

## CONVERSATIONS ON BAPTISM, PART ONE: SACRAMENT

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“I’m glad we could find the time to continue our dialogue about your conversion to Catholicism.”

“Same. I’ve been meaning to spend some time with you on the matter.”

“Well, we decided last time to focus tonight’s topic of conversation on baptism: its very nature. As an Adventist I believe that baptism is an ordinance. Christ commanded us to be baptized in water after our conversion to represent our death to sin and new life in Christ, as our denomination’s Fundamental Beliefs state: ‘Baptism is a symbol of our union with Christ, the forgiveness of our sins, and our reception of the Holy Spirit.’ (FB 15)

“What do Catholics believe?”

“Fair enough. Catholics believe that baptism is no mere symbol. In the experience of baptism, we *are* united with Christ, our sins *are* forgiven, and we *are* renewed in the Holy Spirit. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church states, ‘Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission: ‘Baptism is the sacrament of regeneration through water in the word.’” (CCC 1213)

“Baptism was the moment of my personal, spiritual rebirth. When Jesus first explains the ‘new birth’ to Nicodemus, he explains, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’ (John 3:3) Nicodemus is at first confused, so Christ repeats His statement with greater clarity: ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.’ (John 3:5) Our rebirth in Christ is not only a spiritual rebirth, but a rebirth in water—that is, baptism. Paul echoes Christ’s words, “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.*” (Titus 3:5-6) We are saved by the washing (water) and the renewing (Spirit). These two go hand in hand.

“Alright, my disagreements begin there. The Bible asserts that we are saved by faith, not baptism.”

“Baptism is, at its essence, an expression of faith. I exercise my original saving trust in Christ by opening my heart to receiving its waters, and in so doing, I receive the gift of salvation. As Peter says, ‘...baptism now saves you—not as 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) Notice, the apostle assures his readers that baptism saves us (it has ‘salvific efficacy’ or saving power). But, he adds that this power exists only because the entire sacrament is the sinners’ repentant, faith-inspired appeal to God for His mercy. Baptism is the first expression of the faith that brings us salvation: it is the initiatory expression of faith.

“This is why the apostles invited the world to encounter Christ in the waters of baptism. Sadly, Protestants came to deny that baptism had salvific efficacy because they separated faith from baptism. Catholics, on the other hand (with good Biblical reasoning), assert that salvation, rebirth, and the forgiveness of sins are made available to humanity in baptism.”

“Wait—where in the Bible do you read that our sins are forgiven in baptism? Our sins are forgiven when we first come to Christ. Again, I believe your view of baptism is incompatible with the Bible’s view of salvation by faith”

“Again, let’s let the Bible speak for itself. The apostles promised the nations that in baptism, they would receive the forgiveness of their sins: it is in that moment that we are finally united with Him. Peter pleaded with the crowds at Pentecost: ‘Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’ (Acts 2:38). Ananias also urged Paul, when he had yet not come to the faith, ‘Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.’ (Acts 22:16) In Ephesians, Paul himself says, “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word.” (Eph 5:25-26) In the waters of baptism (albeit it by our own repentance and the active renewal of the Holy Spirit) we are purified from sin.

“Think of it this way. Imagine baptism is the doorway to salvation. We walk through the doorway by faith, but *we must walk through the doorway*. When we first come to Christ, the Holy Spirit empowers us with faith so that our sins may be forgiven; but that forgiveness occurs in baptism. This is why we call it a “sacrament” or “mystery”: something real occurs when we are baptized.

“I’ve read those verses before, but never heard anyone draw your theological conclusions from them.”

“Neither had I. Again, this is why I Catholicism surprised me—it is absolutely Scriptural. Baptism, inasmuch as it is an act of repentance and

expression of faith, is the sinner's true and saving encounter with God's forgiveness. This truth was alluded to throughout Scripture, especially in the image of the Jordan, the river in whose midst Christ was baptized. As the Israelites crossed the Jordan to enter the Promised Land, so we also pass through its waters in our quest for paradise. As Naaman descended into its murky waters—recovering full restoration of body, his uncleanness washed away—so must we descend into its flood: our sins washed away and our lives spiritually renewed.

Catholics also believe that the waters of baptism unite us with the death and resurrection of Christ: we die to our past sinful life and experience a new life in the Holy Spirit. I quote the book of Romans,

‘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, so 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 also be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin.’ (Rom 6:3-6)

As an Adventist, I often read these verses and also understood them to mean that baptism *represents* our dying to sin. But notice, the verse says “we have been buried with Him *through* baptism.” Baptism does not merely illustrate the act; it accomplishes it. The same Spirit who hovered over the waters of creation to bring forth life in the beginning, now descends upon the waters of baptism to make us into ‘a new creation’ (2 Cor 5:17)”

“I still have to disagree with you. Paul doesn't mean that baptism literally accomplishes our burial with Christ; only that it represents such. When we first come to Christ, and accept Him by faith, we die to Him. Baptism merely symbolizes this after the fact. I think you're reading too much into these verses.”

“But can you provide Scriptural evidence to validate that claim? The Scriptures claim we died with Christ (to sin and this world) three times. The first example is the chapter I cited above (Romans 6), where Paul explicitly states that this occurs through baptism. Another such claim is found in Colossians 2-3, which again says this occurs through baptism:

And in Christ you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.’ (Col 2:11-12)

The final example is Gal 2:20 where Paul says that we are “crucified with Christ.” However, he does not mention baptism in that text; but, Rom. 6:6 reminds us that our old man was ‘crucified with Him’ in baptism: a strong parallel. Furthermore, Galatians also asserts that we are united into Christ in baptism: “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” (Gal 3:26-27) Since Romans 6:3 adds that those who are baptized into Christ are baptized into his death, the concept that we die to self in baptism is rooted in the theology of Galatians as well.

“I am presenting the consistent teaching of the Scriptures. In baptism we die to self; in baptism we are raised to new life; in baptism we are clothed with Christ. On what grounds do you claim that baptism only symbolizes these events? I make these claims in unity with the Scriptures, quoting it word for word. The burden of proof is on you to defend, honestly, what amounts to a Protestant tradition.”

“So are you saying that we do not die to sin until we are baptized? I don’t believe your point is very consistent. If baptism saves us, then we cannot be saved without it. What of the thief on the cross who was never baptized?”

“Again, I echo the words of Scripture, that in baptism our sins are forgiven—that much I know. In the theology of Scripture, baptism is the first step in the Christian life; the Bible affirms its centrality and primacy. After someone has come to understand the gospel and desires to accept it, he or she prepares for baptism and is thereby initiated into the Christian mystery. Why? Because they must be born of water and the Spirit.

“That being said, many individuals (who are in God’s favor) will never experience the sacrament for one reason or another. Some may have wanted to join the Church, but died before receiving baptism. Their faith in Christ’s salvation and desire to unite with Him in baptism will not be forgotten, just as the thief on the cross was not forgotten. Christ assures us that such will be with Him in paradise. (Luke 23:43)

“Likewise, there are billions who have never heard the name of Jesus, much less will ever be baptized. If they knew Christ, they would willingly unite their lives with His. Christ knows their hearts, and many of them will also be saved, even without the sacrament of baptism. This mystery is what Catholics (perhaps imprecisely) call ‘the baptism of desire.’ Although such individuals will not experience the *full* rewards of sacramental baptism in this life (regeneration, forgiveness, incorporation into the body of Christ), they will receive these rewards in eternity.

This is, of course, the same Biblical conundrum that presses us when we consider whether someone who has not heard the gospel can even exercise saving faith. Remember Paul: “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17). We have to admit that, somehow, faith can arise even *without* the Word of God.

I like the way the Catechism puts it: “God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments” (CCC 1257). Those who will be saved though have never heard the gospel or could not be baptized are a special case; they will, therefore, be saved by exceptional means.”

“Do you think, perhaps, you’re simply reading these Scriptures at face value?”

“No: unless reading the Scriptures is itself at fault. I try to remain true to the precise words of Scripture. Theology must flow from the words of Scripture, and all our pre-conceived ideas must be laid aside.

“And so, I challenge you: explain why these many verses should not be understood in their literal clarity. Sadly, the Reformers abandoned the teaching of the Catholic Church because they understood faith and baptism as radically distinct, even incompatible (as you first contended). The latter could only “symbolize” the former. The Catholic Church answered their charges on Biblical grounds, as do I. Baptism is *the* response of faith to Christ’s saving invitation. And as we are baptized, we are promised the forgiveness of sins and a new life in Christ. We are born again.

“So can we ever be lost after we are baptized?”

“Of course. Affirming that we are saved in baptism does not imply that our salvation is assured after the act. In 1 Corinthians 10:1-5, Paul sees in the Red Sea crossing of ancient Israel a symbol of baptism. Yet, he then warns his readers that even those who passed through the sea were ultimately punished for later disobedience. (10:5) We too must be on guard lest, after receiving this wonderful gift, we fail to reach our Promised Land.”

“Granted. But, honestly, is this even an important doctrine? I mean, ”

“It is if Adventism has inherited a false doctrine from its proud Reformation heritage. I wish all Adventists would study these fundamental issues: doctrines they assume but have never truly engaged. Search the Word of God: find your answers there. Experience the beautiful, transforming glory of this truth: a truth that finds its center in Christ. Christians are baptized into Christ, into His baptism, His death, His resurrection. The forgiveness of sins flows from Him with whom we unite ourselves in the purifying sign of water. Our sinful nature dies with Him who sacrificed Himself for us. We become one with our Lord, embraced by His love. Christ *is* the sacrament, the resurrection, and the life: He is our salvation. Is it so difficult to see?”