

## **47- Are Catholics born-again Christians? (L-13)**

**Common view:** Catholics and Protestants agree that to be saved, you have to be born again because Jesus taught so: "*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God*" (John 3:3).

**The Catholic view:** The Catholic Church has always held the view that, being "*born again*" or "*born from above*" means being baptized. It also teaches that "*born of water and the Spirit*" in John 3:5 refers to Baptism. The Catholic Church links regeneration, or being "*born again*" in the life of the Spirit, to the Sacrament of Baptism (CCC, # 1215, 1265-1266). Hence Baptism is not a mere human "work" one does to "earn" regeneration and Divine son-ship. On the contrary, it is the work of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, which, by grace, washes away sin and makes us children of God. It is central also to the Catholic understanding of justification by grace. Baptism is an instrumental means by which God graciously justifies --that is, regenerates-- sinners through faith in Jesus Christ and makes them children of God. Just like the Protestants, Catholics also believe that accepting Jesus in faith as Lord and Savior is a necessary step before receiving Baptism. The adults do so by reciting the Nicene Creed and the godparents do so in the case of children. So all baptized Catholics are "born-again" Christians. When a Catholic says that he has been "born again," he refers to the transformation that God's grace has accomplished in him during Baptism, as described in the Bible. In the water-and-Spirit rebirth that takes place at baptism, the repentant sinner is transformed from a state of sin to the state of grace. Peter mentioned this transformation from sin to grace when he exhorted people to "*be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*" (Acts 2:38).

**The Protestant view:** According to the "Crusade Evangelists" one is born again of the Spirit only after accepting Jesus as Lord and personal Savior and declaring it publicly, and after expressing his repentance for his sins publicly by reciting the "Sinner Prayer": "*Dear God, I'm a sinner. I'm sorry for my sins. I want to turn from my sins. I believe that Jesus Christ is Your Son. I believe that He died for me, that He rose from the grave, that He's alive. I want to invite Him to come into my heart to take control, from this day forward, forevermore. And I pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen.*" They base their argument on the Bible words: "*If you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and believe he died for your sins, you'll be born again!*"

**Same Scripture, different interpretations:** The Catholics and the Protestants equally believe that their views of rebirth and salvation have strong Biblical basis. Jesus' interview with Nicodemus described in chapter 3 of John's gospel, supported by other Biblical texts, is the basis of arguments for both Catholics and Protestants. According to Catholics, the context of Jesus' statements in John 3

makes it clear that he was referring to water Baptism. Shortly before Jesus taught Nicodemus about the necessity and regenerating effect of baptism, he himself was baptized by John the Baptist, and the circumstances are striking: Jesus goes down into the water, and as he is baptized, the heavens open, the Holy Spirit descends upon him in the form of a dove, and the Voice of God the Father speaks from Heaven, saying, "*This is my beloved Son with Whom I am well pleased*" (cf. Matt. 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:30-34). This scene gives us a graphic depiction of what happens at Baptism: We are baptized with water, symbolizing our dying with Christ (Rom. 6:3), and our rising with Christ to the newness of life (Rom. 6:4-5); we receive the gift of Sanctifying Grace and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:27); and we are adopted as God's sons or daughters (Rom. 8:15-17). We have the witness of the early Church that John 3:5 refers to baptismal regeneration. This was universally recognized by the early Christians.

**Unanimous teaching of the Fathers of the Church:** The Church Fathers were unanimous in teaching this. (Justin Martyr, A.D. 151, Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons, around A.D. 190, Cyprian, A.D. 52, Augustine, A.D. 419). In A.D. 151, Justin Martyr wrote, "As many as are persuaded and believe that what we [Christians] teach and say is true . . . are brought by us where there is water and are regenerated in the same manner in which we were ourselves regenerated. For, in the name of God the Father . . . and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit [Matt. 28:19], they then receive the washing with water. For Christ also said, '*Unless you are born again, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven*' [John 3:3]" (*First Apology* 61).

**Catholic teaching supported by other biblical texts:** Paul reminds us in Titus 3:5 that God "*saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit.*" Paul also said, "*Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life*" (Rom. 6:3-4). This teaching – that baptism unites us with Christ's death and resurrection so that we might die to sin and receive new life – is a key part of Paul's theology. In Colossians 2:11-13, he tells us, "*In [Christ] you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision [of] Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ*" (NIV). In Acts 2:38, Peter tells us, "*Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*" When Paul was converted, he was told, "*And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins,*

calling on his name" (Acts 22:16). Peter also said, "God's patience waited in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, 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 Pet. 3:20–21). Peter says that, as in the time of the flood, when eight people were "saved through water," so for Christians, "Baptism ... now saves you." It does not do so by the water's physical action, but through the power of Jesus Christ's resurrection, through Baptism's spiritual effects and the appeal we make to God to have our consciences cleansed. These verses showing the supernatural grace God bestows through Baptism set the context for understanding the New Testament's statements about receiving new life in the sacrament.

**The different perspectives:** The term "*born-again*" may not appear in the Bible. The Greek phrase often translated "born again" (*gennatha anothēn*) occurs twice in the Bible—John 3:3 and 3:7—and there is a question of how it should be translated. The Greek word *anothen* sometimes can be translated "again," but in the New Testament, it most often means "from above." In the King James Version, the *only* two times it is translated "again" are in John 3:3 and 3:7; every other time it is given a different rendering. Another term is "**regeneration**." When referring to something that occurs in the life of an individual believer, it only appears in Titus 3:5. In other passages, the new birth phenomenon is also described as receiving new life (Rom. 6:4), receiving the circumcision of the heart (Rom. 2:29; Col. 2:11–12), and becoming a "new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15). The Greek of the text suggests that "born of water and the Spirit" (literally "born of water and spirit") refers to a single, supernatural birth over against natural birth ("born of the flesh"). The phrase "of water and the Spirit" (Greek, *ek hudatos kai pneumatos*) is a single linguistic unit. It refers to being "born of water and the Spirit," not "born of water" on the one hand and "born of the Spirit" on the other. The most reasonable explanation for "born of water and the Spirit," then, is that it refers to Baptism. This is reinforced by many New Testament texts linking Baptism, the Holy Spirit and regeneration. At Jesus' baptism, the Holy Spirit descends upon him as He comes up out of the water (cf. John 1:25–34; Matt 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–11; Luke 3:21–22). Furthermore, what distinguishes John's baptism of repentance, in anticipation of the Messiah, from Christian Baptism, is that the latter is a Baptism with the Holy Spirit (Matt 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:31; Acts 1:4–5). Some Protestants argue that the "new birth" mentioned in 1 Peter 1:3 and 23 is said to come about through the Word of God, being "born-again" means accepting the Gospel message, not being baptized. This argument overlooks the fact that elsewhere in the New Testament accepting the gospel message and being baptized are seen as two parts of the one act of commitment to Christ. That is why Martin Luther wrote in his *Short Catechism* that baptism "*works the forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and grants eternal life to*

*all who believe.*" His recognition that the Bible teaches Baptismal regeneration has been preserved by Lutherans and a few other Protestant denominations.

**Are the Protestants really born again in the Biblical sense?** Many Protestants have abandoned this Biblical teaching, substituting man-made theories on regeneration. There are two main views held by those who deny the scriptural teaching that one is born again through baptism: the "Evangelical" view, common among Baptists, and the "Calvinist" view, common among Presbyterians. Evangelicals claim that one is born again at the first moment of faith in Christ. According to this theory, faith in Christ produces regeneration. The Calvinist position is the reverse: Regeneration precedes and produces faith in Christ. Calvinists (some of whom also call themselves Evangelicals) suppose that God "secretly" regenerates people, without their being aware of it, and this *causes* them to place their faith in Christ. To defend these theories, Evangelicals and Calvinists attempt to explain away the many unambiguous verses in the Bible that plainly teach baptismal regeneration. One strategy is to say that the water in John 3:5 refers not to baptism but to the amniotic fluid present at childbirth. The absurd implication of this view is that Jesus would have been saying, "*You must be born of amniotic fluid and the Spirit.*" Evangelicals and Calvinists try to deal with the other verses where new life is attributed to baptism either by ignoring them or by arguing that it is not actually water baptism that is being spoken of. The anti-baptismal regeneration position is indefensible. It has no Biblical basis whatsoever. So the answer to the question, "Are Catholics born again?" is, "*Yes!* Since all Catholics have been baptized, all Catholics have been born again." Catholics should ask Protestants "Are *you* born again—the way the *Bible* understands that concept?" If the Evangelical has not been properly water baptized, he has *not* been born again "the Bible way," regardless of what he may think. (L)

**Sources and resources:** 1) <http://biblocality.com/forums/showthread.php?4483-The-Catholic-Church/page2>  
 2) <http://www.catholic.com/tracts/are-catholics-born-again>  
 3) [http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2007/mbrumley\\_bornagain\\_nov07.asp](http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2007/mbrumley_bornagain_nov07.asp)  
 4) <http://www.catholic.com/thisrock/2008/0809btb.asp>  
 5) <http://www.integratedcatholiclife.org/2011/11/deacon-bickerstaff-are-catholics-born-again-christians/>