14. The sinner's prayer and "accepting Jesus"

Often heard: "Have you accepted Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior? When were you saved?"
Also heard: "Where does the Bible tell anyone to pray the sinner's prayer? The apostles said 'repent, and be baptized.'"

Receive Christ by personal faith; baptism follows

HELD BY Methodist conscious conversion, infant baptism · Baptist

Salvation is received by a personal decision of repentance and faith, often expressed in a prayer asking Christ to save you. Baptism follows as an act of obedience.

VERSES CITED

Rom 10:9–10, 13; John 1:12; Rev 3:20; Acts 16:31; Luke 18:13.

WHERE THE IDEA COMES FROM

Revival practice, not the early church. Camp meetings (Cane Ridge, 1801) and Charles Finney's "anxious bench" (late 1820s–1830s) introduced the public call to decide; D. L. Moody (1870s) used inquiry rooms; the scripted "sinner's prayer" was popularized in the 20th century by Billy Graham's crusades (nationally prominent from 1949) and Bill Bright's *Four Spiritual Laws* (written in the 1950s, published as a booklet in 1965).

Conversion is sealed in baptism

HELD BY Catholic · Orthodox · Lutheran baptism gives salvation · Reformed baptism as sign and seal · Anglican most; evangelicals differ

Personal faith and conversion are essential; the Catechism itself calls prayer a "vital and personal relationship with the living and true God." But when people in Acts asked "what shall we do?", the apostles answered "Repent, and be baptized," and new believers were baptized, often the same day, rather than led in a prayer. Rev 3:20 is addressed to an existing church (Laodicea). Conversion continues throughout life.

VERSES CITED

Acts 2:37–41; 8:36–38; 9:17–18; 22:16; 16:30–33; Mark 16:16; 1 Pet 3:21.

EARLY CHURCH AND HISTORY

Converts went through a catechumenate and at baptism renounced Satan and professed the Creed (Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition* 15–21; Justin, *First Apology* 61).

CATECHISM AND COUNCILS

CCC 1229–1233 (Christian initiation), 1427–1429 (first and second conversion), 2558–2565.

Across the traditions

How each major tradition understands becoming a Christian, in its own words and from its own documents.

Catholic

Catholics hold that personal faith and lifelong conversion are essential, but that the apostles answered 'Repent, and be baptized' and baptized new believers, often the same day, rather than leading them in a prayer, so conversion is sealed in Christian initiation. The full case is set out above.

Sources: Acts 2:37-41; CCC 1229-1233, 1427-1429, 2558.

Orthodox

Orthodox teaching holds that a person becomes a Christian through baptism, which the Confession of Dositheus calls of the highest necessity. Repentance and faith are required of those baptized, which is why the Creed is recited first; infants are baptized on the faith of their parents and sponsors, who must later teach them. Chrismation follows, giving the gifts of the Holy Spirit for growth in spiritual life, and conversion continues over a lifetime through repentance and the sacraments.

Sources: Longer Catechism of St. Philaret, Q 291-292, 307, 351-353; Confession of Dositheus (1672), Decree 16.

Lutheran

Lutherans confess that no one can believe in Christ or come to Him by his own reason or strength; the Holy Spirit calls through the Gospel and gives faith through the Word and sacraments where and when it pleases God. Baptism is necessary to salvation, works forgiveness and gives salvation to all who believe its promise, and is lived out by daily contrition and repentance. Conversion is therefore God's work in a person rather than a decision made by his own power.

Sources: Small Catechism, Creed, Third Article; Small Catechism, Baptism, questions 2-4; Augsburg Confession V, IX.

Reformed

Reformed churches teach that conversion is God's effectual call: the sinner is altogether passive until quickened by the Spirit, and is then enabled to answer by faith. Baptism admits a person to the visible church and signs the covenant of grace, and the children of believers are baptized. But grace is not so tied to baptism that no one is regenerated without it, or that every baptized person is regenerated, and its effect is not bound to the moment it is given.

Sources: Westminster Confession 10.1-2, 28.1, 28.4-6.

Anglican

The Articles call baptism a sign of regeneration by which those who rightly receive it are grafted into the Church, and the 1662 Prayer Book declares the baptized infant regenerate. Those baptized as infants later ratify and confirm their baptismal promises in confirmation, and none was to receive Communion until confirmed or ready and desirous to be. Evangelical Anglicans, in the tradition of the Anglican clergy George Whitefield and John Wesley, also stress personal conversion.

Sources: Thirty-Nine Articles XXVII; Book of Common Prayer (1662), Public Baptism of Infants; BCP (1662), Order of Confirmation, preface and final rubric.

Methodist

Methodists keep infant baptism, which the Articles call a sign of regeneration or the new birth, yet Wesley taught that baptism is not itself the new birth: baptized or not, anyone living in sin must be born again. Methodism therefore stresses conscious conversion and assurance. The United Methodist Church teaches that baptism must be followed by justifying faith and personal commitment, and, with Wesley, that the Lord's Supper can be a 'converting ordinance'.

Sources: Methodist Articles of Religion XVII; John Wesley, Sermon 45 'The New Birth' IV.1-4; This Holy Mystery (UMC 2004), 'Invitation to the Lord's Table', citing Wesley's Journal, 27 June 1740.

Baptist

Baptists hold that salvation is received by a personal decision of repentance and faith, often expressed in a prayer asking Christ to save, with believer's baptism following as an act of obedience. The full case is set out above.

Sources: Rom 10:9-10, 13; John 1:12; Acts 16:31; Baptist Faith and Message 2000, arts. IV, VII.

Where it gets contested: Baptists, and others who teach conversion by personal decision, answer that the prayer isn't a formula but an expression of faith, and that calling on the Lord (Rom 10:13) is biblical. Those who hold that conversion is sealed in baptism (Catholics, Orthodox, Lutherans, Reformed and Anglicans) agree faith must be personal, but note that the NT links calling on His name to baptism itself (Acts 22:16).

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