

BORN AGAIN : BAPTISM IN THE EARLY FATHERS

Work on this in class: take this home and complete it as homework over the weekend-it will be checked!

Instructions: Roman Catholics believe that baptism “saves” the individual. Since modern Christians interpret Bible verses differently, Catholics often appeal to the early Church Fathers to show that there was consistent agreement on interpreting certain passages. Read the following two paragraphs for some background, then as you read the excerpts from the Church Fathers, underline any words or sentence(s) that support the Catholic view that baptism saves the individual and is connected to being “born again”. After that complete the few reflection questions at the end of this handout.

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Jesus told Nicodemus, "You must be born again" (John 3:7). What did our Lord mean?

Modern Fundamentalist and Evangelical Christians, while agreeing with Catholic Christians that a spiritual regeneration by the Holy Spirit (or the "new birth") is necessary for salvation (e.g. John 3:3-8; 2 Cor 5:17; Titus 3:5), generally disagree that the Sacrament (or what some call "ordinance") of Baptism is the means by which the Holy Spirit regenerates and saves the person, and all sins committed prior to Baptism are forgiven and washed away by the power of Christ (John 3:5; Acts 2:38; 22:16; Rom 6:1ff; 1 Cor 6:11; Gal 3:27; Eph 5:26f; Col 2:11ff; 1 Peter 3:21; etc). There are exceptions of course (such as Evangelical Lutherans, Anglicans, Methodists, and Church of Christ groups who hold some form of "baptismal regeneration" -- and certain of these practice infant Baptism, as do most Reformed or Calvinist Christians).

Many of these modern Fundamentalists and Evangelicals suggest that accepting or "receiving Christ" as one's "personal Lord and Savior" by faith alone is what our Lord meant in John chapter 3. The Sacrament of Baptism is seen as merely a "symbolic" gesture with no inherent spiritual efficacy.

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THE EPISTLE OF BARNABAS (c. A.D. 70)

Now let us see if the Lord has been at any pains to give us a foreshadowing of the waters of Baptism and of the cross. Regarding the former, we have the evidence of Scripture that Israel would refuse to accept the washing which confers the remission of sins and would set up a substitution of their own instead [Jer 22:13; Isa 16:1-2; 33:16-18; Psalm 1:3-6]. Observe there how he describes both the water and the cross in the same figure. His meaning is, "Blessed are those who go down into the water with their hopes set on the cross." Here he is saying that after we have stepped down into the water, burdened with sin and defilement, we come up out of it bearing fruit, with reverence in our hearts and the hope of Jesus in our souls. **(11:1-10)**

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THE SHEPHERD OF HERMAS (c. A.D. 140)

"I have heard, sir," said I, "from some teachers, that there is no other repentance except that which took place when we went down into the water and obtained the remission of our former sins." He said to me, "You have heard rightly, for so it is." **(The Shepherd 4:3:1-2)**

They had need [the Shepherd said] to come up through the water, so that they might be made alive; for they could not otherwise enter into the kingdom of God, except by putting away the mortality of their former life. These also, then, who had fallen asleep, received the seal of the Son of God, and entered into the kingdom of God. For, [he said,] before a man bears the name of the Son of God, he is dead. But when he receives the seal, he puts mortality aside and again receives life. The seal, therefore, is the water. They go down into the water dead [in sin], and come out of it alive. **(ibid 9:16:2-4)**

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ST. JUSTIN MARTYR (inter A.D. 148-155)

Whoever is convinced and believes that what they are taught and told by us is the truth, and professes to be able to live accordingly, is instructed to pray and to beseech God in fasting for the remission of their former sins, while we pray and fast with them. Then they are led by us to a place where there is water; and there they are reborn in the same kind of rebirth in which we ourselves were reborn: In the name of God, the Lord and Father of all, and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, they receive the washing with water. For Christ said, "Unless you be reborn, you shall not enter into the

kingdom of heaven." ...The reason for doing this, we have learned from the Apostles.
(The First Apology 61)

ST. THEOPHILUS OF ANTIOCH (c. A.D. 181)

Moreover, those things which were created from the waters were blessed by God, so that this might also be a sign that men would at a future time receive repentance and remission of sins through water and the bath of regeneration -- all who proceed to the truth and are born again and receive a blessing from God. **(To Autolytus 2:16)**

ST. IRENAEUS (c. A.D. 190)

"And [Naaman] dipped himself...seven times in the Jordan" [2 Kings 5:14]. It was not for nothing that Naaman of old, when suffering from leprosy, was purified upon his being baptized, but [this served] as an indication to us. For as we are lepers in sin, we are made clean, by means of the sacred water and the invocation of the Lord, from our old transgressions, being spiritually regenerated as new-born babes, even as the Lord has declared: "Except a man be born again through water and the Spirit, he shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." **(Fragment 34)**

TERTULLIAN (inter A.D. 200-206)

A treatise on our sacrament of water, by which the sins of our earlier blindness are washed away and we are released for eternal life will not be superfluous.....taking away death by the washing away of sins. The guilt being removed, the penalty, of course, is also removed.....Baptism is itself a corporal act by which we are plunged in water, while its effect is spiritual, in that we are freed from sins. **(On Baptism 1:1; 5:6; 7:2)**

...no one can attain salvation without Baptism, especially in view of the declaration of the Lord, who says: "Unless a man shall be born of water, he shall not have life." **(On Baptism 12:1)**

ST. CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA (ante A.D. 202)

When we are baptized, we are enlightened. Being enlightened, we are adopted as sons. Adopted as sons, we are made perfect. Made perfect, we become immortal...."and sons all of the Most High" [Psalm 82:6]. This work is variously called grace, illumination, perfection, and washing. It is a washing by which we are cleansed of sins; a gift of grace by which the punishments due our sins are remitted; an illumination by which we behold that holy light of salvation -- that is, by which we see God clearly; and we call that perfection which leaves nothing lacking. Indeed, if a man know God, what more does he need? Certainly it were out of place to call that which is not complete a true gift of God's grace. Because God is perfect, the gifts He bestows are perfect. **(The Instructor of Children 1:6:26:1)**

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RECOGNITIONS OF CLEMENT (c. A.D. 221)

But you will perhaps say, "What does the baptism of water contribute toward the worship of God?" In the first place, because that which has pleased God is fulfilled. In the second place, because when you are regenerated and born again of water and of God, the frailty of your former birth, which you have through men, is cut off, and so ...you shall be able to attain salvation; but otherwise it is impossible. For thus has the true Prophet [Jesus] testified to us with an oath: "Verily, I say to you, that unless a man is born again of water....he shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." **(Recognitions 6:9)**

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ORIGEN (post A.D. 244)

Formerly there was Baptism, in an obscure way...now, however, in full view, there is regeneration in water and in the Holy Spirit. Formerly, in an obscure way, there was manna for food; now, however, in full view, there is the true food, the flesh of the Word of God as He Himself says: "My flesh is truly food, and My blood is truly drink" [John 6:55]. **(Homilies on Numbers 7:2)**

The Church received from the Apostles the tradition of giving Baptism even to infants. For the Apostles, to whom were committed the secrets of divine mysteries, knew that there is in everyone the innate stains of sin, which must be washed away through water and the Spirit. **(Commentaries on Romans 5:9)**

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ST. CYPRIAN OF CARTHAGE (c. 200 - 258 A.D.)

But afterwards, when the stain of my past life had been washed away by means of the water of re-birth, a light from above poured itself upon my chastened and now pure heart; afterwards through the Spirit which is breathed from heaven, a second birth made of me a new man... Thus it had to be acknowledged that what was of the earth and was born of the flesh and had lived submissive to sins, had now begun to be of God, inasmuch as the Holy Spirit was animating it. **(To Donatus 4)**

[When] they receive also the Baptism of the Church...then finally can they be fully sanctified and be the sons of God...since it is written, "Except a man be born again of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." **(Letters 71[72]:1)**

[It] behooves those to be baptized...so that they are prepared, in the lawful and true and only Baptism of the holy Church, by divine regeneration, for the kingdom of God...because it is written, "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." **(Letters 72[73]:21)**

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SEVENTH COUNCIL OF CARTHAGE (c. A.D. 256)

And in the gospel our Lord Jesus Christ spoke with his divine voice, saying, "Except a man be born again of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." ...Unless therefore they receive saving Baptism in the Catholic Church, which is one, they cannot be saved, but will be condemned with the carnal in the judgment of the Lord Christ.

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APHRAATES THE PERSION SAGE (inter A.D. 336-345)

For from Baptism we receive the Spirit of Christ. At that same moment in which the priests invoke the Spirit, heaven opens, and He descends and rests upon the waters; and those who are baptized are clothed in Him. For the Spirit is absent from all those who are born of the flesh, until they come to the water of re-birth; and then they receive the Holy Spirit...in the second birth, that through Baptism, they receive the Holy Spirit. **(Treatises 6:14)**

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ST. CYRIL OF JERUSALEM (c. A.D. 350)

If any man does not receive Baptism, he does not have salvation. The only exception is the martyrs, who, even without water, will receive the kingdom....for the Savior calls martyrdom a Baptism (cf. Mark 10:38) ...Bearing your sins, you go down into the water; but the calling down of grace seals your soul and does not permit that you afterwards be swallowed up by the fearsome dragon. You go down dead in your sins, and come up made alive in righteousness. **(Catechetical Lectures 3:10,12)**

Since man is of a twofold nature, composed of body and soul, the purification also is twofold: the corporeal for the corporeal and the incorporeal for the incorporeal. The water cleanses the body, and the Spirit seals the soul....When you go down into the water, then, regard not simply the water, but look for salvation through the power of the Holy Spirit. For without both you cannot attain to perfection. It is not I who says this, but the Lord Jesus Christ, who has the power in this matter.

And He says, "Unless a man be born again" -- and He adds the words "of water and of the Spirit" -- "he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." He that is baptized with water, but is not found worthy of the Spirit, does not receive the grace in perfection. Nor, if a man be virtuous in his deeds, but does not receive the seal by means of the water, shall he enter the kingdom of heaven.

A bold saying, but not mine; for it is Jesus who has declared it.

(Catechetical Lectures 3:4)

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ST. BASIL THE GREAT (c. A.D. 330 - 379)

For prisoners, Baptism is ransom, forgiveness of debts, death of sin, regeneration of the soul, a resplendent garment, an unbreakable seal, a chariot to heaven, a protector royal, a gift of adoption. **(Sermons on Moral and Practical Subjects: On Baptism 13:5)**

This then is what it means to be "born again of water and Spirit" : just as our dying is effected in the water [Rom 6:3-4; Col 2:11-13], our living is wrought through the Spirit. In three immersions and in an equal number of invocations the great mystery of Baptism is completed in such a way that the type of death may be shown figuratively,

and that by the handing on of divine knowledge the souls of the baptized may be illuminated. If, therefore, there is any grace in the water, it is not from the nature of water but from the Spirit's presence there. **(On the Holy Spirit 15:35)**

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ST. AMBROSE OF MILAN (c. A.D. 333 - 397)

The Lord was baptized, not to be cleansed Himself but to cleanse the waters, so that those waters, cleansed by the flesh of Christ which knew no sin, might have the power of Baptism. Whoever comes, therefore, to the washing of Christ lays aside his sins. **(Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 2:83)**

The Church was redeemed at the price of Christ's blood. Jew or Greek, it makes no difference; but if he has believed, he must circumcise himself from his sins [in Baptism -- Col 2:11-13] so that he can be saved...for no one ascends into the kingdom of heaven except through the sacrament of Baptism...."Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." **(On Abraham 2:11:79,84)**

You have read, therefore, that the three witnesses in Baptism are one: water, blood and the Spirit [1 John 5:8]: and if you withdraw any one of these, the sacrament of Baptism is not valid. For what is the water without the cross of Christ? A common element with no sacramental effect. Nor on the other hand is there any mystery of regeneration without water: for "unless a man be born again of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." **(On the Mysteries 4:20)**

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ST. GREGORY OF NAZIANZ (c. A.D. 330 - 389)

Baptism is God's most beautiful and magnificent gift....We call it gift, grace, anointing, enlightenment, garment of immortality, bath of rebirth, seal, and most precious gift. It is called gift because it is conferred on those who bring nothing of their own; grace since it is given even to the guilty; Baptism because sin is buried in the water; anointing for it is priestly and royal as are those who are anointed; enlightenment because it radiates light; clothing since it veils our shame; bath because it washes; and seal as it is our guard and the sign of God's Lordship. **(Orations on Holy Baptism 40:3-4; PG 36, 361C cited in CCC [1216])**

Do you have an infant child? Allow sin no opportunity; rather, let the infant be sanctified [i.e. baptized] from childhood. From his most tender age let him be consecrated by the Spirit. Do you fear the seal because of the weakness of nature? O what a pusillanimous mother, and of how little faith! ...Give your child the Trinity, that great and noble Protector. **(Orations on Holy Baptism 40:17)**

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ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM (c. A.D. 344 - 407)

Behold, they thoroughly enjoy the peacefulness of freedom who shortly before were held captive. They are citizens of the Church who were wandering in error. They have their lot in righteousness who were in the confusion of sin. For not only are they free, but holy also; not only holy, but righteous too; not only righteous, but sons also; not only sons, but heirs as well; not only heirs, but brothers even of Christ; not only brothers of Christ, but also co-heirs; not only co-heirs, but His very members; not only His members, but a temple too; not a temple only, but likewise the instruments of the Spirit.

You see how many are the benefits of Baptism, and some think its heavenly grace consists only in the remission of sins; but we have enumerated ten honors. For this reason we baptize even infants, though they are not defiled by sin [or though they do not have personal sins] so that there may be given to them holiness, righteousness, adoption, inheritance, brotherhood with Christ, and that they may be His members. **(Baptismal Catecheses quoted by Augustine in Contra Iulianum 1:6:21)**

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APOSTOLIC CONSTITUTIONS (c. A.D. 400)

Be ye likewise contented with one Baptism alone, that which is into the death of the Lord [Rom 6:3-4; Col 2:11-13]...he that out of contempt will not be baptized shall be condemned as an unbeliever and shall be reproached as ungrateful and foolish. For the Lord says, "Except a man be baptized of water and of the Spirit, he shall by no means enter into the kingdom of heaven." And again, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be damned." **(6:3:15)**

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ST. JEROME (c. A.D. 415)

This much you must know, that Baptism forgives past sins, but it does not safeguard future justice, which is preserved by labor and industry and diligence, and depends always and above all on the mercy of God. (**Dialogue Against the Pelagians 3:1**)

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ST. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO (c. A.D. 354 - 430)

By this grace baptized infants too are ingrafted into [Christ's] body, infants who certainly are not yet able to imitate anyone. Christ, in whom all are made alive....gives also the most hidden grace of His Spirit to believers, grace which He secretly infuses even into infants....It is an excellent thing that the Punic [North African] Christians call Baptism itself nothing else but "salvation" and the sacrament of Christ's Body nothing else but "life."

Whence does this derive, except from an ancient and, as I suppose, apostolic tradition, by which the Churches of Christ hold inherently that without Baptism and participation at the table of the Lord it is impossible for any man to attain either to the kingdom of God or to salvation and life eternal? This is the witness of Scripture too.

If anyone wonders why children born of the baptized should themselves be baptized, let him attend briefly to this....The Sacrament of Baptism is most assuredly the Sacrament of regeneration.

(Forgiveness and the Just Deserts of Sin, and the Baptism of Infants 1:9:10; 1:24:34; 2:27:43 c. A.D. 412)

It is this one Spirit who makes it possible for an infant to be regenerated....when that infant is brought to Baptism; and it is through this one Spirit that the infant so presented is reborn. For it is not written, "Unless a man be born again by the will of his parents" or "by the faith of those presenting him or ministering to him," but: "Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Spirit." The water, therefore, manifesting exteriorly the sacrament of grace, and the Spirit effecting interiorly the benefit of grace, both regenerate in one Christ that man who was generated in one Adam." (**Letters 98:2 c. A.D. 408**)

Those who, though they have not received the washing of regeneration, die for the confession of Christ -- it avails them just as much for the forgiveness of their sins as if they had been washed in the sacred font of Baptism. For He that said, "If anyone is not reborn of water and the Spirit, he will not enter the kingdom of heaven," made an exception for them in that other statement in which He says no less generally, "Whoever confesses Me before men, I too will confess him before My Father, who is in heaven" [Matt 10:32]. **(City of God 13:7 c. A.D. 420)**

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ST. FULGENCE OF RUSPE (c. A.D. 524)

From that time at which our Savior said: "If anyone is not reborn of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven," no one can say, without the sacrament of Baptism, except those who, in the Catholic Church, without Baptism pour out their blood for Christ, receive the kingdom of heaven and eternal life. Anyone who receives the sacrament of Baptism, whether in the Catholic Church or in a heretical or schismatic one, receives the whole sacrament...

[But one outside the Church] must, therefore, return to the Church, not so that he might receive again the sacrament of Baptism, which no one dare repeat in any baptized person, but so that he may receive eternal life in Catholic society, for the obtaining of which no one is suited who...remains estranged from the Catholic Church. **(The Rule of Faith 43)**

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Reflection Questions

1. Would you agree or disagree that the early Church Fathers understood being “born again” from John 3 to primarily mean “receiving Christ” as one's "personal Lord and Savior”? Explain and/or defend your point!

2. Why would someone believe that John 3:7 does not refer to baptism at all?

3. What is the value of using the early Church Fathers as ‘evidence’ or ‘witnesses’ for the Roman Catholic position of baptism being regenerative and salvific? What if a modern Christian’s view disagrees with this historical testimony; what does that mean to the truth of his or her position?
