

## Infant Baptism

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Fundamentalists often criticize the Catholic Church's practice of baptizing infants. According to them, baptism is for adults and older children, because it is to be administered only after one has undergone a "born again" experience—that is, after one has "accepted Jesus Christ as his personal Lord and Savior." At the instant of acceptance, when he is "born again," the adult becomes a Christian, and his salvation is assured forever. Baptism follows, though it has no actual salvific value. In fact, one who dies before being baptized, but after "being saved," goes to heaven anyway.

As Fundamentalists see it, baptism is not a sacrament (in the true sense of the word), but an ordinance. It does not in any way convey the grace it symbolizes; rather, it is merely a public manifestation of the person's conversion. Since only an adult or older child can be converted, baptism is inappropriate for infants or for children who have not yet reached the age of reason (generally considered to be age seven). Most Fundamentalists say that during the years before they reach the age of reason infants and young children are automatically saved. Only once a person reaches the age of reason does he need to "accept Jesus" in order to reach heaven.

Since the New Testament era, the Catholic Church has always understood baptism differently, teaching that it is a sacrament which accomplishes several things, the first of which is the remission of sin, both original sin and actual sin—only original sin in the case of infants and young children, since they are incapable of actual sin; and both original and actual sin in the case of older persons.

Peter explained what happens at baptism when he said, "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" (Acts 2:38). But he did not restrict this teaching to adults. He added, "For the promise is to you *and to your children* and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him" (2:39). We also read: "Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name" (Acts 22:16). These commands are universal, not restricted to adults. Further, these commands make clear the necessary connection between baptism and salvation, a

connection explicitly stated in 1 Peter 3:21: "Baptism . . . 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."

### Christ Calls All to Baptism

Although Fundamentalists are the most recent critics of infant baptism, opposition to infant baptism is not a new phenomenon. In the Middle Ages, some groups developed that rejected infant baptism, e.g., the Waldenses and Catharists. Later, the Anabaptists ("re-baptizers") echoed them, claiming that infants are incapable of being baptized validly. But the historic Christian Church has always held that Christ's law applies to infants as well as adults, for Jesus said that no one can enter heaven unless he has been born again of water and the Holy Spirit (John 3:5). His words can be taken to apply to anyone capable of belonging to his kingdom. He asserted such even for children: "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19:14).

More detail is given in Luke's account of this event, which reads: "Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. But Jesus called them to him, saying, 'Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God'" (Luke 18:15–16).

Now Fundamentalists say this event does not apply to young children or infants since it implies the children to which Christ was referring were able to approach him on their own. (Older translations have, "Suffer the little children to come unto me," which seems to suggest they could do so under their own power.) Fundamentalists conclude the passage refers only to children old enough to walk, and, presumably, capable of sinning. But the text in Luke 18:15 says, "Now they were bringing even *infants* to him" (Greek, *Prosepheron de auto kai ta brepha*). The Greek word *brepha* means "infants"—children who are quite unable to approach Christ on their own and who could not possibly make a conscious

decision to "accept Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior." And that is precisely the problem. Fundamentalists refuse to permit the baptism of infants and young children, because they are not yet capable of making such a conscious act. But notice what Jesus said: "to such as these [referring to the infants and children who had been brought to him by their mothers] belongs the kingdom of heaven." The Lord did not require them to make a conscious decision. He says that they are precisely the kind of people who *can* come to him and receive the kingdom. So on what basis, Fundamentalists should be asked, can infants and young children be excluded from the sacrament of baptism? If Jesus said "let them come unto me," who are we to say "no," and withhold baptism from them?

### In Place of Circumcision

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Furthermore, Paul notes that baptism has replaced circumcision (Col. 2:11–12). In that passage, he refers to baptism as "the circumcision of Christ" and "the circumcision made without hands." Of course, usually only infants were circumcised under the Old Law; circumcision of adults was rare, since there were few converts to Judaism. If Paul meant to exclude infants, he would not have chosen circumcision as a parallel for baptism.

This comparison between who could receive baptism and circumcision is an appropriate one. In the Old Testament, if a man wanted to become a Jew, he had to believe in the God of Israel and be circumcised. In the New Testament, if one wants to become a Christian, one must believe in God and Jesus and be baptized. In the Old Testament, those born into Jewish households could be circumcised in anticipation of the Jewish faith in which they would be raised. Thus in the New Testament, those born in Christian households can be baptized in anticipation of the Christian faith in which they will be raised. The pattern is the same: If one is an adult, one must have faith before receiving the rite of membership; if one is a child too young to have faith, one may be given the rite of membership in the knowledge that one will be raised in the faith. This is the basis of Paul's reference to baptism as "the circumcision of Christ"—that is, the Christian equivalent of circumcision.

### Were Only Adults Baptized?

Fundamentalists are reluctant to admit that the Bible nowhere says baptism is to be restricted to adults, but when pressed, they will. They just conclude that is what it should be taken as meaning, even if the text does not explicitly support such a view. Naturally enough, the people whose baptisms we read about in Scripture (and few are individually identified) are adults, because they were converted as adults. This makes sense, because Christianity was just beginning—there were no "cradle Christians," people brought up from childhood in Christian homes.

Even in the books of the New Testament that were written later in the first century, during the time when children were raised in the first Christian homes, we never—not even once—find an example of a child raised in a Christian home who is baptized only upon making a "decision for Christ." Rather, it is always assumed that the children of Christian homes are already Christians, that they have already been "baptized into Christ" (Rom. 6:3). If infant baptism were not the rule, then we should have references to the children of Christian parents joining the Church only after they had come to the age of reason, and there are no such records in the Bible.

### Specific Biblical References?

But, one might ask, does the Bible ever say that infants or young children can be baptized? The indications are clear. In the New Testament we read that Lydia was converted by Paul's preaching and that "She was baptized, with her household" (Acts 16:15). The Philippian jailer whom Paul and Silas had converted to the faith was baptized that night along with his household. We are told that "the same hour of the night . . . he was baptized, with all his family" (Acts 16:33). And in his greetings to the Corinthians, Paul recalled that, "I did baptize also the household of Stephanas" (1 Cor. 1:16).

In all these cases, whole households or families were baptized. This means more than just the spouse; the children too were included. If the text of Acts referred simply to the Philippian jailer and his wife, then we would read that "he and his wife were baptized," but we do not. Thus his children must have been baptized as well. The same applies to the other cases of household baptism in Scripture.

Granted, we do not know the exact age of the children; they may have been past the age of reason, rather than infants. Then again, they could have been babes in arms. More probably, there were both younger and older children. Certainly there were children younger than the age of reason in some of the households that were baptized, especially if one considers that society at this time had no reliable form of birth control. Furthermore, given the New Testament pattern of household baptism, if there were to be exceptions to this rule (such as infants), they would be explicit.

### Catholics From the First

The present Catholic attitude accords perfectly with early Christian practices. Origen, for instance, wrote in the third century that "according to the usage of the Church, baptism is given even to infants" (*Holilies on Leviticus*, 8:3:11 [A.D. 244]). The Council of Carthage, in 253, condemned the opinion that baptism should be withheld from infants until the eighth day after birth. Later, Augustine taught, "The custom of Mother Church in baptizing infants is certainly not to be scorned . . . nor is it to be believed that its tradition is anything except apostolic" (*Literal Interpretation of Genesis* 10:23:39 [A.D. 408]).

### No Cry of "Invention!"

None of the Fathers or councils of the Church was claiming that the practice was contrary to Scripture or tradition. They agreed that the practice of baptizing infants was the customary and appropriate practice since the days of the early Church; the only uncertainty seemed to be when—exactly—an infant should be baptized. Further evidence that

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infant baptism was the accepted practice in the early Church is the fact that if infant baptism had been opposed to the religious practices of the first believers, why do we have no record of early Christian writers condemning it?

But Fundamentalists try to ignore the historical writings from the early Church which clearly indicate the legitimacy of infant baptism. They attempt to sidestep appeals to history by saying baptism requires faith and, since children are incapable of having faith, they cannot be baptized. It is true that Christ prescribed instruction and actual faith for adult converts (Matt. 28:19–20), but his general law on the necessity of baptism (John 3:5) puts no restriction on the subjects of baptism. Although infants are included in the law he establishes, requirements of that law that are impossible to meet because of their age are not applicable to them. They cannot be expected to be instructed and have faith when they are incapable of receiving instruction or manifesting faith. The same was true of circumcision; faith in the Lord was necessary for an adult convert to receive it, but it was not necessary for the children of believers.

Furthermore, the Bible never says, "Faith in Christ is necessary for salvation except for infants"; it simply says, "Faith in Christ is necessary for salvation." Yet Fundamentalists must admit there is an exception for infants unless they wish to condemn instantaneously all infants to hell. Therefore, the Fundamentalist himself makes an exception for infants regarding the necessity of faith for salvation. He can thus scarcely criticize the Catholic for making the exact same exception for baptism, especially if, as Catholics believe, baptism is an instrument of salvation.

It becomes apparent, then, that the Fundamentalist position on infant baptism is not really a consequence of the Bible's strictures, but of the demands of Fundamentalism's idea of salvation. In reality, the Bible indicates that infants are to be baptized, that they too are meant to inherit the kingdom of heaven. Further, the witness of the earliest Christian practices and writings must once and for all silence those who criticize the Catholic Church's teaching on infant baptism. The Catholic Church is merely continuing the tradition established by the first Christians, who heeded the words of Christ: "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God" (Luke 18:16).

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## Early Teachings on Infant Baptism [http://catholic.com/library/Early\\_Teachings\\_of\\_Infant\\_Baptism.asp](http://catholic.com/library/Early_Teachings_of_Infant_Baptism.asp)

Although many Protestant traditions baptize babies, Baptists—and "Bible churches" in the Baptist tradition—insist that baptism is only for those who have come to faith. Nowhere in the New Testament, they point out, do we read of infants being baptized.

On the other hand, nowhere do we read of children raised in believing households reaching the age of reason and *then* being baptized. The only explicit baptism accounts in the Bible involve *converts* from Judaism or paganism. For children of believers there is no explicit mention of baptism—either in infancy or later.

This poses a problem for Baptists and Bible Christians: *On what basis do they require children of believers to be baptized at all?* Given the silence of the New Testament, why not assume Christian baptism is only for adult converts?

This, of course, would be contrary to historical Christian practice. But so is rejecting infant baptism. As we will see, there is no doubt that the early Church practiced infant baptism; and no Christian objections to this practice were ever voiced until the Reformation.

The New Testament itself, while it does not explicitly say when (or whether) believers should have their children baptized, is not silent on the subject.

Luke 18:15–16 tells us that "they were bringing even infants" to Jesus; and he himself related this to the kingdom of God: "Let the children come to me

. . . for to such belongs the kingdom of God."

When Baptists speak of "bringing someone to Jesus," they mean leading him to *faith*. But Jesus says "even infants" can be "brought" to him. Even Baptists don't claim their practice of "dedicating" babies does this. The fact is, the Bible gives us no way of bringing anyone to Jesus apart from baptism.

Thus Peter declared, "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. For the promise is to you *and to your children*" (Acts 2:38–39).

The apostolic Church baptized whole "households" (Acts 16:33; 1 Cor. 1:16), a term encompassing children and infants as well as servants. While these texts do not specifically mention—nor exclude—infants, the very use of the term "households" indicates an understanding of the family as a unit. Even one believing parent in a household makes the children and even the unbelieving spouse "holy" (1 Cor. 7:14).

Does this mean unbelieving spouses should be baptized? Of course not. The kingdom of God is not theirs; they cannot be "brought to Christ" in their unbelief. But infants have no such impediment. The kingdom is theirs, Jesus says, and they should be brought to him; and this means baptism.

Baptism is the Christian equivalent of circumcision, or "the circumcision of Christ": "In him you were also circumcised 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" (Col. 2:11–12). Thus, like circumcision, baptism can be given to children as well as adults. The difference is that circumcision was powerless to save (Gal. 5:6, 6:15), but "[b]aptism . . . now saves you" (1 Pet. 3:21).

The first *explicit* evidence of children of believing households being baptized comes from the early Church—where infant baptism was uniformly

upheld and regarded as apostolic. In fact, the only reported controversy on the subject was a third-century debate whether or not to delay baptism until the eighth day after birth, like its Old Testament equivalent, circumcision! (See quotation from Cyprian, below; compare Leviticus 12:2–3.)

Consider, too, that Fathers raised in Christian homes (such as Irenaeus) would hardly have upheld infant baptism as apostolic if their own baptisms had been deferred until the age of reason.

For example, infant baptism is assumed in Irenaeus' writings below (since he affirms both that regeneration happens in baptism, and also that Jesus came so even infants could be regenerated). Since he was born in a Christian home in Smyrna around the year 140, this means he was probably baptized around 140. He was also probably baptized by the bishop of Smyrna at that time—Polycarp, a personal disciple of the apostle John, who had died only a few decades before.

## Irenaeus

"He [Jesus] came to save all through himself; all, I say, who through him are reborn in God: infants, and children, and youths, and old men. Therefore he passed through every age, becoming an infant for infants, sanctifying infants; a child for children, sanctifying those who are of that age . . . [so that] he might be the perfect teacher in all things, perfect not only in respect to the setting forth of truth, perfect also in respect to relative age" (*Against Heresies* 2:22:4 [A.D. 189]).

"And [Naaman] dipped himself . . . seven times in the Jordan' [2 Kgs. 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 newborn 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' [John 3:5]" (*Fragment* 34 [A.D. 190]).

## Hippolytus

"Baptize first the children, and if they can speak for themselves let them do so. Otherwise, let their parents or other relatives speak for them" (*The Apostolic Tradition* 21:16 [A.D. 215]).

## Origen

"Every soul that is born into flesh is soiled by the filth of wickedness and sin. . . . In the Church, baptism is given for the remission of sins, and, according to the usage of the Church, baptism is given even to infants. If there were nothing in infants which required the remission of sins and nothing in them pertinent to forgiveness, the grace of baptism would seem superfluous" (*Homilies on Leviticus* 8:3 [A.D. 248]).

"The Church received from the apostles the tradition of giving baptism even to infants. The apostles, to whom were committed the secrets of the divine sacraments, knew there are in everyone innate strains of [original] sin, which must be washed away through water and the Spirit" (*Commentaries on Romans* 5:9 [A.D. 248]).

## Cyprian of Carthage

"As to what pertains to the case of infants: You [Fidus] said that they ought not to be baptized within the second or third day after their birth, that the old law of circumcision must be taken into consideration, and that you did not think that one should be baptized and sanctified within the eighth day after his birth. In our council it seemed to us far otherwise. No one agreed to the course which you thought should be taken. Rather, we all judge that the mercy and grace of God ought to be denied to no man born" (*Letters* 64:2 [A.D. 253]).

"If, in the case of the worst sinners and those who formerly sinned much against God, when afterwards they believe, the remission of their sins is granted and no one is held back from baptism and grace, how much more, then, should an infant not be held back, who, having but recently been born, has done no sin, except that, born of the flesh according to Adam, he has contracted the contagion of that old death from his first being born. For this very reason does he [an infant] approach more easily to receive the remission of sins: because the sins forgiven him are not his own but those of another" (*ibid.*, 64:5).

## Gregory of Nazianz

"Do you have an infant child? Allow sin no opportunity; rather, let the infant be sanctified from childhood. From his most tender age let him be consecrated by the Spirit. Do you fear the seal [of baptism] because of the weakness of nature? Oh, what a pusillanimous mother and of how little faith!" (*Oration on Holy Baptism* 40:7 [A.D. 388]).

"Well enough,' some will say, 'for those who ask for baptism, but what do you have to say about those who are still children, and aware neither of loss nor of grace? Shall we baptize them too?' Certainly [I respond], if there is any pressing danger. Better that they be sanctified unaware, than that they depart unsealed and uninitiated" (*ibid.*, 40:28).

## John Chrysostom

"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 [it bestows]! For this reason we baptize even infants, though they are not defiled by [personal] sins, so that there may be given to them holiness, righteousness, adoption, inheritance, brotherhood with Christ, and that they may be his [Christ's] members" (*Baptismal Catecheses in Augustine, Against Julian* 1:6:21 [A.D. 388]).

## Augustine

"What the universal Church holds, not as instituted [invented] by councils but as something always held, is most correctly believed to have been handed down by apostolic authority. Since others respond for children, so that the

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celebration of the sacrament may be complete for them, it is certainly availing to them for their consecration, because they themselves are not able to respond" (*On Baptism, Against the Donatists* 4:24:31 [A.D. 400]).

"The custom of Mother Church in baptizing infants is certainly not to be scorned, nor is it to be regarded in any way as superfluous, nor is it to be believed that its tradition is anything except apostolic" (*The Literal Interpretation of Genesis* 10:23:39 [A.D. 408]).

"Cyprian was not issuing a new decree but was keeping to the most solid belief of the Church in order to correct some who thought that infants ought not be baptized before the eighth day after their birth. . . . He agreed with certain of his fellow bishops that a child is able to be duly baptized as soon as he is born" (*Letters* 166:8:23 [A.D. 412]).

"By this grace baptized infants too are ingrafted into his [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 salvation and the sacrament of Christ's Body nothing else than 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 [A.D. 412]).

## Council of Carthage V

"*Item*: It seemed good that whenever there were not found reliable witnesses who could testify that without any doubt they [abandoned children] were baptized and when the children themselves were not, on account of their tender age, able to answer concerning the giving of the sacraments to them, all such children should be baptized without scruple, lest a hesitation should deprive them of the cleansing of the sacraments. This was urged by the [North African] legates, our brethren, since they redeem many such [abandoned children] from the barbarians" (Canon 7 [A.D. 401]).

## Council of Mileum II

"[W]hoever says that infants fresh from their mothers' wombs ought not to be baptized, or say that they are indeed baptized unto the remission of sins, but that they draw nothing of the original sin of Adam, which is expiated in the bath of regeneration . . . let him be anathema [excommunicated]. Since what the apostle [Paul] says, 'Through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so passed to all men, in whom all have sinned' [Rom. 5:12], must not be understood otherwise than the Catholic Church spread everywhere has always understood it. For on account of this rule of faith even infants, who in themselves thus far have not been able to commit any sin, are therefore truly baptized unto the remission of sins, so that that which they have contracted from generation may be cleansed in them by regeneration" (Canon 3 [A.D. 416]).

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## Baptism: Immersion Only?

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Although Latin-rite Catholics are usually baptized by infusion (pouring), they know that immersion (dunking) and sprinkling are also valid ways to baptize. Fundamentalists, however, regard only baptism by immersion as true baptism, concluding that most Catholics are not validly baptized at all.

Although the New Testament contains no explicit instructions on how physically to administer the water of baptism, Fundamentalists argue that the Greek word *baptizo* found in the New Testament means "to immerse." They also maintain that only immersion reflects the symbolic significance of being "buried" and "raised" with Christ (see Romans 6:3-4).

It is true that *baptizo* often means immersion. For example, the Greek version of the Old Testament tells us that Naaman, at Elisha's direction, "went down and *dipped himself* [the Greek word here is *baptizo*] seven times in the Jordan" (2 Kgs. 5:14, *Septuagint*, emphasis added).

But immersion is not the only meaning of *baptizo*. Sometimes it just means washing up. Thus Luke 11:38 reports that, when Jesus ate at a Pharisee's house, "[t]he Pharisee was astonished to see that he did not first wash [*baptizo*] before dinner." They did not practice immersion before dinner, but, according to Mark, the Pharisees "do not eat unless they wash [*nipto*] their hands, observing the tradition of the elders; and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they *wash themselves* [*baptizo*]" (Mark 7:3-4a, emphasis added). So *baptizo* can mean cleansing or ritual washing as well as immersion.

A similar range of meanings can be seen when *baptizo* is used metaphorically. Sometimes a figurative "baptism" is a sort of "immersion"; but not always. For example, speaking of his future suffering and death, Jesus said, "I have a baptism [*baptisma*] to be baptized [*baptizo*] with; and how I am constrained until it is accomplished!" (Luke 12:50) This might suggest that Christ would be "immersed" in suffering. On the other hand, consider the case of being "baptized with the Holy Spirit."

In Acts 1:4-5 Jesus charged his disciples "not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, 'you heard from me, for John baptized with water, but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'" Did this mean they would be "immersed" in the Spirit? No: three times Acts 2 states that the Holy Spirit *was poured out* on them when Pentecost came (2:17, 18, 33, emphasis added). Later Peter referred to the Spirit *falling* upon them, and also on others after Pentecost, explicitly identifying these events with the promise of being "baptized with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 11:15-17). These passages demonstrate that the meaning of *baptizo* is broad enough to include "pouring."

### Christian Baptism

The Fundamentalist contention that *baptizo* always means immersion is an oversimplification. This is especially true because in Christian usage the word had a highly particular meaning distinct from the term's ordinary, everyday usage.

The same principle can be seen with other special Christian terms, such as "Trinity" and "*agape*" (divine love), that were originally ordinary Greek words with no special religious significance. The earliest evidence of anyone referring to God as a "Trinity" is a letter by Theophilus of Antioch (*Ad Autolycum* [A.D. 181]). Before the Christian usage, a "trinity" (*triad* in Greek) was simply any group of three things.

However, as Christians made theological use of the term, it quickly gained a new, technical sense, referring specifically to the three persons of the Godhead. When Christians professed that God is a "Triad," they did not mean a group of three gods, but one God in three persons. Here, an everyday word was being used in a special, theological sense.

The same is true of *agape*, originally a general term for any sort of "love" very much like the English word. But it quickly became used in Christian circles as the name of a common fellowship (love) meal among Christians (cf. Jude 12).

In the same way, *baptizo* acquired a specialized Christian usage distinct from its original meaning. In fact, it already had a complex history of specifically religious usages even before Christians adopted it. Long before Jesus' day, Gentile converts to Judaism were "baptized" as well as circumcised. Then John the Baptist performed a "baptism of repentance" for Jews as a dramatic prophetic gesture indicating that they were as much in need of conversion as pagans. Through these usages *baptizo* acquired associations of initiation, conversion, and repentance.

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Given this history, it was natural for Jesus and his followers to use the same word for Christian baptism, though it was not identical either to the Jewish baptism or to that of John. But it is completely misguided to try to determine the meaning of the word in its Christian sense merely on the basis of ordinary secular usage. It would be like thinking that the doctrine of the Trinity is polytheism or that the New Testament exhortation to "love one another" means only to be fond of each other. To understand what Christian baptism entailed, we must examine not what the word meant in other contexts, but what it meant and how it was practiced *in a Christian context*.

## Inner and Outer Baptism

One important aspect of Christian baptism in the New Testament is the clear relationship between being baptized with water and being "baptized with the Holy Spirit", or "born again." This tract is primarily concerned with the *mode* of baptism, not its *effects* [Footnote: For more on the relationship between baptism and rebirth, see John 3:5; Acts 2:38, 19:2–3, 22:16; Romans 6:3–4; Colossians 2:11–12; Titus 3:5; and 1 Peter 3:21; and also the Catholic Answers tract *Baptismal Grace*.]; but even non-Catholic Christians must admit that the New Testament clearly associates water baptism with Spirit baptism and rebirth (even if they do not interpret this relationship as cause and effect).

Right from the beginning, as soon as the Holy Spirit was given on Pentecost, water and Spirit went hand in hand: "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" (Acts 2:38).

In Acts 10:44, the first Gentiles to whom Peter preached received the Holy Spirit even before their water baptism. This is always possible, for God is free to operate outside the sacraments as well as within them. In this case it was fitting for the Spirit to be given before baptism, in order to show God's acceptance of believing Gentiles. Even under these circumstances, however, the connection to water baptism is still evident from Peter's response: "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" (Acts 10:47).

Still later in Acts, when Paul found people who did not have the Spirit, he immediately questioned whether they had received Christian water baptism. Upon learning that they had not, he baptized them and laid hands on them, and they received the Spirit (Acts 19:1–6).

These passages illustrate the connection between water and Spirit first made by Jesus himself: "Unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5).

Earlier we saw that the "baptism of the Holy Spirit" was depicted as "pouring." But these passages show that the "baptism" or "pouring" of the Spirit is itself closely related to water baptism.

This provides some balance to the Fundamentalist argument that only baptism by immersion adequately symbolizes death and resurrection with Jesus. It is true that immersion *best* represents death and resurrection, bringing out more fully the meaning of the sacrament than pouring or sprinkling (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1239). (Immersion is actually the usual mode of baptizing in the Catholic Church's Eastern rites.) On the other hand, *pouring* best represents the *infusion* of the Holy Spirit also associated with water baptism. And all three modes adequately suggest the sense of cleansing signified by baptism. No one mode has exclusive symbolical validity over the others.

## Physical Difficulties

After Peter's first sermon, three thousand people were baptized in Jerusalem (Acts 2:41). Archaeologists have demonstrated there was no sufficient water supply for so many to have been immersed. Even if there had been, the natives of Jerusalem would scarcely have let their city's water supply be polluted by three thousand unwashed bodies plunging into it. These people must have been baptized by pouring or sprinkling.

Even today practical difficulties can render immersion nearly or entirely impossible for some individuals: for example, people with certain medical conditions—the bedridden; quadriplegics; individuals with tracheotomies (an opening into the airway in the throat) or in negative pressure ventilators (iron lungs). Again, those who have recently undergone certain procedures (such as open-heart surgery) cannot be immersed, and may not wish to defer baptism until their recovery (for example, if they are to undergo further procedures).

Other difficulties arise in certain environments. For example, immersion may be nearly or entirely impossible for desert nomads or Eskimos. Or consider those in prison—not in America, where religious freedom gives prisoners the right to be immersed if they desire—but in a more hostile setting, such as a Muslim regime, where baptisms must be done in secret, without adequate water for immersion.

What are we to do in these and similar cases? Shall we deny people the sacrament because immersion is impractical or impossible for them? Ironically, the Fundamentalist, who acknowledges that baptism is commanded but thinks it isn't essential for salvation, may make it impossible for many people to be baptized at all in obedience to God's



## Baptism in the Early Church

That the early Church permitted pouring instead of immersion is demonstrated by the *Didache*, a Syrian liturgical manual that was widely circulated among the churches in the first few centuries of Christianity, perhaps the earliest Christian writing outside the New Testament.

The *Didache* was written around A.D. 70 and, though not inspired, is a strong witness to the sacramental practice of Christians in the apostolic age. In its seventh chapter, the *Didache* reads, "Concerning baptism, baptize in this manner: Having said all these things beforehand, baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in living water [that is, in running water, as in a river]. If there is no living water, baptize in other water; and, if you are not able to use cold water, use warm. If you have neither, pour water three times upon the head in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." These instructions were composed either while some of the apostles and disciples were still alive or during the next generation of Christians, and they represent an already established custom.

The testimony of the *Didache* is seconded by other early Christian writings. Hippolytus of Rome said, "If water is scarce, whether as a constant condition or on occasion, then use whatever water is available" (*The Apostolic Tradition*, 21 [A.D. 215]). Pope Cornelius I wrote that as Novatian was about to die, "he received baptism in the bed where he lay, by pouring" (*Letter to Fabius of Antioch* [A.D. 251]; cited in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 6:4311).

Cyprian advised that no one should be "disturbed because the sick are poured upon or sprinkled when they receive the Lord's grace" (*Letter to a Certain Magnus* 69:12 [A.D. 255]). Tertullian described baptism by saying that it is done "with so great simplicity, without pomp, without any considerable novelty of preparation, and finally, without cost, a man is baptized in water, and amid the utterance of some few words, is sprinkled, and then rises again, not much (or not at all) the cleaner" (*On Baptism*, 2 [A.D. 203]). Obviously, Tertullian did not consider baptism by immersion the only valid form, since he says one is only sprinkled and thus comes up from the water "not much (or not at all) the cleaner."

## Ancient Christian Mosaics Show Pouring

Then there is the artistic evidence. Much of the earliest Christian artwork depicts baptism—but not baptism by immersion! If the recipient of the sacrament is in a river, he is shown standing in the river while water is poured over his head from a cup or shell. Tile mosaics in ancient churches and paintings in the catacombs depict baptism by pouring. Baptisteries in early cemeteries are clear witnesses to baptisms by infusion. The entire record of the early Church—as shown in the New Testament, in other writings, and in monumental evidence—indicates the mode of baptism was not restricted to immersion.

Other archaeological evidence confirms the same thing. An early Christian baptistery was found in a church in Jesus' hometown of Nazareth, yet this baptistery, which dates from the second century, was too small and narrow in which to immerse a person.

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## Baptismal Grace

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Few truths are so clearly taught in the New Testament as the doctrine that in baptism God gives us grace. Again and again the sacred writers tell us that it is in baptism that we are saved, buried with Christ, incorporated into his body, washed of our sins, regenerated, cleansed, and so on (see Acts 2:38, 22:16; Rom. 6:1–4; 1 Cor. 6:11, 12:13; Gal. 3:26–27; Eph. 5:25–27; Col. 2:11–12; Titus 3:5; 1 Pet. 3:18–22). They are unanimous in speaking of baptism in invariably *efficient* terms, as really bringing about a spiritual effect.

Despite this wealth of evidence, Protestants are almost equally unanimous in rejecting this truth. In general Protestants regard baptism as something like an ordinance: an observance that does not itself bring about any spiritual effect but merely represents that effect. Its observance may be required by obedience, but it is not necessary in any further sense—certainly not for salvation.

This view requires Protestants to explain away *all* the New Testament passages on the nature of baptism as figurative language. It is not baptism itself, they assert, but *what baptism represents*, that really saves us. Yet the language of the New Testament on this point is so uniform that they cannot even dredge up a couple of "proof-texts" on baptism to support this view or their figurative reading of all the other passages.

There is *one* text that Protestants occasionally mention. In 1 Corinthians 1:14–17 Paul wrote that he was glad that he himself had baptized so few of the Corinthians, since they could not say that they were baptized in his name; and he went on to say, "For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel. . . ."

Needless to say, this passage doesn't say anything about baptism only representing spiritual realities, or not really saving. It doesn't say anything about how those who accepted Paul's preaching of the gospel were then saved. Paul didn't write, "For I was not sent to baptize but to pray with people to accept Jesus as their personal Savior" (or even "to lead people to faith"). Paul didn't pit faith against baptism.

Nor did he pit preaching against baptism. He would hardly have contradicted the great commission in Matthew 28:19: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Paul's point was not that God didn't want him to baptize, only that preaching was the driving force of his evangelistic ministry.

In short, Paul's remark doesn't remotely support the Protestant view of baptism, or justify a figurative interpretation of all the other passages. Yet this is the closest thing to a Protestant proof-text!

The early Fathers were equally unanimous in affirming baptism as a means of grace. They all recognized the Bible's teaching that "[In the ark] 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, emphasis added).

Protestant early Church historian J. N. D. Kelly writes, "From the beginning baptism was the universally accepted rite of admission to the Church. . . . As regards its significance, it was always held to convey the remission of sins . . . we descend into the water 'dead' and come out again 'alive'; we receive a white robe which symbolizes the Spirit . . . the Spirit is God himself dwelling in the believer, and the resulting life is a re-creation. Prior to baptism . . . our heart was the abode of demons . . . [but] baptism supplies us with the weapons for our spiritual warfare" (*Early Christian Doctrines*, 193–4).

### The Letter of Barnabas

"Regarding [baptism], 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 [Ps. 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" (*Letter of Barnabas* 11:1–10 [A.D. 74]).

### Hermas

"I have heard, sir," said I, "from some teacher, 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 [A.D. 80]).

### Ignatius of Antioch

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"Let none of you turn deserter. Let your baptism be your armor; your faith, your helmet; your love, your spear; your patient endurance, your panoply" (*Letter to Polycarp* 6 [A.D. 110]).

## Second Clement

"For, if we do the will of Christ, we shall find rest; but if otherwise, then nothing shall deliver us from eternal punishment, if we should disobey his commandments. . . . [W]ith what confidence shall we, if we keep not our baptism pure and undefiled, enter into the kingdom of God? Or who shall be our advocate, unless we be found having holy and righteous works?" (*Second Clement* 6:7–9 [A.D. 150]).

## Justin Martyr

"Whoever are convinced and believe that what they are taught and told by us is the truth, and professes to be able to live accordingly, are 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 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 of water. For Christ said, 'Unless you be reborn, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven'" (*First Apology* 61:14–17 [A.D. 151]).

## Theophilus of Antioch

"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 Autolycus* 12:16 [A.D. 181]).

## Clement of Alexandria

"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 of the Most High' [Ps. 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" (*The Instructor of Children* 1:6:26:1 [A.D. 191]).

## Tertullian

"Happy is our sacrament of water, in that, by washing away the sins of our early blindness, we are set free and admitted into eternal life. . . . [But] a viper of the [Gnostic] Cainite heresy, lately conversant in this quarter, has carried away a great number with her most venomous doctrine, making it her first aim to destroy baptism—which is quite in accordance with nature, for vipers and asps . . . themselves generally do live in arid and waterless places. But we, little fishes after the example of our [Great] Fish, Jesus Christ, are born in water, nor have we safety in any other way than by permanently abiding in water. So that most monstrous creature, who had no right to teach even sound doctrine, knew full well how to kill the little fishes—by taking them away from the water!" (*Baptism* 1 [A.D. 203]).

...

"Baptism itself is a corporal act by which we are plunged into the water, while its effect is spiritual, in that we are freed from our sins" (*ibid.*, 7:2).

## Hippolytus

"And the bishop shall lay his hand upon them [the newly baptized], invoking and saying: 'O Lord God, who did count these worthy of deserving the forgiveness of sins by the laver of regeneration, make them worthy to be filled with your Holy Spirit and send upon them thy grace [in confirmation], that they may serve you according to your will'" (*The Apostolic Tradition* 22:1 [A.D. 215]).

## Cyprian of Carthage

"While I was lying in darkness . . . I thought it indeed difficult and hard to believe . . . that divine mercy was promised for my salvation, so that anyone might be born again and quickened unto a new life by the laver of the saving water, he might put off what he had been before, and, although the structure of the body remained, he might change himself in soul and mind. . . . But afterwards, when the stain of my past life had been washed away by means of the water of rebirth, 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" (*To Donatus* 3–4 [A.D. 246]).

## Aphraahat the Persian Sage

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"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. The Spirit is absent from all those who are born of the flesh, until they come to the water of rebirth, and then they receive the Holy Spirit. . . . [I]n the second birth, that through baptism, they receive the Holy Spirit" (*Treatises* 6:14:4 [A.D. 340]).

### Cyril of Jerusalem

"If any man does not receive baptism, he does not have salvation. The only exception is the martyrs, who, even without water, will receive baptism, for the Savior calls martyrdom a baptism [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 you come up made alive in righteousness" (*Catechetical Lectures* 3:10, 12 [A.D. 350]).

### Basil the Great

"For prisoners, baptism is ransom, forgiveness of debts, the death of sin, regeneration of the soul, a resplendent garment, an unbreakable seal, a chariot to heaven, a royal protector, a gift of adoption" (*Sermons on Moral and Practical Subjects* 13:5 [A.D. 379]).

### Council of Constantinople I

"We believe . . . in one baptism for the remission of sins" (*Nicene Creed* [A.D. 381]).

### Ambrose of Milan

"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 Luke* 2:83 [A.D. 389]).

### Augustine

"It is an excellent thing that the Punic [North African] Christians call baptism salvation and the sacrament of Christ's body nothing else than 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" (*Forgiveness and the Just Deserts of Sin, and the Baptism of Infants* 1:24:34 [A.D. 412]).

"The sacrament of baptism is most assuredly the sacrament of regeneration" (*ibid.*, 2:27:43).

"Baptism washes away all, absolutely all, our sins, whether of deed, word, or thought, whether sins original or added, whether knowingly or unknowingly contracted" (*Against Two Letters of the Pelagians* 3:3:5 [A.D. 420]).

"This is the meaning of the great sacrament of baptism, which is celebrated among us: all who attain to this grace die thereby to sin—as he himself [Jesus] is said to have died to sin because he died in the flesh (that is, 'in the likeness of sin')—and they are thereby alive by being reborn in the baptismal font, just as he rose again from the sepulcher. This is the case no matter what the age of the body. For whether it be a newborn infant or a decrepit old man—since no one should be barred from baptism—just so, there is no one who does not die to sin in baptism. Infants die to original sin only; adults, to all those sins which they have added, through their evil living, to the burden they brought with them at birth" (*Handbook on Faith, Hope, and Love* 13[41] [A.D. 421]).

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## Born Again in Baptism

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One key Scripture reference to being "born again" or "regenerated" is John 3:5, where Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

This verse is so important that those who say baptism is just a symbol must deny that Jesus here refers to baptism. "Born again" Christians claim the "water" is the preached word of God.

But the early Christians uniformly identified this verse with baptism. Water baptism is the way, they said, that we are born again and receive new life—a fact that is supported elsewhere in Scripture (Rom. 6:3–4; Col. 2:12–13; Titus 3:5).

No Church Father referred to John 3:5 as anything other than water baptism.

### Justin Martyr

"As many as are persuaded and believe that what we [Christians] teach and say is true, and undertake to be able to live accordingly, and instructed to pray and to entreat God with fasting, for the remission of their sins that are past, we pray and fast with them. Then they 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 [A.D. 151]).

### Irenaeus

"'And [Naaman] dipped himself . . . seven times in the Jordan' [2 Kgs. 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 newborn 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 [A.D. 190]).

### Tertullian

"[N]o 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'" (*Baptism* 12:1 [A.D. 203]).

### Hippolytus

"The Father of immortality sent the immortal Son and Word into the world, who came to man in order to wash him with water and the Spirit; and he, begetting us again to incorruption of soul and body, breathed into us the Spirit of life, and endued us with an incorruptible panoply. If, therefore, man has become immortal, he will also be God. And if he is made God by water and the Holy Spirit after the regeneration of the laver he is found to be also joint-heir with Christ after the resurrection from the dead. Wherefore I preach to this effect: Come, all ye kindreds of the nations, to the immortality of the baptism" (*Discourse on the Holy Theophany* 8 [A.D. 217]).

### The Recognitions of Clement

"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'" (*The Recognitions of Clement* 6:9 [A.D. 221]).

### Testimonies Concerning the Jews

"That unless a man have been baptized and born again, he cannot attain unto the kingdom of God. In the Gospel according to John: 'Except a man be born again of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God' [John 3:5]. . . . Also in the same place: 'Unless ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye shall not have life in you' [John 6:53]. That it is of small account to be baptized and to receive the Eucharist, unless one profit by it both in deeds and works" (*Testimonies Concerning the Jews* 3:2:25–26 [A.D. 240]).

### Cyprian of Carthage

"[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 [A.D. 253]).

## Council of Carthage VII

"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" (*Seventh Carthage* [A.D. 256]).

## Cyril of Jerusalem

"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 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 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 [A.D. 350]).

## Athanasius

"[A]s we are all from earth and die in Adam, so being regenerated from above of water and Spirit, in the Christ we are all quickened" (*Four Discourses Against the Arians* 3:26[33] [A.D. 360]).

## Basil the Great

"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; Col. 2:12–13], our living is wrought through the Spirit. In three immersions and 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" (*The Holy Spirit* 15:35 [A.D. 375]).

## Ambrose of Milan

"Although we are baptized with water and the Spirit, the latter is much superior to the former, and is not therefore to be separated from the Father and the Son. There are, however, many who, because we are baptized with water and the Spirit, think that there is no difference in the offices of water and the Spirit, and therefore think that they do not differ in nature. Nor do they observe that we are buried in the element of water that we may rise again renewed by the Spirit. For in the water is the representation of death, in the Spirit is the pledge of life, that the body of sin may die through the water, which encloses the body as it were in a kind of tomb, that we, by the power of the Spirit, may be renewed from the death of sin, being born again in God" (*The Holy Spirit* 1:6[75–76] [A.D. 381]).

"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. 2:11–12)] 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'" (*Abraham* 2:11:79–84 [A.D. 387]).

"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'" (*The Mysteries* 4:20 [A.D. 390]).

## Gregory of Nyssa

"[In] the birth by water and the Spirit, [Jesus] himself led the way in this birth, drawing down upon the water, by his own baptism, the Holy Spirit; so that in all things he became the firstborn of those who are spiritually born again, and gave the name of brethren to those who partook in a birth like to his own by water and the Spirit" (*Against Eunomius* 2:8 [A.D. 382]).

## John Chrysostom

"[N]o one can enter into the kingdom of heaven except he be regenerated through water and the Spirit, and he who does not eat the flesh of the Lord and drink his blood is excluded from eternal life, and if all these things are accomplished only by means of those holy hands, I mean the hands of the priest, how will any one, without these, be

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able to escape the fire of hell, or to win those crowns which are reserved for the victorious? These [priests] truly are they who are entrusted with the pangs of spiritual travail and the birth which comes through baptism: by their means we put on Christ, and are buried with the Son of God, and become members of that blessed head [the Mystical Body of Christ]" (*The Priesthood* 3:5–6 [A.D. 387]).

## Gregory of Nazianz

"Such is the grace and power of baptism; not an overwhelming of the world as of old, but a purification of the sins of each individual, and a complete cleansing from all the bruises and stains of sin. And since we are double-made, I mean of body and soul, and the one part is visible, the other invisible, so the cleansing also is twofold, by water and the Spirit; the one received visibly in the body, the other concurring with it invisibly and apart from the body; the one typical, the other real and cleansing the depths" (*Oration on Holy Baptism* 7–8 [A.D. 388]).

## The Apostolic Constitutions

"Be ye likewise contented with one baptism alone, that which is into the death of the Lord [Rom. 6:3; Col. 2:12–13]. . . . [H]e 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 believes and is baptized shall be saved, but he that believes not shall be damned'" [Mark 16:16] (*Apostolic Constitutions* 6:3:15 [A.D. 400]).

## Augustine

"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 Adam" (*Letters* 98:2 [A.D. 412]).

"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] (*The City of God* 13:7 [A.D. 419]).

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*+Robert H. Brom, Bishop of San Diego, August 10, 2004*





## The Necessity of Baptism

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Christians have always interpreted the Bible literally when it declares, "Baptism . . . 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. 3:21; cf. Acts 2:38, 22:16, Rom. 6:3–4, Col. 2:11–12).

Thus the early Church Fathers wrote in the Nicene Creed (A.D. 381), "We believe in one baptism for the forgiveness of sins."

And the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: "The Lord himself affirms that baptism is necessary for salvation [John 3:5]. . . . Baptism is necessary for salvation for those to whom the Gospel has been proclaimed and who have had the possibility of asking for this sacrament [Mark 16:16]" (CCC 1257).

The Christian belief that baptism is necessary for salvation is so unshakable that even the Protestant Martin Luther affirmed the necessity of baptism. He wrote: "Baptism is no human plaything but is instituted by God himself. Moreover, it is solemnly and strictly commanded that we must be baptized or we shall not be saved. We are not to regard it as an indifferent matter, then, like putting on a new red coat. It is of the greatest importance that we regard baptism as excellent, glorious, and exalted" (*Large Catechism* 4:6).

Yet Christians have also always realized that the necessity of water baptism is a *normative* rather than an *absolute* necessity. There are exceptions to water baptism: It is possible to be saved through "baptism of blood," martyrdom for Christ, or through "baptism of desire", that is, an explicit or even implicit desire for baptism.

Thus the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: "Those who die for the faith, those who are catechumens, and all those who, without knowing of the Church but acting under the inspiration of grace, seek God sincerely and strive to fulfill his will, are saved even if they have not been baptized" (CCC 1281; the salvation of unbaptized infants is also possible under this system; cf. CCC 1260–1, 1283).

As the following passages from the works of the Church Fathers illustrate, Christians have always believed in the normative necessity of water baptism, while also acknowledging the legitimacy of baptism by desire or blood.

### Hermas

"I have heard, sir,' said I [to the Shepherd], 'from some teacher, 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 [A.D. 80]).

### Justin Martyr

"As many as are persuaded and believe that what we [Christians] teach and say is true, and undertake to be able to live accordingly . . . 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 Lord of the universe, and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, they then receive the washing with water. For Christ also said, 'Except you be born again, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven' [John 3:3]" (*First Apology* 61 [A.D. 151]).

### Tertullian

"Happy is our sacrament of water, in that, by washing away the sins of our early blindness, we are set free and admitted into eternal life. . . . [But] a viper of the [Gnostic] Cainite heresy, lately conversant in this quarter, has carried away a great number with her most venomous doctrine, making it her first aim to destroy baptism—which is quite in accordance with nature, for vipers and asps . . . themselves generally do live in arid and waterless places. But we, little fishes after the example of our [Great] Fish, Jesus Christ, are born in water, nor have we safety in any other way than by permanently abiding in water. So that most monstrous creature, who had no right to teach even sound doctrine, knew full well how to kill the little fishes—by taking them away from the water!" (*Baptism* 1 [A.D. 203]).

"Without baptism, salvation is attainable by none" (ibid., 12).

"We have, indeed, a second [baptismal] font which is one with the former [water baptism]: namely, that of blood, of which the Lord says: 'I am to be baptized with a baptism' [Luke 12:50], when he had already been baptized. He had come through water and blood, as John wrote [1 John 5:6], so that he might be baptized with water and glorified with blood. . . . This is the baptism which replaces that of the fountain, when it has not been received, and restores it when it has been lost" (ibid., 16).

## Hippolytus

"[P]erhaps someone will ask, 'What does it conduce unto piety to be baptized?' In the first place, that you may do what has seemed good to God; in the next place, being born again by water unto God so that you change your first birth, which was from concupiscence, and are able to attain salvation, which would otherwise be impossible. For thus the [prophet] has sworn to us: 'Amen, I say to you, unless you are born again with living water, into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.' Therefore, fly to the water, for this alone can extinguish the fire. He who will not come to the water still carries around with him the spirit of insanity for the sake of which he will not come to the living water for his own salvation" (*Homilies* 11:26 [A.D. 217]).

## Origen

"It is not possible to receive forgiveness of sins without baptism" (*Exhortation to the Martyrs* 30 [A.D. 235]).

Cyprian of Carthage

"[T]he baptism of public witness and of blood cannot profit a heretic unto salvation, because there is no salvation outside the Church." (*Letters* 72[73]:21 [A.D. 253]).

"[Catechumens who suffer martyrdom] are not deprived of the sacrament of baptism. Rather, they are baptized with the most glorious and greatest baptism of blood, concerning which the Lord said that he had another baptism with which he himself was to be baptized [Luke 12:50]" (*ibid.*, 72[73]:22).

## Cyril of Jerusalem

"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, saying, 'Can you drink the cup which I drink and be baptized with the baptism with which I am to be baptized [Mark 10:38]?' Indeed, the martyrs too confess, by being made a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men [1 Cor. 4:9]" (*Catechetical Lectures* 3:10 [A.D. 350]).

## Gregory Nazianz

"[Besides the baptisms associated with Moses, John, and Jesus] I know also a fourth baptism, that by martyrdom and blood, by which also Christ himself was baptized. This one is far more august than the others, since it cannot be defiled by later sins" (*Oration on the Holy Lights* 39:17 [A.D. 381]).

## Pope Siricius

"It would tend to the ruin of our souls if, from our refusal of the saving font of baptism to those who seek it, any of them should depart this life and lose the kingdom and eternal life" (*Letter to Himerius* 3 [A.D. 385]).

## John Chrysostom

"Do not be surprised that I call martyrdom a baptism, for here too the Spirit comes in great haste and there is the taking away of sins and a wonderful and marvelous cleansing of the soul, and just as those being baptized are washed in water, so too those being martyred are washed in their own blood" (*Panegyric on St. Lucian* 2 [A.D. 387]).

## Ambrose of Milan

"But I hear you lamenting because he [the Emperor Valentinian] had not received the sacraments of baptism. Tell me, what else could we have, except the will to it, the asking for it? He too had just now this desire, and after he came into Italy it was begun, and a short time ago he signified that he wished to be baptized by me. Did he, then, not have the grace which he desired? Did he not have what he eagerly sought? Certainly, because he sought it, he received it. What else does it mean: 'Whatever just man shall be overtaken by death, his soul shall be at rest [Wis. 4:7]?'"  
(*Sympathy at the Death of Valentinian* [A.D. 392]).

## Augustine

"There are three ways in which sins are forgiven: in baptism, in prayer, and in the greater humility of penance; yet God does not forgive sins except to the baptized" (*Sermons to Catechumens on the Creed* 7:15 [A.D. 395]).

"I do not hesitate to put the Catholic catechumen, burning with divine love, before a baptized heretic. Even within the Catholic Church herself we put the good catechumen ahead of the wicked baptized person. . . . For Cornelius, even before his baptism, was filled up with the Holy Spirit [Acts 10:44–48], while Simon [Magus], even after his baptism, was puffed up with an unclean spirit [Acts 8:13–19]" (*On Baptism, Against the Donatists* 4:21:28 [A.D. 400]).

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"That the place of baptism is sometimes supplied by suffering is supported by a substantial argument which the same blessed Cyprian draws from the circumstance of the thief, to whom, although not baptized, it was said, 'Today you shall be with me in paradise' [Luke 23:43]. Considering this over and over again, I find that not only suffering for the name of Christ can supply for that which is lacking by way of baptism, but even faith and conversion of heart [i.e., baptism of desire] if, perhaps, because of the circumstances of the time, recourse cannot be had to the celebration of the mystery of baptism" (ibid., 4:22:29).

"When we speak of within and without in relation to the Church, it is the position of the heart that we must consider, not that of the body. . . . All who are within [the Church] in heart are saved in the unity of the ark [by baptism of desire]" (ibid., 5:28:39).

"[According to] apostolic tradition . . . 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" (*Forgiveness and the Just Deserts of Sin, and the Baptism of Infants* 1:24:34 [A.D. 412]).

"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' [John 3:5], 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]" (*The City of God* 13:7 [A.D. 419]).

## Pope Leo I

"And because of the transgression of the first man, the whole stock of the human race was tainted; no one can be set free from the state of the old Adam save through Christ's sacrament of baptism, in which there are no distinctions between the reborn, as the apostle [Paul] says, 'For as many of you as were baptized in Christ did put on Christ; there is neither Jew nor Greek . . . ' [Gal. 3:27–28]" (*Letters* 15:10[11] [A.D. 445]).

## Fulgentius of Ruspe

"From that time at which our Savior said, 'If anyone is not reborn of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven' [John 3:5], no one can, 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 life eternal" (*The Rule of Faith* 43 [A.D. 524]).

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## Trinitarian Baptism

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For a sacrament to be valid, three things have to be present: the correct form, the correct matter, and the correct intention. With baptism, the correct intention is to do what the Church does, the correct matter is water, and the correct form is the baptizing "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19).

Unfortunately, not all religious organizations use this form. In fact, Jehovah's Witnesses sometimes use no formula at all in their baptisms, and an even larger group, the "Jesus Only" Pentecostals, baptize "in the name of Jesus." As a result, the baptisms of these groups are invalid; thus, they are not Christian, but pseudo-Christian.

Both groups also reject the Trinity. Jehovah's Witnesses claim that Jesus is not God, a heresy known as Arianism (after its fourth-century founder), and the "Jesus Only" Pentecostals claim that there is only a single person, Jesus, in the Godhead, a heresy known as Sabellianism (after its inventor in the third century; see the Catholic Answers tract, *God in Three Persons*).

"Jesus Only" Pentecostals note that Jesus told the apostles to baptize in "*the name*" (singular) of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, but they make the mistake of assuming that name is *Jesus*. There may not be a single name that Jesus has in mind at all, just as when we say, "Stop! In the name of the law," we do not have a personal name in mind. If he did have such a name in mind, it may have been something such as *God* or *Yahweh* or *Lord*.

"Jesus Only" Pentecostals also argue that the New Testament talks about people being baptized "in the name of Jesus," but there are only four such passages (Acts 2:38, 8:16, 10:48, and 19:5). Further, these passages do not use the same designation in each place (some say "Lord Jesus," other say "Jesus Christ"), indicating that they were not technical formulas used in the baptism but simply descriptions by Luke. These four descriptions are not to be considered as a substitute for or contradiction of the divine command of the Lord Jesus Christ to: "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19).

Rather, the phrase "baptized in the name of Jesus" is simply Luke's way to distinguish Christian baptism from other baptisms of the period, such as John's baptism (which Luke mentions in Acts 1:5, 22, 10:37, 11:16, 13:24, 18:25, 19:4), Jewish proselyte baptism, and the baptisms of pagan cults (such as Mithraism). It also indicates the person into whose Mystical Body baptism incorporates us (Rom. 6:3).

The early Church Fathers, of course, agreed. As the following quotes illustrate, Christians have from the beginning recognized that the correct form of baptism requires one to baptize "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

### The Didache

"After the foregoing instructions, baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in living [running] water. If you have no living water, then baptize in other water, and if you are not able in cold, then in warm. If you have neither, pour water three times on the head, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Before baptism, let the one baptizing and the one to be baptized fast, as also any others who are able. Command the one who is to be baptized to fast beforehand for one or two days" (*Didache* 7:1 [A.D. 70]).

### Tatian the Syrian

"Then said Jesus unto them, 'I have been given all authority in heaven and earth; and as my Father has sent me, so I also send you. Go now into all the world, and preach my gospel in all the creation; and teach all the peoples, and baptize them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit; and teach them to keep all whatsoever I commanded you: and lo, I am with you all the days, unto the end of the world' [Matt. 28:18-20]" (*The Diatesseron* 55 [A.D. 170]).

### Hippolytus

"When the one being baptized goes down into the water, the one baptizing him shall put his hand on him and speak thus: 'Do you believe in God, the Father Almighty?' And he that is being baptized shall say: 'I believe.' Then, having his hand imposed upon the head of the one to be baptized, he shall baptize him once. Then he shall say: 'Do you believe in Christ Jesus . . . ?' And when he says: 'I believe,' he is baptized again. Again shall he say: 'Do you believe in the Holy Spirit and the holy Church and the resurrection of the flesh?' The one being baptized then says: 'I believe.' And so he is baptized a third time" (*The Apostolic Tradition* 21 [A.D. 215]).

### Tertullian

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"After his resurrection he promises in a pledge to his disciples that he will send them the promise of his Father; and lastly, he commands them to baptize into the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, not into a unipersonal God. And indeed it is not once only, but three times, that we are immersed into the three persons, at each several mention of their names" (*Against Praxeas* 26 [A.D. 216]).

## Origen

"The Lord himself told his disciples that they should baptize all peoples in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . . for indeed, legitimate baptism is had only in the name of the Trinity" (*Commentary on Romans* 5:8 [A.D. 248]).

## The Acts of Xantippe and Polyxena

"Then Probus . . . leapt into the water, saying, 'Jesus Christ, Son of God, and everlasting God, let all my sins be taken away by this water.' And Paul said, 'We baptize thee in the name of the Father and Son and Holy Ghost.' After this he made him to receive the Eucharist of Christ" (*Acts of Xantippe and Polyxena* 21 [A.D. 250]).

## Cyprian of Carthage

"He [Jesus] commanded them to baptize the Gentiles in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. How then do some say that though a Gentile be baptized . . . never mind how or of whom, so long as it be done in the name of Jesus Christ, the remission of sins can follow—when Christ himself commands the nations to be baptized in the full and united Trinity?" (*Letters* 73:18 [A.D. 253]).

## Eusebius of Caesarea

"We believe . . . each of these to be and to exist: the Father, truly Father, and the Son, truly Son, and the Holy Ghost, truly Holy Ghost, as also our Lord, sending forth his disciples for the preaching, said, 'Go teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.' Concerning whom we confidently affirm that so we hold, and so we think, and so we have held aforetime, and we maintain this faith unto the death, anathematizing every godless heresy" (*Letter to the People of His Diocese* 3 [A.D. 323]).

## Cyril of Jerusalem

"You were led by the hand to the holy pool of divine baptism, as Christ was carried from the cross to this sepulcher here before us [the tomb of Jesus at Jerusalem]. And each of you was asked if he believed in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. And you confessed that saving confession, and descended three times into the water, and again ascended, and in this there was suggested by a symbol the three days of Christ's burial" (*Catechetical Lectures* 20:4 [A.D. 350]).

## Athanasius

"And the whole faith is summed up, and secured in this, that a Trinity should ever be preserved, as we read in the Gospel, 'Go ye and baptize all the nations in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost' (Matt. 28:19). And entire and perfect is the number of the Trinity" (*On the Councils of Arminum and Seleucia* 2:28 [A.D. 361]).

## Basil the Great

"The Holy Spirit, too, is numbered with the Father and the Son, because he is above creation, and is ranked as we are taught by the words of the Lord in the Gospel, 'Go and baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.' He who, on the contrary, places the Spirit before the Son, or alleges him to be older than the Father, resists the ordinance of God, and is a stranger to the sound faith, since he fails to preserve the form of doxology which he has received, but adopts some newfangled device in order to be pleasing to men" (*Letters* 52:4 [A.D. 367]).

## Ambrose of Milan

"Moreover, Christ himself says: 'I and the Father are one.' 'One,' said he, that there be no separation of power and nature; but again, 'We are,' that you may recognize Father and Son, forasmuch as the perfect Father is believed to have begotten the perfect Son, and the Father and the Son are one, not by confusion of person, but by unity of nature. We say, then, that there is one God, not two or three gods" (*The Faith* 1:1[9–10] [A.D. 379]).

## Gregory of Nazianz

"But not yet perhaps is there formed upon your soul any writing good or bad; and you want to be written upon today. . . . I will baptize you and make you a disciple in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost; and these

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three have one common name, the Godhead. And you shall know, both by appearances and by words that you reject  
all ungodliness, and are united to all the Godhead" (*Orations* 40:45 [A.D. 380]).

## Jerome

"[S]eeing that a man, baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, becomes a temple of the Lord, and that while the old abode is destroyed a new shrine is built for the Trinity, how can you say that sins can be remitted among the Arians without the coming of the Holy Ghost? How is a soul purged from its former stains which has not the Holy Ghost?" (*Dialogue Against the Luciferians* 6 [A.D. 382]).

## Gregory of Nyssa

"And we, in receiving baptism . . . conceal ourselves in [the water] as the Savior did in the earth: and by doing this thrice we represent for ourselves that grace of the resurrection which was wrought in three days. And this we do, not receiving the sacrament in silence, but while there are spoken over us the names of the three sacred persons on whom we believed, in whom we also hope, from whom comes to us both the fact of our present and the fact of our future existence" (*Sermon For the Day of Lights* [A.D. 383]).

## Augustine

"Baptism in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost has Christ for its authority, not any man, whoever he may be; and Christ is the truth, not any man" (*On Baptism, Against the Donatists* 4:24 [57] [A.D. 400]).

"O Lord our God, we believe in you, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. For the truth would not say, 'Go, baptize all nations in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,' unless you were a Trinity" (*The Trinity* 15:28[51] [A.D. 408]).

## Theodoret of Cyr

"And what need is there of many words, when it is possible to refute falsehood in few? We provide that those who year by year come up for holy baptism should carefully learn the faith set forth at Nicaea by the holy and blessed Fathers; and initiating them as we have been bidden, we baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, pronouncing each name singly" (*Letters* 145 [A.D. 444]).

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