

Consider Cornelius’ household: they heard the gospel, believed it and were baptized. It is clear that there were no infants baptized, for they had all gathered “to hear all things” that God had commanded Peter (*Acts 10:33*). “The Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard [and, obviously, understood and believed] the word” (*v44*); and they spoke with tongues (*v46*). That they had “received the Holy Ghost” (*v47*) convinced Peter that they were saved. Thus, he baptized them (*v48*).

Nor can infant baptism be supported from the case of the Philippian jailor who “was baptized, he and all his” (*Acts 16:33*). Again there were no infants present because Paul and Silas preached the gospel “to all that were in his house” (*v32*), and “all his house” believed (*v34*) and were then baptized.

Some of the early Reformers were Catholics who, unfortunately, retained some Catholic dogmas, among them baptismal regeneration and infant baptism. These heresies are still held by some Protestant denominations today. The issue is a serious one. If baptism is essential for salvation, then to reject that gospel is to be damned. But if salvation is through faith in Christ alone, then to *add* baptism as a “condition” for salvation is to reject the true gospel and thus be eternally lost. The Bible declares that it’s wrong to *add anything* to faith in Christ for salvation—circumcision, keeping the Jewish law, etc. (*Gal 5:2; Acts 15:24*). Paul cursed (anathematized) those who taught this false gospel that damns the soul (*Gal 1:8-9*). A gospel of salvation through Christ *plus baptism* is equally false.

When Paul reminded the Corinthians of the essential ingredients of the gospel which he preached and by which they had been saved, he made no mention of baptism (*1 Cor 15:1-4*). In fact, he distinguished between the gospel and baptism: “Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel” (*1 Cor 1:17*). He hadn’t baptized most of the Corinthians, couldn’t remember whom he had baptized, and was thankful that it had been very few (*1 Cor 1:14-16*)—a strange attitude if baptism is essential to salvation! Yet without baptizing them, Paul declared that he was their father in the faith: “In Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel” (*1 Cor 4:15*).

Christ did say, “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved” (*Mark 16:16*). All who believe the gospel are saved, so of course all who believe and are baptized are saved; but that does not say that baptism saves or that it is essential for salvation. Scores of verses declare, with no mention of baptism, that salvation comes by believing the gospel: “It pleased God...to save them that believe” (*1 Cor 1:21; John 3:16,18,36; 5:24; Acts 10:43; 13:38-39; 16:31; Rom 1:16; 3:28; 4:24; 5:1; Eph 2:8; etc.*).

Numerous verses declare that whosoever does not believe is lost, but not one verse declares that whosoever is not baptized is lost. Surely the Bible would make it clear that believing in Christ without being baptized cannot save if that were the case, yet it never says so! In the Gospels Christ told people that their “sins are forgiven” without ever saying a word about baptism (*Luke 5:20; 7:48*). These situations would have been the perfect opportunity for Jesus to have insisted

on baptism before pronouncing forgiveness. Instead he says, “Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace” (*Luke 7:50*). It is important to realize here that the practice of baptism had already been confirmed by Jesus himself (*John 3:22; 4:1-2*); and that it was not something invented on the day of Pentecost. The publican in the temple cried, “God be merciful to me a sinner” (*Luke 18:13-14*), and Christ declared him “justified” without baptism. And the thief on the cross would have been in a most wretched condition if he could not have been saved without baptism (*Luke 23:42-43*). But he was saved!

Romans 6:4 states, “We are buried with Christ by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead...even so we also should walk in newness of life.” Paul is not speaking of water baptism, but of the spiritual reality it symbolizes, for he says that through baptism “our old man [sinful nature] is crucified with Christ, that the body of sin might be destroyed.” As a consequence, he urges believers to “reckon” themselves “to be dead indeed unto sin...let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body” (*vv6-13*).

Paul uses similar language concerning himself when he says, “I am crucified with Christ” (*Gal 2:20*). He is obviously speaking of that same spiritual “baptism” by which we have been placed in Christ and have thus passed with him through death into resurrection life. If we were literally dead to sin, then we wouldn’t need to “reckon” it true or live the new life by faith; we would automatically never sin again. That a Christian may sin shows that water baptism doesn’t effect a literal crucifixion with Christ. It portrays a spiritual baptism into Christ which the believer must live by faith.

In that context, then, we can understand Peter’s declaration: “The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us...by the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (*1 Peter 3:21*). He is no more saying that the physical act of baptism literally saves than Paul is saying that it literally makes us dead to sin. The few difficult isolated verses such as these cannot contradict the overwhelming number of other Scriptures which are crystal clear. Water baptism, says Peter, is a “figure” or symbolization of a spiritual baptism into Christ effected by the Holy Spirit and which is settled forever in heaven, but which must be lived out by faith while we are here upon earth.

Significantly, though Paul baptized a few, Christ never baptized anyone (*John 4:2*)—very odd if baptism saves. The Savior of the world must have deliberately avoided baptizing to make it clear that baptism has no part in salvation. Yes, Christ said we must be “born [again] of water and of the Spirit” to be saved (*John 3:5*), but it is unwarranted to assume that “water” here means baptism. To do so would contradict the wealth of Scripture we have seen which proves salvation is not by baptism. Jesus was speaking to Nicodemus, a rabbi to whom “water” would not mean baptism (which was unknown in Jewish law) but the ceremonial cleansing of someone who had been defiled (*Exod 30; 40; Lev 13; 15; etc.*). And that is what Jesus meant. His death would make it possible to “sanctify and cleanse [his church] with the washing of water *by the*

*word*” of the gospel (*Eph 5:25-27*). He said, “Now ye are clean through *the word* which I have spoken unto you” (*John 15:3*). Like Jesus, Paul put “water” and “the Spirit” together, referring to the “washing of regeneration” and linking it with the “renewing of the Holy Ghost” (*Titus 3:5*). We are born again by the Holy Spirit and by the word or gospel of God, which is sometimes called “water” because of its cleansing power. As Peter said, we are “born again...by the word of God” (*1 Peter 1:23*).

It was obviously this figure of Old Testament ceremonial cleansing which Peter communicated to the Jews on Pentecost: “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins” (*Acts 2:38*). It is clear from the many other Scriptures we’ve given that Peter wasn’t saying that baptism saves, but that it offered a ceremonial cleansing uniquely applicable to his Jewish hearers.

Notice also that the phrase, “baptized... for the remission of sins,” again has to do with what baptism signifies, and not what it actually does. Compare Matthew 3:11, “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance.” The same Greek word “eis” (“for” or “unto”) appears in both of these passages. Baptism in the name of Christ “for” the remission of sins no more means that baptism effects forgiveness than that John’s baptism in water “unto” repentance caused those who were baptized to repent. They were already repentant “confessing their sins” (*v6*). John’s baptism signified repentance on the part of those baptized. Even so with those at Pentecost, the forgiveness of their sins through faith in Christ was that which their baptism signified.

There’s something else, too, in Peter’s words, “Repent, and be baptized.” He was addressing scoffers and persecutors of the church. He is telling them in no uncertain terms that if they want to get right with God, they must come out and identify themselves officially, by baptism, with this despised group of Christ’s followers. Baptism was the mark of the validity of one’s profession of faith and the badge of becoming a Christian. To be baptized was to be identified with this hated Jesus Christ before the fanatical Jews of Jerusalem. Baptism many times cost family and friends and endangered one’s life, as it still does in Israel and Muslim countries. Those who are afraid to take this public stand in such cultures are even today considered not to be true believers. Thus for a Jew to be publicly baptized at that time in that culture was, in a sense, to “wash away his sins” (*Acts 22:16*), as Ananias told Saul.

Consider again Mark 16:16: “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.” Baptism is mentioned here in the same breath with believing because baptism is integrally involved in what it means to become a disciple of Christ. There were many in Jesus’ day who were only willing to “believe” on him secretly, because of the fear of men (*John 12:42-43; 2:23-25*). It was the costly and humbling act of baptism, however, that was often the acid test of whether their “faith” was true saving faith, or mere mental assent, such as James warned against (*James 2:14-26*). Baptism is a public confession of faith in Jesus Christ. Many

people are willing to say they believe in Jesus, yet they refuse to publicly identify themselves as one of his own. “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved.” Notice the contrasting parallel, “He that believeth not shall be damned.” Christ does not say, “He that is not baptized shall be damned.” Why? because baptism is not the central issue in salvation—faith is.

Look carefully at the conversion of Paul (*Acts 9,22,26*) and what Ananias said, “Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord” (*Acts 22:16*). There are those who insist on a literal interpretation of this phrase: “Wash away thy sins.” They assert that baptism doesn’t merely symbolize the washing away of sins by the blood of Christ, but that the waters of baptism actually wash away those sins. As with Cornelius, though, Paul was already a child of God having received the fullness of the Spirit before he was baptized (*Acts 9:17*). “Wash away thy sins” is symbolic language, not to be taken literally any more than the words: “This is my body” (*Matt 26:26*); “I am the door” (*John 10:9*); “I am the vine, ye are the branches” (*John 15:5*).

“The gospel of Christ...is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth” (*Rom 1:16*). That gospel as Paul preached it required faith in Christ’s blood poured out in death for our sins on the cross and said nothing about baptism. To preach baptismal regeneration is to preach a false gospel that cannot save, which is why Paul cursed those who did so (*Gal 1:6-9*). The difference between faith in Christ alone and faith in Christ plus baptism has eternal consequences.□

—Dave Hunt

**References:** **(1)** H. J. Schroeder, trans., *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (Tan Books, 1978), 33,53 **(2)** Vatican Council II, *The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Austin Flannery, O.P., General Editor (Costello Publishing Co., 1988 rev. ed.), 412 **(3)** Ibid, 365 **(4)** *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (The Wanderer Press, 1994), 224,320 **(5)** Trent, op. cit., 22,23,54 **(6)** *Code of Canon Law* (Paulist Press, 1985), 122,614

## Indulgences

### Can Good Works and Rituals Really Save You? Salvation According to Rome

**Redefining Sin**—The Catholic Church redefines sin by dividing it into two categories. *Mortal sin* is sin only Jesus can atone (pay) for. *Venial sins* are lesser sins man must atone for in purgatory as a means of purification before he can enter heaven.

**What is an Indulgence?**—“Indulgence” is a Catholic term not found in the Bible. The Vatican defines it as “the taking away of the temporal punishment due to sin” (*Vatican II—Flannery p70*). Temporal punishment is defined as suffering in the fires of purgatory for venial (lesser) sins. Through performing certain rituals or works according to specific Vatican rules, Catholics may obtain an indulgence which lessens the time spent in purgatory. The amount of temporal punishment that is taken

away is determined by the value of the act (*Vatican II, pp74-75*). The Catholic Church says the primary purpose for granting indulgences is to “help the faithful expiate their sins” (*Vatican II, p71*).

**Where Does Forgiveness Come From?—**The Pope is said to have the authority and power to dispense these indulgences to Catholics from a treasury of merit. This invisible treasury contains the infinite merits of Christ, as well as the merits of Mary and the saints. They are truly immense, unfathomable, and even pristine in their value before God. In the treasury, too, are the prayers and good works of the saints, all those who have followed in the footsteps of Christ the Lord and by his grace have made their lives holy and carried out the mission the Father entrusted to them. Catholics “in this way attain their own salvation and at the same time cooperate in saving their brothers” (*1994 Catholic Catechism—#1477*).

**History of Indulgences—**This tradition began in the middle ages when Pope Urban II promised a plenary indulgence to anyone who would participate in the Crusades. At first, only the sins of the living could be taken away, but in 1477 Pope Sixtus IV declared they could be applied to the souls in purgatory as well. This began Rome’s works for the dead. Revenues from the sale of indulgences helped finance the construction of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. This public selling of indulgences outraged Martin Luther and started the Reformation in 1517. As the use of indulgences spread, there were many abuses including the “collection of unlawful profits that blasphemously took away the good name of indulgences” (*Vatican II, p71*). As a result, Vatican II had to set up twenty new rules for granting indulgences. An example is Rule #17—“The faithful who use with devotion an object of piety (crucifix, cross, rosary, scapular, or medal) after it has been duly blessed by any priest, can gain a partial indulgence. But, if this object of piety is blessed by the Pope or any bishop, the faithful who use it with devotion can also gain a plenary indulgence on the feast of the Apostle Peter and Paul, provided they make a confession of faith using any approved formula” (*Vatican II, pp77-78*).

The Council also reduced the number of plenary indulgences in order to esteem them more, realizing “what is offered too abundantly is not sufficiently appreciated” (*Vatican II, p75*). Vatican II also abolished the laws which defined the exact number of days and years a person could escape the fires of purgatory with each indulgence. Prior to Vatican II, Catholics knew that saying the rosary would reduce the time they or their loved ones had to spend in purgatory, by seven years. Presently, the Catholic Church takes indulgences very seriously. It “condemns with anathema [eternal condemnation] those who say that indulgences are useless or that the Church does not have the power to grant them” (*Vatican II, p71*).

**Biblical Truth Mixed with Catholic Error—**There are many Catholic traditions that nullify the Word of God and deny the sufficiency of Christ’s atonement, but none so flagrant as the practice of indulgences—“Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition” (*Mark 7:9*). Rome says that Christ completely paid the eternal pun-

ishment for sin, but then states a temporal punishment still remains to be paid by indulgences. This would be like a father completely paying off the outstanding debt of his son’s car loan and the bank insisting the monthly payments must continue.

**A Christian Response—**Those who understand and believe the gospel know that salvation is a free gift from God. The Scriptures clearly state that salvation is by grace and not of works—“By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast...Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us” (*Eph 2:8-9; Titus 3:5*). Grace means a free gift—“Being justified freely by his grace...I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely” (*Rom 3:24; Rev 21:6; 22:17*). “Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price” (*Isaiah 55:1*).

No one can earn or become worthy of salvation. It’s given only through faith. Indulgences are the works of man which nullify and oppose God’s way of salvation. Christians who have an understanding of the Scriptures are not easily deceived. Jesus “bare our sins in his own body on the tree” (*1 Peter 2:24*). It is appalling for anyone to devalue the precious blood of Christ by substituting indulgences as a method of forgiveness of sins. Anyone who believes saying the rosary or kissing a scapula can accomplish what Christ achieved by dying on the cross is woefully blind to the truth of the gospel of grace.

**The Bible Speaks—(1)** The teaching that venial sin causes only “temporal punishment” is an eternally fatal deception. All sin, no matter how small, earns eternal punishment and separation from God—“The wages of sin is death...Sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death...The soul that sinneth, it shall die” (*Rom 6:23; James 1:15; Ezek 18:20; see also Isaiah 59:2; Gal 3:10*).

**(2)** The Bible clearly teaches that the punishment for any sin is eternal, not temporal (temporary). As long as there is a “great gulf fixed” (*Luke 16:26*), not one soul will ever pass out of the “devouring flames” into God’s presence. Those who die in any sin will be thrown into the eternal lake of fire (*Rev 20:14*).

**(3)** Nowhere in Scripture do we find a treasury of human merit where the good deeds of others can be transferred to the account of another. Since no such treasury exists, the granting of indulgences is a vain delusion. Salvation from the punishment of sin cannot be bought, sold, transferred, or earned by man—“No man can by any means redeem his brother or give God a ransom for him, for the redemption of his soul is costly and he should cease trying forever” (*Psalms 49:7-8; see Ezek 18:20*).

**(4)** It is utterly impossible for any one to atone for his own sins in order to satisfy the wrath of God. Only the sacrifice of the infinite Christ can pay the eternal punishment God’s justice demands for sin—“Once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself...So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many...But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat

down on the right hand of God...For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified” (*Hab 9:26,28; 10:12,14*).

**(5)** Indulgences numb the consciences of men to the seriousness of sin and its dreadful consequences—“The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men...The wages of sin is death” (*Rom 1:18; 6:23*).

**(6)** Sinners are not purified by indulgences nor the purging fires of purgatory, but only by the precious blood of Christ—“Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity...In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins...When he had by himself purged our sins...Ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold...but with the precious blood of Christ” (*Titus 2:14; Eph 1:7; Heb 1:3; 1 Peter 1:18-19*).

**(7)** Indulgences are nothing more than a form of Simony—the selling of the grace of God (*Acts 8:18-24*). Anyone who grants indulgences usurps the place of God. He alone can take away the punishment for sin—“The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth us from all sin...If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (*1 John 1:7,9*).

**(8)** Peter warned that there would arise “false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies... And many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of. And through covetousness shall they with feigned words make merchandise of you” (*2 Peter 2:1-3; see Matt 23:14*).

The false gospel of indulgences has brought shame, ridicule, and contempt to the name of Christ. Indulgences have unmercifully robbed the poor and deceived them with a false hope, leaving them to die in their sins. American Catholics may deny this practice continues, but in Roman Catholic Church bulletins, indulgences are offered through Masses for the release of souls from purgatory throughout the world. Most mortuaries have Mass cards available for Masses to be performed for the dead. Catholic clergy should take heed: “The getting of treasures by a lying tongue is a vanity tossed to and fro of them that seek death” (*Prov 21:6*).

Catholics trying to obtain the mercy of God with money should listen to what Peter told Simon who tried to do the same—“Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money. Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee” (*Acts 8:20-22*).

*“Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to thy cross I cling;  
Naked, look to thee for dress, helpless, come to thee for grace;  
Black, I to the fountain fly; wash me, Savior, or I die.”*

# Baptismal Regeneration?

Christ commanded his original disciples to go into all the world and preach the gospel (*Mark 16:15*). Those of every nation who believed in Christ as their Lord and Savior were to be baptized “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (*Matt 28:19*). Baptism in the early church was by immersion: “They went down both into the water...when they were come up out of the water” (*Acts 8:38-39; see Matt 3:16*). Why? Because baptism symbolizes the believer’s identification with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection: “We are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead...we also should walk in newness of life” (*Rom 6:4; Col 2:12*).

Unfortunately, various innovations and heresies were gradually introduced regarding baptism: that one must be baptized to be saved; indeed, that baptism itself saves the soul, even when administered to infants. These heresies became known as the doctrine of *baptismal regeneration*. Most people who hold these beliefs today are not aware that they originated with the Roman Catholic Church in the Middle Ages.

The Council of Trent (*1545-63*) stated that while Christ “merited for us justification by his most holy passion...the instrumental cause [of justification/regeneration] is the sacrament of baptism...If anyone says that baptism is...not necessary for salvation, let him be anathema.”<sup>1</sup> Vatican II (*1962-65*) reconfirms all of Trent<sup>2</sup> and reiterates the necessity of baptism for salvation,<sup>3</sup> as does the universal *Catechism of the Catholic Church* released by the Vatican in 1993: “Baptism is necessary for salvation...the Church does not know of any [other] means...that assures entry into eternal beatitude...”<sup>4</sup>

Trent anathematizes all who deny that “the merit of Jesus Christ is applied...to infants by the sacrament of baptism” or who deny that by baptism “the guilt of original sin is remitted...”<sup>5</sup> Today’s *Code of Canon Law (Canon 849)* declares that those baptized are thereby “freed from their sins, are reborn as children of God and...incorporated into the Church.” Canon 204 states: “The Christian faithful are those who... have been incorporated into Christ through baptism” and are thereby members of the one, true Catholic Church.<sup>6</sup>

For centuries before the Reformation, baptismal regeneration was rejected by Bible-believing Christians, whom the Roman Catholic Church therefore persecuted, tortured and slaughtered by the millions. Non-Catholics taught from Scripture that baptism was only for those who had believed the gospel: “Teach all nations...baptizing them [who have believed]” (*Matt 28:19*); “Then they that gladly received his word were baptized” (*Acts 2:41*); “What doth hinder me to be baptized?...If thou believest [in Christ] with all thine heart, thou mayest” (*Acts 8:35-37*). Infants can’t believe in Christ.