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

Significantly, though Paul baptized a few, Christ never baptized anyone (Jn 4:2)—very odd if baptism saves. The Savior of the world must have deliberately avoided baptizing to make it clear that baptism has no part in salvation. Yes, Christ said we must be "born [again] of *water* and of the Spirit" to be saved (Jn 3:5), but it is unwarranted to assume that "water" here means baptism. To do so would contradict the wealth of Scripture we have seen which proves salvation is not by baptism.

Jesus was speaking to Nicodemus, a rabbi to whom "water" would not mean *baptism* (which was unknown in Jewish law) but the ceremonial cleansing of someone who had been defiled (Ex 30, 40; Lv 13, 15, etc.). And that is what Christ meant. His death would make it possible to "sanctify and cleanse [His church] with the washing of water by the word [of the gospel] (Eph 5:25-27). Christ said, "Now ye are *clean through the word* which I have spoken" (Jn 15:3). Like Christ, Paul put water and the Spirit together, referring to the "washing of regeneration" and linking it with the "renewing of the Holy Ghost" (Ti 3:5). We are born again by the Holy Spirit and by the Word or gospel of God, which is sometimes called "water" because of its cleansing power. As Peter said, we are "born again...by the word of God" (1 Pt 1:23).

It was obviously this figure of Old Testament ceremonial cleansing which Peter communicated to his Jewish audience in his Pentecost sermon: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins" (Acts 2:38). It is clear from the many other scriptures we've given that Peter wasn't saying that baptism saves, but that it offered a ceremonial cleansing uniquely applicable to his Jewish hearers. To be baptized was to be identified before the fanatical Jews of Jerusalem with this hated Jesus Christ as one's personal Savior. Baptism cost family and friends and endangered one's life, as it still does in Israel and Muslim countries. Those who are afraid to take this public stand in such cultures are even today considered not to be true believers. Thus for a Jew to be publicly baptized at that time in that culture was, in a sense, to "wash away [his] sins" (Acts 22:16), as Ananias told Saul.

"[T]he gospel of Christ...is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth [it]" (Rom 1:16). That gospel as Paul preached it required faith in Christ's blood poured out in death for one's sins on the cross and said nothing about baptism. To preach baptismal regeneration is to preach a false gospel that cannot save, which is why Paul cursed those who did so. The difference between faith in Christ alone and faith in Christ *plus baptism* has eternal consequences. Let us stand firmly for and preach the true gospel that saves.

—Dave Hunt
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Scriptures taken from the King James Version

1 H.J. Schroeder, trans., *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (Tan Books, 1978), 33, 53.
2 *Vatican Council II, The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Austin Flannery, O.P., General Editor (Costello Publishing Company, 1988 rev. ed.), 412.
3 Ibid, 365.
4 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (The Wanderer Press, 1994), 224, 320.
5 *Trent*, op. cit., 22, 23, 54.
6 *Code of Canon Law* (Paulist Press, 1985), 122, 614.
7 *Trent*, op. cit., 44.

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Baptismal Regeneration?

Christ commanded His original disciples to go into all the world and preach the gospel (Mk 16:15). Those of every nation who believed in Christ as their Savior were to be baptized "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (Mt 28:19). These *new* disciples were to preach the gospel everywhere and to baptize those who believed (v 20) through their testimony as Christianity spread worldwide.

Baptism in the early church was by immersion: "they went down both into the water....[W]hen they were come up out of the water" (Acts 8:38-39), etc. Why? Because baptism symbolizes the believer's identification with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection: "we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead...we also should walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:4).

Unfortunately, various innovations and heresies were gradually introduced regarding baptism: that one must be baptized to be saved; indeed, that baptism itself saves the soul even when administered to infants. These heresies became known as the doctrine of baptismal regeneration. Most Protestants holding these beliefs today are not aware that they came down through the Roman Catholic Church. Lutheran churches retain the error today.

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

Trent anathematizes all who deny that "the merit of Jesus Christ is applied...to infants by the sacrament of baptism" or who deny that by baptism "the guilt of original sin is remitted...."[5] Today's *Code of Canon Law* (Canon 849)

declares that those baptized are thereby "freed from their sins, are reborn as children of God and...incorporated in the Church." Canon 204 states: "The Christian faithful are those who...have been incorporated in Christ through baptism" and are thereby members of the one, true Catholic Church.[6]

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

Consider Cornelius's household: they heard the gospel, believed it and were baptized. That there were no infants baptized is also clear, for they had all gathered "to hear all things that are commanded thee of God" (Acts 10:33). "[T]he Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard [and, obviously, understood and believed] the word" (v 44); and they spoke with tongues (v 46). That they had "received the Holy Ghost" (v 47) convinced Peter that they were saved. Therefore, he baptized them (v 48).

Nor can infant baptism be supported from the case of the Philippian jailor who "was baptized, he and all his" (Acts 16:33). Again there were no infants present because Paul and Silas preached the gospel "to all that were in his house," (v 32) and "all his house" *believed* (v 34) and were then baptized.

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

The essentials of the gospel

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

Then what about Mark 16:16: "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved"? All who believe the gospel are saved, so of course all who believe and are baptized are saved; but that does not say that baptism saves or that it is essential for salvation. Scores of verses declare, with no mention of baptism, that salvation comes by believing the gospel: "[I]t pleased God by the foolishness of *preaching* to save them that *believe*" (1 Cor 1:21; see also Jn 3:16, 18, 36, 5:24; Acts 10:43, 13:38-39, 16:31; Rom 1:16, 3:28, 4:24, 5:1; 1 Cor 15:1-4; Eph 2:8, etc.). *Not one verse*, however, says that baptism saves.

Numerous verses declare that whosoever does not *believe* is lost, but not one verse declares that whosoever is not *baptized* is lost. Surely the Bible would make it clear that believing in Christ without being baptized cannot save if that were the case, yet it *never* says so! Instead, we have examples of those who believed and were saved without being baptized, such as the thief on the cross and the Old Testament saints (Enoch, Abraham, Joseph, Daniel, et al.), to whom Christian baptism was unknown.

It is essential to realize that some baptismal texts do not refer to Christian water baptism, but to one of the seven other baptisms in Scripture. There was the baptism of the Israelites "unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea" (1 Cor 10:2); the "baptism of John" (Mt 21:25; Mk 11:30; Acts 19:3, etc.), which was a baptism "of repentance" (Mk 1:4; Lk 3:3; Acts 19:4, etc.); the baptism attributed to Christ before the cross–"Though Jesus himself baptized not, but his disciples" did the baptizing (Jn 4:1-2; 3:22); the baptism Christ had to endure of suffering and death–"I have a baptism to be baptized with" (Lk 12:50; Mt 20:22; Mk 10:38, etc.); the baptism Christ now performs on His own "with the Holy Ghost and with fire" (Mt 3:11; Mk 1:8; Lk 3:16; Jn 1:33; Acts 1:5, 11:16); the baptism by the Holy Spirit "into Jesus Christ" (Rom 6:3; Gal 3:27) and thereby "into his death" (Rom 6:4; Col 2:12); and the baptism by the Holy Spirit into the church, the one body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13).

Then why does the Bible say, "There is...*one* baptism" (Eph 4:4-5)? The explanation is simple but carries profound consequences: Baptism of any kind occurs only *once* and is never repeated. In that sense, then, there is only one baptism. Whether one believes that baptism itself saves, or that it symbolizes salvation through identification with Christ in His death and resurrection, the fact that it cannot recur proves that one's salvation can never be lost. For if one must get saved again as a result of losing one's salvation, then baptism must be repeated each time—but there is only *one baptism*.

The dogma of "falling away," like baptismal regeneration, also comes from Roman Catholicism. No Catholic can be certain he is saved; for salvation, which in Catholicism is by works, could be forfeited at any time by failure to continue to perform the works prescribed. Trent declares, "If anyone says that in order to obtain the remission of sins it is necessary...to believe with certainty...that his sins are forgiven him, let him be anathema....If anyone says that he will for certain...have that great gift of perseverance [in the faith] even to the end...let him be anathema."[7] While rebaptism is not practiced in Catholicism, the sacraments of penance and the Mass are said to restore saving grace and are thus repeated endlessly.

Understanding the meaning

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

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