceding verses (Rom. 6:1-2) read as follows:

What shall we say then? Are we to continue to sin that grace might increase? May it never be!  
How shall we who died to sin still live in it?

Paul is saying that because a true Christian has been joined to Jesus Christ through the baptizing work of the Holy Spirit, it is impossible for that person to live in sin, or as 1 John 3:9 says, to practice sin.

Romans 6:4 says that the person who has been united to Jesus Christ will walk in 'newness of life' because as Romans 6:5 says he has become 'united in the likeness of His resurrection'. Further, Romans 7:4 tells us that a Christian has been joined to Christ that he might bear fruit for God, which means a righteous or holy life. Thus to be baptized into Christ is to become united with him in his resurrection power and to bear the fruit of holiness or righteousness unto God in one's life. The kind of baptism referred to here in Romans 6 always results in a holy life. This person will not live in sin.

But we have already seen that a person can be baptized with water and still continue to live in sin. Therefore there must be a distinct difference between water baptism and Spirit baptism. Water baptism does not result in the Spirit baptism in which an individual is united to Christ and is born again, for an individual can be baptized with water and still practice sin, whereas the person who is baptized by the Holy Spirit into Christ will *not* practice sin.

This not to deny the importance of water baptism. But only when it is accompanied by the cleansing power of the Spirit are we saved (see 1 Pet. 3:21). Water baptism, then, is an outward picture of an inward work of grace by the Holy Spirit. It does not bring about the new birth, but is a public testimony to the necessity and nature of the new birth.

There is, then, a very clear distinction drawn in the Word of God between water baptism and a baptism which is spiritual and effected by the Spirit of God in the heart.

JOHN 3:3-5

This passage of Scripture is one of the passages constantly alluded to by the Roman Catholic Church as a basis for its teaching on baptismal regeneration.

Jesus answered and said to him [Nicodemus], 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.'

Nicodemus said to him, 'How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?'

Jesus answered, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.'

Jesus says we must be born again or we will not enter the kingdom of heaven. He tells Nicodemus that a man must be 'born of water and the Spirit'. What exactly does he mean? Does Jesus mean water baptism by his use of the word 'water'? Three reasons suggest that he does not.

Firstly, Jesus could not mean water baptism here for such an interpretation would cause the Word of God to contradict itself. The Bible teaches that water baptism does not cause a person to be born again. Secondly, Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus, who is a Jew, and Christian baptism had not yet been instituted. Thirdly, because Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus, the term must be interpreted within its context. The term 'water' had a certain

significance to Nicodemus, who was not only a Jew, but also steeped in the learning of the Old Testament since he was a leader, if not the leading teacher in Israel. In the light of these facts what significance would the term 'water' have for Nicodemus? Professor John Murray's comments on John 3:5 are very helpful at this point:

Now what religious idea would we expect to be conveyed to the mind of Nicodemus by the use of the word water? Of course, the idea associated with the religious use of water in the Old Testament and in that religious tradition and practice which provided the very context of Nicodemus' life and profession! And that simply means the religious import of water in the Old Testament, in the rites of Judaism, and in contemporary practice. When we say this, there is one answer. The religious use of water, that is to say, the religiously symbolic meaning of water, pointed in one direction, and that direction is purification. All the relevant considerations would conspire to convey to Nicodemus that message. And that message would be focused in his mind in one central thought, the indispensable necessity of purification for entrance into the kingdom of God.

In the Old Testament water often signified washing and purifying from the pollution of sin (cf. Psalm 51:2,3; Isa. 1:16, Jer. 33:8, Ezek. 36:25; Zech. 13:1)...

John 3:5 sets forth the two aspects from which the new birth must be viewed—it purges away the defilement of our hearts and it recreates in newness of life. The two elements of this text—'born of water' and 'born of the Spirit'—correspond to the two elements of the Old Testament counterpart: 'Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh' (Ezek. 36:25, 26). This passage we may properly regard as the Old Testament parallel to John 3:5, and there is neither reason nor warrant for placing any other interpretations upon 'born of water' than that of Ezek. 36:25: 'Then I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean' (*Collected Writings of John Murray*, Volume 2, 1977, pp. 182-84).

To Nicodemus the term 'water' must have conveyed the idea of cleansing from the guilt and pollution of sin. In John 3:5 the term 'water' refers to cleansing from the guilt of sin, as Paul says, similarly, in Titus 3:5: 'He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit.' This 'washing' takes place through the work of Christ on our behalf (see Rev. 1:5).

The basis for our entering the kingdom of God is our washing, our cleansing, our purification from the guilt and defilement of sin through the blood of Jesus Christ. The agent by which we are actually regenerated is the Spirit of God who communicates new life to us by uniting us to Christ. He thus brings us into the kingdom of God cleansed and made new through the blood of Jesus. This is further amplified in John 3:14-16:

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; that whoever believes may in Him have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.

In Moses' day a bronze serpent was attached to a wooden pole and then lifted up so that those who looked at it would not die. In the same way, God's Son was to be lifted up—that is, nailed to a wooden cross, and lifted up to die for the sins of the world. Thus God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that those who trust in the sufficiency of that blood sacrifice would not perish eternally, but instead possess eternal life.

To be born again is to possess eternal life. Jesus says that an individual must be born again to enter the kingdom of heaven. The basis upon which a person is born again is Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross. He was lifted up just as the serpent in the wilderness was. Salvation becomes ours when we exercise faith in this sacrifice. In the context of John 3, therefore, regeneration has nothing to do with water as such.

## CONCLUSION

Just as Nicodemus could think only in material terms when Jesus spoke of being ‘born again’ and he began to speak of entering a second time into his mother’s womb, so the Roman Catholic Church relegates the new birth to a purely mechanical ritual of being sprinkled with physical water and robs it of its spiritual significance and reality.

To do this is completely contradictory to the teaching of the Word of God with respect to baptism and the new birth. Sadly, there are multitudes of people who are deceived into believing that if they have simply been baptized with water then they have been born again. But they make the same error the Jews made during the time of Paul when they equated circumcision with spiritual life. Those Jews, though sincere, were completely wrong in their belief and teaching, and the same can be said today with respect to the Roman Catholic Church’s teaching on baptism.

This chapter gratefully presented here by Think Inc. with permission from the author and publisher. We highly recommend you obtain a copy of the book in order to grow in your understanding and practice of Biblical Truth.

**Webster, William. Salvation, The Bible, And Roman Catholicism, The Banner of Truth Trust: Pennsylvania, 1990.**

*The author expressed his thanks to the following publishers for permission to quote from their material (the documents below carry the official authorization of the Vatican):*

**I. The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent**, in Philip Shaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Baker Book House (1919 ed.).

**II. The Documents of Vatican II**, Walter M. Abbott S.J., General Editor, Association Press, Follett Publishing Company, 1966.

**III. The Code of the Canon Law**, Prepared by the Canon Law Society of Great Britain and Ireland in Association with The Canon Law Society of Australia and New Zealand and the Canadian Canon Law Society, William Collins and William B. Eedmans Publishing Company, 1983. John Paul II makes the following comments concerning The Code of The Canon Law: “It is hoped that this English Version of the Code will be a fitting resource for an attentive and fruitful study for the law of the Church...” “We order that henceforth it is to have the force of law for the whole latin Church, and we commit its observance to the care and vigilance of all who are responsible.”

**IV. The Question and Answer Catholic Catechism**, John A. Hardon S.J., Image Books, Doubleday and Company, 1981