

A Catholic Response to Christians Who Believe Baptism is Not Necessary for Salvation and the “Once Saved Always Saved” Doctrine

By Julie Onderko

Where do Evangelicals and other modern Christians get the idea that being saved is only a matter of believing in Jesus Christ and accepting him as Lord and Savior? The answer is found in the Bible, “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom 10:9), and “everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom 10:13). In light of these scriptures, where does baptism fit in? Catholics believe that the Sacrament of Baptism is necessary for entry into the Kingdom of God. Is baptism just a symbolic washing and only a simple act of obedience or does it regenerate a person as a new creation in Christ? Is it through baptism that a human being is born again? Often because of the “saved” and “born again” doctrines held by many modern day Christians, baptism is not considered necessary for salvation when in fact it is a requirement placed on humanity by Jesus himself.

Born Again

Jesus tells Nicodemus that baptism is essential for salvation, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). Being born of water *and* the Spirit is baptism. There are those who use the amniotic-fluid-defense to separate being born of water from born of the Spirit. It is believed and taught that when Jesus speaks of being born of water he is referring to physical birth because a baby floats in amniotic fluid. However, when Jesus speaks of anyone being born physically into this world, he does not use this term. He refers to John the Baptist and says, “Truly I say to you, among those *born of woman...*” (Matt 11:11) and in referring to child birth he says, “When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come; but when *she is delivered* of the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a child is *born into the world*” (Matt 16:21). Concluding that “born of water” is being physically born is a stretch; when Jesus did speak of birth He did not refer to it in that way. Born of water and spirit are not two different things, they are contained in the same rite—baptism and the proof is in the baptism of Jesus; “And when Jesus was baptized, he went up immediately from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him” (Matt 3:16).

Old Testament Prophecy Fulfilled in the New Testament

Baptism into the New Covenant was prophesized in Ezekiel, “I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances” (Ezekiel 36:25-27). We read in Hebrews how this prophecy is practiced and fulfilled in the New Testament of Jesus Christ, “Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (Heb 10:22).

Early Church History

Just as circumcision was the entry point into the Old Covenant with God, baptism is the entry point into the New Covenant with God. Just as children were brought into the Old Covenant through circumcision, children and infants are also brought into the New Covenant through baptism. Evidence of this is found in the Bible and early Church writings when whole households were baptized, “And when she was baptized, with her household...” (Acts 16:15) and “they said, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household... And he took them that same hour of the night, and washed their wounds, and he was baptized at once, with all his family” (Acts 16:31, 33). Jesus does not require that an infant first grow to an age of understanding before being baptized, he admonished the disciples when they tried to keep children and even infants from him (Luke 18:15-16). The belief of a child is not necessary and this is demonstrated by Jesus when he cured the centurion’s servant because of the centurion’s faith. The servant was not present nor had to believe, rather the faith of another—the centurion—was sufficient, just as the faith of the parents is sufficient for an infant baptism.

Saul was a great sinner and persecutor of the Church. If anyone needed his sins washed away and the grace that comes through the Holy Spirit it was Saul (to be later called Paul, the Apostles of the Gentiles). Therefore after his conversion and healing of blindness, Ananias implored him with an urgency that implies the necessity of baptism, “And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name” (Acts 22:16). Baptism washes away sins including the original sin which is the stain from Adam, “Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin...” (Rom 5:12). Baptism is not merely symbolic, but is a visible sign of the reality of sanctifying grace through the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Peter tells the story of Noah to illustrate the saving power of baptism, “When God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight person, were saved through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 3:20-21). Peter shows that the ark represents the Church and the water of the flood represents baptism (Brock 2004).¹

Historically, it is beneficial to look to the earliest Christians who did not have a canon of the Bible yet but learned through the Apostles and their successors who had been commissioned by Christ to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and behold, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Matt 28:19). Through their oral tradition handed down from Christ, one can know how baptism was practiced and what the earliest Christians believed about it. From Justin Martyr’s First Apology written in A.D. 61 one reads, “Then they are brought by us where there is water, and are regenerated in the same way that we were regenerated. For, in the name of God, the Father and the Lord of the universe, and

¹ “The Church does teach that some who do not receive water Baptism can be saved through Baptism of blood or desire. Baptism of blood is where one gives his life for Christ, such as the case of the Holy Innocents who were slaughtered in place of the Christ child. Baptism of desire is where one is invincibly ignorant of Christ but tries to do good according to the dictates of his conscience and the natural law” (Brock 2004)

of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, they then receive the washing with water. For Christ also said, ‘Unless you be born again, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven’” (Akin 2010). One can see from reading Justin Martyr’s Apology that the term “born again” was synonymous for baptism. When reading from Theophilus of Antioch in his letter to Autolycus in A.D. 181 one find that the understanding of baptism unchanged, “Moreover, the things proceeding from the waters were blessed by God, that this also might be a sign of men being destined to receive repentance and remission of sins through the water and washing of regeneration, as many as come to the truth, and are born again, and receive blessing from God” (Akin 2010).

Christians Concerned For One Another

Non-Catholic Christians are often concerned that people have a genuine solid relationship with Jesus. There is a misconception is that the sacraments (Baptism) get in the way of this relationship because one would trust in one’s Baptism and not live in the grace of God (Burnham and Wood 1996). Is there a contradiction here? Of course not. The misunderstanding is in found partially in semantics. It is not “either this or that” but rather “both-and.” A relationship with Christ (belief and faith included) *and* baptism are requirements² for entry into the Kingdom of God. Jesus taught this, “He who believes *and* is baptized will be saved...” (Mark 16:16). Often baptism is the first step a person takes in their relationship—demonstrating a willingness to follow Jesus and do what He commands.

Catholics on the other hand, are concerned that some Protestants believe their salvation is certain no matter what they do or do not do as long as they have been “saved.” This begs the question, “Can one lose one’s salvation?” Some would say no, “For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable” (Rom 11:29). It is true that God’s gifts are irrevocable and He will not steal back what he has given; but one should not discount free will. Any person of their own free will through their actions can forfeit and reject the salvation they previously received from Christ.

Can One’s Salvation be Lost?

Looking at Judas, the betrayer of Jesus one can understand this. Peter explains, “For he (Judas) was numbered among us, and was allotted his share in this ministry...to take the place of this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place” (Acts 1:17,25). Judas was “numbered among us (the disciples)” and “turned (it) aside.” Jesus himself says that not all who call him Lord will be saved. This is poignantly illustrated in Matthew’s Gospel when Jesus describes the Judgment when he will separate people like a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. The goats called him their “Lord” but they did not do the charitable works required for entry into heaven. He will address them saying, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matt 25:41). Those he sent away were perplexed and even asked for an explanation because *they believed their salvation was secure*, but it was not. Yes they believed in Jesus, but Satan believes in Jesus too!

In the New Testament there are numerous warnings about losing one’s salvation;

- “But he who endures to the end will be saved” (Matt 24:13),

² Not for all. For instance a baptized baby does not “believe” but is saved.

- “Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God’s kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you too will be cut off” (Rom 11:22),
- Paul was ever vigilant regarding his salvation, “But I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified” (1Cor 9:27),
- “Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor 10:12), and
- “If we endure, we shall also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us” (2 Tim 2:12). (See a more comprehensive list footnoted below).³

Why Do You Wait?

Anyone can reject or forfeit their salvation, even a baptized person. That does not change the requirement of baptism commissioned to us by Our Lord Jesus Christ. In baptism one is washed clean of sin and brought into the New Covenant Family of God. Like Ananias challenged Paul, all Christians should ask unbaptized believers, “And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name” (Acts 22:16).

Bibliography

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³ Multiple verses support the idea that one can lose one’s salvation: Matt 6:14-15, Matt 7:21, Matt 16:27, Matt 19:16-17, John 14:21, Rom 2:5-8, Rom 8:24-25, 1Cor 4:4-5, Gal 5:6, Eph 2:8-10