16. Baptism: saving or just a symbol? (and the thief on the cross)

Often heard: "Baptism is just an outward symbol of an inward change." / "The thief on the cross wasn't baptized."
Also heard: "Peter says 'baptism doth also now save us' (1 Pet 3:21). No Christian called it just a symbol before Zwingli."

An ordinance of obedience and public testimony

HELD BY Baptist

Baptism is an ordinance of obedience and a public testimony that pictures death, burial and resurrection with Christ. It does not save or convey grace; salvation comes before it, by faith.

VERSES CITED

Eph 2:8–9; Acts 10:44–48; Luke 23:43; 1 Cor 1:14–17; Rom 4:9–12; 1 Pet 3:21b ("not the putting away of the filth of the flesh"); Rom 6:3–4 (read as a picture). Full list: Protestant verses.

WHERE THE IDEA COMES FROM

Ulrich Zwingli (Zurich, 1523–25) first taught that baptism is a sign and not a means of grace. The Anabaptists (from January 1525) and the Schleitheim Confession (1527) tied it to prior faith; John Smyth's congregation (Amsterdam, 1609) and the London Baptist Confession (1644) carried it into Baptist life. No known Christian writer before the 1520s taught that baptism was only a symbol.

Baptism, the washing of new birth

HELD BY Catholic · Orthodox triple immersion · Lutheran · Anglican Prayer Book; views differ · Methodist Wesley; qualified today

Baptism is the sacrament of new birth: it forgives original and personal sin, gives the Holy Spirit, and joins a person to Christ and the Church. It is the ordinary means God has given, which is why it is necessary. On the thief: he died before the New Covenant was in force (Heb 9:16–17), and he shows the faith and repentance that Catholic teaching calls "baptism of desire" in someone prevented from receiving the sacrament. God has bound salvation to baptism, but He Himself is not bound by His sacraments (CCC 1257).

VERSES CITED

John 3:5; Matt 28:19; Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 22:16; 1 Pet 3:21; Rom 6:3–4; Gal 3:27; Col 2:11–12; Titus 3:5; 1 Cor 6:11; 12:13; Eph 5:25–26. Full list: Catholic verses.

EARLY CHURCH AND HISTORY

Universal from the 2nd century: *Barnabas* 11, Hermas, Justin (*First Apology* 61), Irenaeus, Tertullian (*On Baptism*), Cyprian, the Nicene Creed (381: "one baptism for the forgiveness of sins"). Ambrose (392) and Augustine (*On Baptism* 4.22) teach baptism of desire,

Augustine citing the thief (he later noted in his *Retractations* 2.18 that the thief may have been baptized, though he kept the principle of baptism of desire). See What the early Christians believed.

Catholic, Orthodox and many Lutheran and Anglican writers also read the water and blood that flowed from Christ's pierced side (John 19:34) as the sacraments of baptism and the Supper. John Chrysostom says that the initiated are "by water indeed regenerate, and nourished by the Blood and the Flesh," and that "hence the Mysteries take their beginning" (*Homilies on John* 85.3). Augustine notes that the evangelist wrote "opened," not "pierced," so that "the gate of life might be thrown open, from whence have flowed forth the sacraments of the Church" (*Tractates on John* 120.2); 1 John 5:8 names "the Spirit, and the water, and the blood" as witnesses that "agree in one." Reformed and Baptist writers read the flow first as evidence that Christ truly died (John 19:35) and 1 John 5:6 as aimed at those who denied his real humanity, and they do not find baptism or the Supper named in either text.

CATECHISM AND COUNCILS

CCC 1213–1284 (esp. 1257–1261 necessity, desire and blood; 1262–1274 effects); Trent, Session 7, canons on Baptism (esp. 5); Session 6, ch. 4.

A sign and seal of the covenant of grace

HELD BY Reformed

Baptism is a sacrament ordained by Christ that admits the baptized into the visible church and is to them a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration

and of the remission of sins. The water itself does not wash away sin; only the blood of Christ and the Holy Spirit do, and baptism is God's pledge that the believer is cleansed as surely as the body is washed with water. By its right use the promised grace is not only offered but "really exhibited, and conferred" by the Holy Spirit on those to whom it belongs, in God's appointed time. Yet salvation is not so bound to the rite that no one can be saved without it, nor are all the baptized regenerate.

VERSES CITED

Matt 28:19; Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 22:16; Rom 4:11 (circumcision a sign and seal); Rom 6:3–4; Col 2:12; Gal 3:27; Titus 3:5; 1 Cor 6:11; 1 Pet 3:21 ("not the putting away of the filth of the flesh").

WHERE THE IDEA COMES FROM

Zwingli in Zurich (1520s) denied that baptism regenerates while keeping infant baptism; Calvin in Geneva taught that baptism is a sign and seal through which the Spirit truly gives what it promises, though not to every baptized person at the moment of baptism. The Heidelberg Catechism (1563) and the Westminster Confession (1646) gave the view its confessional form for Reformed and Presbyterian churches.

CONFESSIONS AND DOCUMENTS

Westminster Confession 27.1, 27.3, 28.1, 28.5–6; Heidelberg Catechism Q 66, 69–73 (esp. 72–73); Belgic Confession, art. 34.

Across the traditions

How each major tradition answers this question, in its own words and from its own documents.

Catholic

Orthodox

Baptism is the sacrament of new birth: it forgives original and personal sin, gives the Holy Spirit and joins a person to Christ and the Church. It is necessary as the ordinary means God has given, though God Himself is not bound by His sacraments, which is why the Church speaks of baptism of desire and of blood. The full case is set out above.

Sources: Catechism of the Catholic Church 1213, 1257-1261, 1262-1274; Code of Canon Law, can. 849; Council of Trent, Session 7, canons on Baptism, can. 5; Session 6, ch. 4.

Baptism is the Mystery in which a believer, immersed three times in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, dies to the life of sin and is born again of the Holy Spirit. The Confession of Dositheus calls it "of the highest necessity" (John 3:5): it remits original and personal sin, imprints an indelible character and is never repeated. Adults must bring repentance and faith. Chrismation is always given together with it, and the newly baptized, infants included, receive Holy Communion.

Sources: Longer Catechism of St Philaret (English ed., pravoslavieto.com), Q 288, 290, 291, 303-304, 307; Confession of Dositheus (Jerusalem, 1672), Decree 16; Orthodox Church in America, The Orthodox Faith, vol. 2, "Chrismation" (oca.org).

Lutheran

Baptism is God's work, not ours: not simple water only, but water comprehended in God's command and joined with His Word. The Augsburg Confession teaches that it is necessary to salvation and that through it God's grace is offered. It works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe; not the water does this, but the Word with the water and the faith that trusts it. So Lutherans hold baptismal regeneration together with justification by faith.

Sources: Augsburg Confession, art. IX (and art. II); Luther, Small Catechism, Part IV (Baptism), questions 1-3; Large Catechism, Part IV (Baptism), paras. 10, 35.

Reformed

Baptism is a sacrament instituted by Christ that admits the baptized into the visible church: a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration and of remission of sins. The water itself does not wash away sin; only Christ's blood and Spirit do, and baptism is God's pledge of it. The Spirit really confers the promised grace on those to whom it belongs, in God's time, but salvation is not so tied to the rite that no one can be saved without it.

Sources: Westminster Confession 28.1, 28.5, 28.6; Heidelberg Catechism Q 69-73 (esp. 72-73); Belgic Confession, art. 34.

Anglican

Baptism is not only a mark of Christian profession but a sign of regeneration or new birth, by which, as by an instrument, those who

Methodist

Methodists keep the Anglican article in shorter form: baptism is a sign of profession and also a sign of regeneration or the new birth. Wesley

receive it rightly are grafted into the Church, and God's promises of forgiveness and adoption are visibly signed and sealed. The 1662 Prayer Book declares each newly baptized person regenerate. Anglicans have differed over that word: in the Gorham case (1850) the Privy Council upheld an evangelical clergyman whose Calvinist view of baptism his bishop had rejected.

Sources: Thirty-Nine Articles, art. XXVII; Book of Common Prayer (1662), Publick Baptism of Infants (declaration after the baptism) and Baptism of Such as Are of Riper Years; Gorham case, Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, March 1850 (New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia, "Gorham Case").

taught that it washes away the guilt of original sin, brings us into covenant with God and the Church, and that by it we are born again. The United Methodist statement By Water and the Spirit calls baptism God's act through the church, yet not saving apart from a response of faith; the new birth need not coincide with the rite.

Sources: Methodist Articles of Religion, art. XVII; John Wesley, A Treatise on Baptism (1756), I.1, II.1-4; United Methodist Church, By Water and the Spirit (adopted 1996).

Baptist

Baptism is an ordinance of obedience and a public testimony picturing the believer's death, burial and resurrection with Christ; it does not save or convey grace, since salvation comes before it, by faith. The full case is set out above.

Sources: Baptist Faith and Message (2000), art. VII; Second London Baptist Confession (1677/1689), 29.1.

Where it gets contested: Catholics, Orthodox, Lutherans, Anglicans and Methodists hold that baptism conveys grace, and the Reformed call it a sign and seal through which the Spirit confers the promised grace, so "just a symbol" is a minority view. The strongest texts for the symbolic view are Cornelius (the Spirit before baptism) and 1 Cor 1:17. Those who hold that baptism conveys grace reply that Peter still commanded baptism at once, and that Paul was dividing labor, not belittling baptism.

Deeper study: what the early Christians believed about baptism

What the surviving Christian writers of the first four centuries said about baptism, and how the churches read that record today. It does not decide between them. Dates are approximate.

In brief: From the second century onward, the surviving Christian writers describe baptism as the washing in which sins are forgiven and the believer is born again; no writer of the period is

known to describe it as a symbol only. They disagreed about details: infants, delay, baptism by heretics, and those who die unbaptized. Churches that teach baptismal regeneration read this record as the apostles' teaching handed on; Baptists and many other Protestants read it as an early departure from the New Testament.

Earliest evidence (c. AD 50–150)

- **The Didache:** gives instructions for baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit, with fasting beforehand, and restricts the Eucharist to the baptized. It does not explain the theology.
- **Shepherd of Hermas:** treats the water as necessary for entering the kingdom. It even says the righteous dead had to be baptized by the apostles in the underworld, which shows how strongly the author felt baptism was required.
- **Epistle of Barnabas:** describes going down into the water full of sins and coming up bearing fruit.

Second century

- **Justin Martyr, c. 155 (First Apology 61):** describes baptism as the washing of regeneration, ties it to John 3:5, and says it brings forgiveness of past sins. He also calls it "illumination." Those baptized are those who have come to believe what is taught, and they pray and fast beforehand.
- **Irenaeus, c. 180:** calls baptism the seal of eternal life and rebirth to God.

Third century

- **Tertullian, c. 200 (On Baptism):** says baptism washes away sins and grants eternal life. He is the earliest source for "baptism of blood" (martyrdom). He recommended delaying baptism for small children and the unmarried, which shows that small children were already being baptized and that he thought it better to wait.
- **Hippolytus, c. 215 (Apostolic Tradition; authorship and date debated):** describes a catechumenate of up to three years, but also says children are to be baptized, with parents or family answering for them.
- **Origen, early 200s:** says the Church received the tradition of baptizing infants from the apostles.
- **Cyprian, c. 250:** holds there is no salvation outside the Church and that baptism by heretics is invalid. A council of African bishops, in a letter to Fidus, agrees infants should not wait until the eighth day. He also accepts that catechumens who die as martyrs are saved.

Fourth century and after

- **Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, 381:** confesses "one baptism for the forgiveness of sins."
- **Ambrose, 392:** taught that a catechumen who desires baptism but dies before receiving it is saved by that desire.
- **Augustine, c. 400:** cited the good thief as an example of desire supplying for the sacrament (later noting in his *Retractations* that the thief may have been baptized), and developed original sin as a reason to baptize infants.
- **Delayed baptism:** many people, including Constantine, put off baptism until near death, treating it as a one-time wiping away of past sins. Several preachers criticized the practice.

Didache

Date: c. 50–120

What baptism does: Required before Eucharist; Trinitarian formula

Hermas

Date: c. 100–150

What baptism does: Necessary to enter the kingdom

Justin Martyr

Date: c. 155

What baptism does: Regeneration, forgiveness of past sins

Irenaeus

Date: c. 180

What baptism does: Seal of eternal life, rebirth to God

Tertullian

Date: c. 200

What baptism does: Washes away sin, grants eternal life; baptism of blood

Origen

Date: early 200s

What baptism does: Infant baptism from the apostles

Cyprian

Date: c. 250

What baptism does: Needed for salvation; infants not delayed

Nicene Creed

Date: 381

What baptism does: One baptism for the forgiveness of sins

Ambrose / Augustine

Date: 392 / c. 400

What baptism does: Baptism of desire; the thief as example; infants and original sin

How the churches that teach baptismal regeneration read this record

- Catholics, Orthodox, Lutherans and many Anglicans hold that baptismal regeneration, the near-universal view from at least the second century, is the apostles' own teaching, handed on in the churches they founded. They point out that no early writer is known to teach that baptism is only a symbol, and that this view first appears with Zwingli and some Anabaptists in the 1520s.
- They take Origen's statement that infant baptism came from the apostles, and Hippolytus's instruction to baptize children, as evidence that the practice was not a late innovation.
- Catholics add that baptism of desire and baptism of blood were also early ideas (Tertullian, Cyprian, Ambrose, Augustine), which is why they say the good thief fits the Fathers' own framework.

How Baptists and other Protestants read it

- The New Testament is the authority, not the later Fathers. They argue the Church drifted toward sacramentalism within a few generations, and that an early date does not make a teaching apostolic.
- The earliest sources (Didache, Justin) put repentance, instruction and faith before baptism. Tertullian could still argue for delaying the baptism of small children, which they take to show

that infant baptism was not yet a fixed or universal rule around 200.
- Scholars disagree on when infant baptism began. Joachim Jeremias argued it goes back to the apostolic era; Kurt Aland argued it came later. Baptists point to this gap as evidence that believer's baptism was original.
- Reformed Protestants take a middle position: they baptize infants and call baptism a sign and seal of grace, but deny that grace and salvation are "so inseparably annexed unto it" that no one can be saved without it, or that all the baptized are regenerated (Westminster Confession 28.5).

What is actually in dispute

Both sides largely agree on what the early writers said. They disagree on whether that early and widespread teaching is a faithful witness to what the apostles taught, or an early development that must be tested against the New Testament and corrected by it.

Deeper study: the good thief: does Luke 23 show that baptism is unnecessary?

The case both sides must account for, and how each reads the other's argument. It does not decide between them.

The key texts

- **Luke 23:39–43.** One of the criminals crucified with Jesus rebukes the other: "we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss," and asks, "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom." Jesus answers, "To day shalt thou be with me in paradise." Nothing is said of baptism.
- **Texts that join salvation to baptism:** John 3:5; Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; Acts 22:16; and the command to baptize, given after the Resurrection (Matt 28:19).
- **Texts that join salvation to faith:** John 3:16; John 6:47; Romans 10:9–10; Ephesians 2:8–9.
- **Hebrews 9:15–17:** "a testament is of force after men are dead," used by Catholics to place the thief before the New Covenant took effect.

The Baptist and evangelical reading

The penitent thief (traditionally called Dismas) was promised paradise that same day without being baptized, so salvation comes by faith alone and baptism is an act of obedience that follows it. Defenders add that Jesus pronounced others forgiven or saved because of their faith (Luke 5:20; 7:50), that Cornelius's household received the Holy Ghost before being baptized (Acts 10:44–48), and that the thief's faith, repentance and confession of Christ are what Romans 10:9–10 names as the conditions of salvation.

The Catholic reading

1. **He died under the Old Covenant.** A testament takes effect at the testator's death (Heb 9:15–17). The command to baptize all nations (Matt 28:19) was given after the Resurrection and took effect at Pentecost (Acts 2:38), so the thief cannot show what is required after Pentecost.
2. **Baptism of desire.** Someone who desires what baptism gives but is prevented from receiving it can be saved. The thief shows faith ("Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom"), repentance ("we receive the due reward of our deeds") and recognition of Christ's innocence and kingship (CCC 1259–1260). The Council of Trent teaches that justification cannot be had "without the laver of regeneration, or the desire thereof" (Session 6, ch. 4). Ambrose (392) and Augustine (*On Baptism* 4.22) teach this, Augustine citing the thief (he later noted in his *Retractations* 2.18 that the thief may have been baptized, though he kept the principle of baptism of desire).
3. **Baptism of blood.** Some suggest his death beside Christ had a martyr-like character. Catholic writers generally treat this as the weaker argument, since he was executed for crimes, not for the faith.
4. **He may have been baptized.** Some speculate he had been baptized by John or earlier. Scripture is silent, so most apologists do not rely on this.
5. **God is not bound by His sacraments.** God has bound salvation to baptism, but He Himself is not bound by His sacraments (CCC 1257). Baptism is the ordinary means; the thief is an extraordinary case.

How each side reads the other's case

- **Protestants on the Catholic answers:** baptism of desire is a later theological category not found in Luke 23, and if desire can supply for the water, then it is faith that saves, which is the Protestant point. On the covenant argument, they note that John 3:5 was itself spoken before the Cross, and that Jesus' disciples were already baptizing during his ministry (John 4:1–2), so the teaching Catholics cite had already been given in the thief's lifetime.
- **Catholics on the Protestant reading:** it treats a single narrative as a complete theology of salvation, which it was not written to be. The example also proves too much: Jesus' teaching (John 3:5; Mark 16:16) and the apostles' practice (Acts 2:38; 22:16) treat baptism as the normal means, and the thief also never received the Lord's Supper or joined a congregation, yet Baptists do not conclude those are unnecessary. Desire does not make baptism optional: Trent says the rule holds "since the promulgation of the Gospel," and the Catechism that the Church knows no other means "that assures entry into eternal beatitude" (CCC 1257).

What is actually in dispute

Both sides agree the thief was saved without being baptized. They disagree on what his case shows: Protestants take it as the pattern, that faith alone saves and baptism follows as obedience; Catholics take it as an exception granted to someone who could not be baptized, which leaves baptism the ordinary means of salvation for everyone who can receive it.

Deeper study: the verses each side cites, and how each reads the other's

The texts both sides must account for, and how each reads the other's. It does not decide between them. Passages are listed by reference with a summary of how each is used; the popups give the King James and Douay-Rheims wording.

Texts cited for baptism as part of how God saves (Catholic, and largely Orthodox and Lutheran)

Luther's Small Catechism (Part IV) cites Matthew 28:19, Mark 16:16, Titus 3:5 and Romans 6:4 for the same purpose.

Passage	How it is used
Matthew 28:19	Great Commission: baptize all nations in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
John 3:5	Born of water and the Spirit to enter the kingdom; "water" read as baptism.
Mark 16:16	Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved.
Acts 2:38	Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins, and receive the Spirit.
Acts 22:16	Ananias tells Paul to be baptized and wash away his sins.
1 Peter 3:21	Baptism now saves you, through the resurrection of Christ. Often called the most direct text.
Romans 6:3–4	Baptized into Christ's death, buried with him, raised to new life.
Galatians 3:27	Baptized into Christ means clothed with Christ.

Colossians 2:11–12	Buried and raised with Christ in baptism; read as replacing circumcision.
Titus 3:5	Saved through the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Spirit.
Ephesians 5:25–26	Christ cleansed the Church by the washing of water with the word.
1 Corinthians 12:13	Baptized by one Spirit into one body.
Acts 16:31–33	Jailer believes and he and his household are baptized immediately.
Hebrews 9:15–17	A testament takes effect at death; used to explain why the good thief died before the new baptismal law applied.
CCC 1257, 1259–1260; Council of Trent, Session 6	Not Scripture, but the Catholic basis for baptism of desire and blood and for God not being bound by his sacraments.

Texts cited for baptism as a sign that follows salvation (Baptist and many evangelicals)

Passage	How it is used
Ephesians 2:8–9	Saved by grace through faith, not by works.
Romans 3:28; Galatians 2:16	Justified by faith apart from works.
Romans 4:2–5	Abraham credited with righteousness because he believed.
Romans 4:9–12	Abraham declared righteous before circumcision; circumcision was a sign and seal, and baptism is argued to work the same way.
John 3:16; 5:24; 6:47; Acts 16:31; Romans 10:9–10	Eternal life tied to believing, with no mention of baptism.
Acts 10:44–48; 11:17	Cornelius's household receives the Spirit before being baptized.
Luke 23:43	The thief is promised paradise with no baptism.

Luke 5:20; 7:50; 18:13–14	Jesus declares people forgiven or justified because of faith or repentance.
1 Corinthians 1:14–17	Paul is glad he baptized few; Christ sent him to preach the gospel.
John 4:2	Jesus himself did not baptize; his disciples did.
Acts 8:13, 20–23	Simon the sorcerer was baptized but his heart was not right.
1 Corinthians 10:1–5	Israelites "baptized unto Moses" yet most fell in the wilderness.
Romans 10:9–10; Acts 8:36–37; Matthew 28:19	Baptism as the believer's public confession and first act of obedience. (Acts 8:37 is absent from many early manuscripts.)

Within Protestantism: "just a symbol" fits Baptists and many evangelicals best. Reformed and Presbyterian churches call baptism a sign and seal of God's covenant promise (more than a symbol: the Spirit confers the promised grace on those to whom it belongs, in God's time, but not automatically or at the moment of baptism; Westminster Confession 28.5–6). Lutherans and many Anglicans hold that baptism conveys grace, much closer to the Catholic view.

How each side reads the other's texts

Baptist and evangelical readings of the first list:

- **1 Peter 3:21:** the verse itself says what saves is "not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God." Baptism is "the like figure" of the flood (verse 20): it pictures salvation, but the water itself does not save.
- **Acts 2:38:** some read the Greek *eis* in "for the remission of sins" as "because of" or "with a view to"; this reading is contested among Greek scholars. Others note that in Peter's next sermon forgiveness is promised on repentance alone: "Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out" (Acts 3:19).
- **Mark 16:16:** only unbelief is named as the ground of condemnation ("he that believeth not shall be damned"), so baptism accompanies saving faith but is not its condition.
- **Acts 22:16:** the washing away of sins is joined to "calling on the name of the Lord," which Baptists read as the means of the washing, with baptism as its outward sign.
- **Titus 3:5 and Ephesians 5:26:** the "washing of regeneration" is the Spirit's inward cleansing, in the same verse that excludes "works of righteousness which we have done"; the washing in Ephesians is "by the word."

- **Romans 6:3–4, Galatians 3:27, 1 Corinthians 12:13:** many Baptists read these as the Spirit's baptism into Christ, which water baptism pictures. Colossians 2:11–12 calls the circumcision of Christ one "made without hands" and names the means as "the faith of the operation of God."
- **Acts 16:31–34:** the jailer is told to believe first, and afterwards rejoices, "believing in God with all his house"; the order is faith, then baptism.
- **John 3:5:** see the four readings in the next study.

Catholic readings of the second list:

- The faith-alone verses do not exclude baptism, since Mark 16:16, Acts 2:38, and 1 Peter 3:21 tie baptism to salvation explicitly. Baptism is not one of the "works" Paul excludes (Ephesians 2:8–9) but God's own work: Titus 3:5 sets the "washing of regeneration" against "works of righteousness which we have done."
- **Acts 2:38:** the same Greek phrase, *eis aphesin hamartiōn*, is used in Matthew 26:28, where Christ's blood is shed "for the remission of sins," and there it cannot mean "because of."
- **1 Peter 3:21:** the parenthesis says what kind of washing baptism is (not a bath for the body but an appeal to God) without taking back "baptism doth also now save us." **Mark 16:16:** the second half speaks of those who refuse to believe; it does not cancel the first half.
- Cornelius is an exception that confirms the rule, because Peter still commands baptism right after the Spirit falls (Acts 10:47–48).
- 1 Corinthians 1 reflects Paul dividing duties with other ministers, not downgrading baptism.
- Simon and the Israelites show baptism can be received without perseverance, not that it does nothing.
- The forgiveness Jesus pronounced in Luke 5, 7 and 18 was given in person, before the Resurrection, by one who "hath power on earth to forgive sins" (Mark 2:10); it does not replace the baptism he later commanded.
- The good thief died under the Old Covenant, was prevented from being baptized, and showed the faith and repentance that baptism of desire describes (see CCC 1257).

What is actually in dispute

Each side accepts all of these texts as Scripture. The question is which set interprets the other: whether the texts that join baptism to forgiveness and new birth describe the means by which God gives what faith receives, or whether the texts that name faith alone show that baptism is the outward sign of a salvation already received.

Deeper study: "born of water and of the Spirit" (John 3:5): four readings

The four main readings of the "water" in John 3:5, the case for each, and how each side answers the others. It does not decide between them.

Jesus tells Nicodemus: "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). The verse is central to the baptism debate, and Christians read its "water" in four main ways.

1. Baptism

This is how the early church read it. Justin Martyr (c. 155), explaining how converts are "brought by us where there is water, and are regenerated," quotes the saying (*First Apology* 61). Catholic teaching follows: baptism "signifies and actually brings about the birth of water and the Spirit" (CCC 1215; also 1257), and the Council of Trent condemns anyone who turns these words into "some sort of metaphor" (Session VII, canons on baptism, canon 2). The Orthodox read it the same way, and the Augsburg Confession (Article II) speaks of those "not born again through Baptism and the Holy Ghost." Supporters add that immediately afterward Jesus and his disciples go out baptizing (John 3:22). Even Calvin, who rejected this reading, granted that most interpreters since Chrysostom took the water as baptism.

Objections: evangelical commentators answer that Christian baptism had not yet been instituted, so Nicodemus could hardly be blamed for not understanding it, yet Jesus asks, "Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?" (John 3:10). They add that the rest of the discourse names only believing as the condition of life (John 3:15–18). Defenders reply that baptism with water was already well known from John the Baptist, who was baptizing nearby (John 1:33; 3:23), and that Jesus' own disciples baptized (John 4:1–2).

2. Natural birth (the "amniotic fluid" reading)

Many Baptist preachers take "water" to mean physical birth: the waters of the womb that break before a child is born. To be "born of water" is then the first birth everyone has, and "of the Spirit" the second, new birth. Supporters point to Nicodemus's question whether a man can "enter the second time into his mother's womb" (John 3:4), and to the next verse, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6), which they read as the same pair: natural birth, then spiritual birth. W. A. Criswell, long the pastor of First Baptist Church, Dallas, said that nearly all the Baptist preachers he had heard read the verse this way, though he did not (sermon "Born of Water and of Spirit," 1986). In scholarship, Ben Witherington III defended a birth reading, arguing that ancient Jewish writers could use water for birth and procreation ("The Waters of Birth: John 3.5 and 1 John 5.6–8", *New Testament Studies* 35, 1989, pp. 155–160).

Objections: D. A. Carson says he has not been able to find any ancient source that speaks of natural birth as being "born of water," and that the saying would then only tell Nicodemus he must have been born at all. Baptist scholar Robert McCabe notes that in the Greek one preposition governs "water and Spirit," so a single birth is meant (*Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 4, 1999). And while verse 6 contrasts flesh with Spirit, verse 5 joins water with Spirit.

3. The Spirit's cleansing

On this reading water and Spirit are one thing: the Spirit's cleansing, pictured as water. Calvin wrote that Christ "employed the words Spirit and water to mean the same thing" and declined to see baptism here (*Commentary on John*, on 3:5). Many evangelical and Reformed scholars, Carson and John MacArthur among them, find the background in Ezekiel 36:25–27, where God promises, "Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean," and "I will put my spirit within you." That would explain why Jesus expects Nicodemus, "a master of Israel," to know these things already (John 3:10).

Objections: those who hold the first reading answer that if the water simply is the Spirit, the verse says no more than "born of the Spirit and of the Spirit," and that Ezekiel's "clean water" is itself a prophecy fulfilled in baptism; the Roman rite reads Ezekiel 36 at the Easter Vigil, the night of its solemn baptisms.

4. The Word of God

Some Baptists read the water as the Word of God, comparing "the washing of water by the word" (Eph 5:26) with "being born again ... by the word of God" (1 Pet 1:23). Criswell and Adrian Rogers of Bellevue Baptist Church, Memphis, both taught this.

Objections: critics, including Baptists who hold the third reading, note that John 3 does not mention the word, and that the image in 1 Peter 1:23 is seed, not water.

What is actually in dispute

The first reading is how the early church writers took the verse; the other three come later and agree with each other only that the verse does not make baptism necessary for salvation. Catholics, Orthodox and Lutherans hold that the earliest readers stood closest to the apostles and that John 3:22 puts baptism in the immediate context; Baptists and many Reformed scholars hold that the words and their setting decide, not later interpreters, and that Nicodemus was expected to understand the saying from the Old Testament.

Deeper study: how the Reformation traditions divided over baptism

- **Lutherans:** retained infant baptism and baptismal regeneration.
- **Zwingli:** rejected baptismal regeneration in the 1520s while retaining infant baptism.
- **Swiss Anabaptists, c. 1525:** rejected infant baptism and required repentance/faith before baptism.
- **Calvin:** retained infant baptism but denied that the sacrament automatically regenerates every baptized person. The Westminster Confession later put it that grace is not "so inseparably annexed unto it" that "all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated" (28.5).
- **Church of England:** the Thirty-Nine Articles call baptism "a sign of Regeneration or New-Birth, whereby, as by an instrument, they that receive Baptism rightly are grafted into the Church," and retain the baptism of young children (Article XXVII).
- **English Baptists, seventeenth century:** generally taught that regeneration/faith precede believer's baptism.

Luther and "faith alone" plus baptism

Luther did not see baptism as a human work competing with faith. He regarded it as **God's promise and action**, a means through which grace is given and received by faith: "It is not the water indeed that does them, but the word of God which is in and with the water, and faith, which trusts such word of God in the water" (Small Catechism, Part IV). Lutherans therefore hold that baptism is necessary and that justification is by faith, because the saving power belongs to God's word and promise, not to any merit of the person baptized.

How each side reads the division

- **Catholics and Lutherans** see the purely symbolic view as a sixteenth-century novelty with no precedent in the early Church, and the rejection of infant baptism as a break with the Church's practice since at least the third century.
- **Baptists** see the Anabaptists and the English Baptists as recovering the New Testament order, in which those who received the word were then baptized (Acts 2:41; 8:36–38), and hold that the magisterial Reformers did not apply their own appeal to Scripture alone to baptism. They add that infants cannot exercise the faith that Luther himself says receives the promise.
- **Reformed churches** hold that Luther was right to keep infant baptism but wrong to tie regeneration to the moment of baptism: its efficacy "is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered" (Westminster Confession 28.6). Lutherans answer that Scripture attaches the promise to the washing itself (Mark 16:16; Titus 3:5).

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