

Born of Water and the Spirit

*A Grammatical, Theological, and Canonical Examination of John 3:5 and Its
Implications for the Doctrine of Water Baptism*

Abstract

John 3:5 stands as one of the most contested verses in the Johannine corpus, frequently marshaled as the chief biblical warrant for the doctrine of baptismal regeneration. The Roman Catholic tradition, reading the verse through the lens of Mosaic typology in 1 Corinthians 10:1–2, has long maintained that “unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (ESV) requires ritual water baptism as a *sine qua non* for salvation. This paper offers a comprehensive grammatical analysis of the Greek text of John 3:5, examines the verse within its Johannine literary context, and tests the prevailing sacramental reading against the broader canonical witness, with particular attention to Pauline soteriology. Drawing on the prophetic background of Ezekiel 36:25–27, this study argues that

ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος (ex hydatos kai pneumatos) functions as a hendiadys describing a single eschatological cleansing-and-renewal effected by the Holy Spirit, not two distinct events of water baptism plus Spirit baptism. The Mosaic typology of the Red Sea crossing, when read in its full Pauline context, actually undermines the sacramentalist position: those who were baptized into Moses (1 Cor 10:2) did not, by virtue of that baptism, enter the inheritance, but were overthrown in the wilderness (1 Cor 10:5). The paper concludes that water baptism is the divinely instituted symbol of the believer’s union with Christ in His death and resurrection (Rom 6:3–4), an outward sign of an inward reality already wrought by grace through faith (Eph 2:8–9), and not the instrumental means by which regeneration is accomplished.

I. Introduction

Few verses in the New Testament have generated the volume of exegetical, sacramental, and polemical literature occasioned by John 3:5. Standing near the threshold of the Fourth Gospel's extended discourse with Nicodemus, the saying functions as an entrée to Johannine soteriology and, simultaneously, as a fault line dividing ecclesiastical traditions. The Catechism of the Catholic Church appeals to this verse as the dominical foundation for the necessity of baptism for salvation, citing it within paragraphs treating Christ's mandate (CCC §1257). Lutheran and certain Anglican readings, while differing in nuance, likewise locate sacramental efficacy in this saying. Yet the historic Reformed and Baptist traditions, attending closely to the prophetic Old Testament background and to the broader Pauline witness, have consistently maintained that the verse refers not to ritual water but to the eschatological cleansing and renewal effected by the Spirit — the new birth promised in Ezekiel 36.

The dispute is not merely lexical. It implicates the *ordo salutis*, the nature of the means of grace, the relation between sign and thing signified, and ultimately the gospel itself. If salvation depends on a ritual administered by ecclesiastical hands, the doctrine of justification by faith alone becomes incoherent. If, conversely, baptism is the symbol of a salvation already received, the sacramental tradition's reading of John 3:5 collapses. This paper undertakes a comprehensive examination of the Greek text, the literary and prophetic context, the principal interpretive options, the Roman Catholic typological argument, and the Pauline doctrine of baptism, with a view toward establishing the correct theological location of water baptism within the New Covenant economy. All English citations are taken from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted; Greek citations follow the Nestle-Aland 28th edition.

II. The Greek Text of John 3:5

A. The Critical Text

The text of John 3:5 is remarkably stable across the manuscript tradition. The reading printed in NA28 and SBLGNT is supported by an overwhelming convergence of witnesses, including $\aleph$ (Sinaiticus), A, B, L, W, and the great majority of later uncials and minuscules. The principal variant of any note is the substitution of οὐρανῶν (heaven) for θεοῦ (God) at the close of the

verse in a small number of Latin and Syriac witnesses, but the reading βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ (kingdom of God) is secure. The verse reads as follows:

ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς· ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω σοι, ἐὰν μὴ τις γεννηθῇ ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος, οὐ δύναται εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ.

apekrithē Iēsous; amēn amēn legō soi, ean mē tis gennēthē ex hydatos kai pneumatos, ou dynatai eiselthein eis tēn basileian tou theou.

“Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God’” (John 3:5, ESV).

B. Lexical and Morphological Analysis

A careful exegesis requires that each significant lexeme be examined in its grammatical and semantic dimensions. The relevant terms are treated in canonical order below.

1. ἀπεκρίθη (apekrithē). Aorist passive indicative, third person singular, from ἀποκρίνομαι, “to answer.” In Hellenistic Greek the passive form has effectively displaced the deponent middle, functioning with active meaning. The aorist locates the response as a discrete event in Jesus’ dialogue with Nicodemus, while the lexical sense “answered” (rather than “said”, εἶπεν) signals a deliberative reply to Nicodemus’s objection in v. 4.

2. ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω σοι (amēn amēn legō soi). The doubled ἀμὴν is a Johannine signature, occurring twenty-five times in the Fourth Gospel and nowhere else in this form in ancient literature prior to John. The Hebrew adverb אָמֵן (’āmēn), denoting affirmation or trustworthiness, is transliterated rather than translated. The doubling intensifies the solemn asseveration: “Truly, truly, I say to you.” This formula introduces sayings of unusual weight, typically those touching directly on the conditions of salvation or the identity of Christ. Its presence here signals that what follows is not a casual remark but a programmatic declaration.

3. ἐὰν μὴ (ean mē). A third-class conditional protasis introduced by ἐὰν with the negative μὴ and the aorist subjunctive γεννηθῇ. The construction expresses what Daniel Wallace classifies as a condition presented as probable or hypothetical, but here it functions as a logical necessity: the apodosis (οὐ δύναται ... εἰσελθεῖν) states an absolute consequence. Idiomatically, ἐὰν μὴ functions equivalently to “unless,” establishing the sine qua non of kingdom entry.

4. τις (tis). Indefinite pronoun, nominative singular, “anyone.” The universalizing scope removes any ethnic or covenantal restriction; the requirement is not merely for Gentiles to convert to

Judaism or for Jews to remain within the covenant, but for every person without exception. This grammatical feature lays the groundwork for the universal scope of v. 16.

5. γεννηθῇ (gennēthē). Aorist passive subjunctive, third person singular, from γεννάω, “to beget, to bear, to bring forth.” In the active voice the verb describes the action of the begetter; in the passive, the action of being begotten or born. Several features of this verb form are critical. First, the *passive voice* indicates that the new birth is something received, not achieved; the subject does not generate his own regeneration but is the recipient of divine action. Second, the *aorist tense* portrays the event as a punctiliar whole, consistent with the New Testament’s presentation of regeneration as a singular, decisive act rather than a process. Third, the verb appears in vv. 3, 5, 6, 7, and 8 of John 3, where it is qualified successively as “from above” (ἄνωθεν), “of water and Spirit,” “of the flesh,” “of the Spirit,” and “of the Spirit” again. This repetition forms an exegetical chain: each occurrence interprets the others, and the cumulative emphasis falls on the Spirit’s agency.

6. ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος (ex hydatos kai pneumatos). This phrase is the interpretive crux of the verse. The preposition ἐκ (ἐξ before a vowel) with the genitive denotes source or origin: “out of, from.” It governs *both* nouns. The two genitives ὕδατος (water) and πνεύματος (spirit) are coordinated by the simple conjunction καὶ and stand under a *single* preposition. This grammatical fact, often noted by Murray J. Harris and others, is of considerable exegetical weight: the absence of a repeated ἐκ before πνεύματος strongly suggests that the two substantives describe a *single* origin or birth rather than two distinct sources. Greek prose customarily repeats a preposition when two genuinely separate referents are intended; the lack of repetition here points toward a unified concept — a hendiadys.

ὕδωρ (hydōr) denotes water in all its forms — the water of physical birth, of ritual washing, of natural rivers and seas, and of eschatological cleansing. In Johannine usage the word is densely symbolic, appearing in connection with John’s baptism (1:26–33), the wedding at Cana (2:7–9), Jacob’s well (4:7–15), the pool at Bethesda (5:7), the Feast of Tabernacles invitation (7:38–39), and the side of the crucified Christ (19:34). In nearly every Johannine instance, water signifies either purification or the life-giving work of the Spirit — explicitly so in 7:38–39, where ὕδωρ ζῶν (living water) is identified by the evangelist as the Spirit.

πνεῦμα (pneuma) carries the polyvalent range of wind, breath, and spirit, deriving from πνέω (“to blow”). The wordplay between wind and Spirit is exploited explicitly in v. 8: τὸ πνεῦμα ὅπου θέλει πνεῖ (“The wind blows where it wishes”). The articular and anarthrous uses of πνεῦμα in John 3 do not in themselves determine personal versus impersonal reference; the context demands that the Holy Spirit is in view. Notably, πνεύματος in v. 5 is anarthrous, but in v. 6b (ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος) it is articular, where “the Spirit” is plainly intended. The anarthrous use in v. 5 does not signal indefiniteness but is conditioned by its parallel construction with the anarthrous ὕδατος.

7. οὐ δύναται εἰσελθεῖν (ou dynatai eiselthein). Present indicative δύναμαι (“to be able”) with complementary aorist infinitive εἰσελθεῖν (“to enter into”). The negation οὐ with the indicative makes a flat factual denial: it is impossible. The infinitive picks up the imagery of v. 3 (“see the kingdom”) and intensifies it to entrance, language that resonates with eschatological inheritance and the kingdom-banquet imagery of the Synoptics (cf. Matt 8:11).

8. εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ (eis tēn basileian tou theou). “Into the kingdom of God.” The phrase βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ appears only twice in the Fourth Gospel (3:3, 5), where the Synoptic frequency is replaced by ζωὴ αἰώνιος (eternal life) as the preferred Johannine soteriological term. The conjunction of these terms here demonstrates their substantive equivalence in Johannine theology: to enter the kingdom is to receive eternal life (cf. vv. 15–16).

C. Grammatical Conclusions

Three grammatical observations bear directly upon the interpretive question. First, the passive voice of γεννηθῆ establishes that the new birth is monergistic in its origin: the subject does not effect his own regeneration. Second, the single preposition ἐξ governing both genitives (ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος) argues against treating “water” and “Spirit” as two discrete entities or two separate births. Third, the consistent narrowing of the qualifying phrases through vv. 3–8 — from ἄνωθεν (from above) to ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος (of water and Spirit) to ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος (of the Spirit) — indicates that the operative agent of regeneration is, finally and simply, the Holy Spirit. The water, on a sound grammatical reading, modifies or qualifies the nature of the Spirit’s work; it does not name an additional, autonomous instrument.

III. The Literary and Historical Context

A. The Nicodemus Dialogue

John 3:1–21 records Jesus’ nocturnal encounter with Nicodemus, identified in v. 1 as “a man of the Pharisees ... a ruler of the Jews,” and later in v. 10 as ὁ διδάσκαλος τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ (“the teacher of Israel”). The article is significant: Nicodemus is presented not as one teacher among many but as a representative, paradigmatic teacher of his nation. This rhetorical positioning is crucial for the interpretation of v. 5, for Jesus’ subsequent rebuke (“Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?”, v. 10) presupposes that the content of v. 5 was, in principle, derivable from the Hebrew Scriptures with which Nicodemus was conversant. Whatever ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος means, it must be intelligible to a first-century Jewish teacher operating without recourse to Christian sacramental categories that had not yet been instituted.

Nicodemus opens with a deferential acknowledgment of Jesus’ divine accreditation (v. 2). Jesus responds with the first ἀμὴν ἀμὴν declaration of the discourse: unless one is born ἄνωθεν, he cannot see the kingdom of God (v. 3). The adverb ἄνωθεν bears the dual sense of “again” and “from above,” and Nicodemus seizes upon the temporal sense (“a second time,” v. 4), missing the spatial-theological sense intended by Jesus. The reiteration in v. 5 then clarifies: birth ἄνωθεν is birth ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος. The two statements are functionally parallel; the latter explicates the former.

B. The Ezekielian Background

The expectation that Nicodemus would have grasped this saying drives the exegete toward the Old Testament prophetic literature, where the conjunction of water and Spirit in the context of eschatological renewal is most densely concentrated. The chief locus is Ezekiel 36:25–27:

“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.” (*Ezek 36:25–27, ESV*)

The structural parallelism is unmistakable. Cleansing water and the bestowal of the Spirit are coordinated as two aspects of a single divine work of new-covenant renewal. The water cleanses; the Spirit indwells; together they constitute the promised inward transformation that the old

covenant could not effect. The Septuagint of Ezekiel 36:25 uses ὕδωρ (water), and v. 27 uses πνεῦμα (spirit). Jesus' phrase ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος maps with striking economy onto this Ezekielian promise.

Adjacent prophetic texts reinforce the connection. Jeremiah 31:31–34 promises a new covenant in which God's law is written on the heart. Isaiah 44:3 promises, "For I will pour water on the thirsty land ... I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring." Joel 2:28–29 anticipates the outpouring of the Spirit. Zechariah 13:1 speaks of a fountain opened for sin and uncleanness. Across this prophetic chorus, water-imagery and Spirit-imagery interpenetrate, both serving as figures for the same eschatological cleansing-and-renewal that God will effect when He establishes His kingdom. For "the teacher of Israel," this constellation of texts should have been the immediate referent of Jesus' saying.

C. Why Sacramental Baptism Cannot Be the Referent in Context

A decisive contextual consideration tells against the sacramental reading: at the moment Jesus speaks these words, Christian baptism does not yet exist. The institution of Christian baptism occurs after the resurrection (Matt 28:19–20). John's baptism, which was extant, was a baptism of repentance in anticipation of one greater (John 1:26–33; Mark 1:4). To impute to Nicodemus a knowledge of post-Pentecost Christian sacrament is anachronistic and contradicts the very premise of Jesus' rebuke in v. 10, which presupposes that Nicodemus ought to have understood the saying from his prior training in the Hebrew Scriptures. A faithful exegesis must locate the meaning of ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος within categories accessible to a first-century rabbi, and that locus is the prophetic promise of new-covenant renewal.

IV. Survey of Interpretive Views

Scholarship has produced four major interpretations of ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος. Each merits brief evaluation.

A. The Sacramental View

On this reading, "water" refers to the water of Christian baptism, and the verse establishes baptism as the instrumental cause of regeneration. This is the official Roman Catholic position, articulated by the Council of Trent (Session VII, canons on baptism, 1547) and reaffirmed in the

Catechism of the Catholic Church (§§1213–1228, 1257). Many medieval and patristic interpreters, including Tertullian and Cyril of Jerusalem, also read the verse this way.

Against this reading three principal objections may be raised. First, as noted above, Christian baptism did not exist at the time of the discourse. Second, the verse becomes unintelligible to Nicodemus on this reading, yet Jesus expects him to comprehend it. Third, the broader Pauline doctrine of justification by faith apart from works of any kind — elaborated below — rules out making any external rite the instrumental cause of salvation.

B. The Natural Birth View

Some interpreters (e.g., Calvin in his earlier formulations, and a number of modern evangelicals) have suggested that “water” refers to physical birth, perhaps to amniotic fluid or to semen, and “Spirit” to spiritual rebirth, so that Jesus is contrasting two births: natural birth is insufficient; one must also be born spiritually. This reading derives some plausibility from the parallel in v. 6: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

However, this view stumbles on the grammar. The single preposition ἐξ governing both nouns argues against a contrast between two births. Moreover, there is no ancient Jewish or Greek text in which “water” simpliciter is a standard idiom for natural birth; if such were the meaning, one would expect a clearer formulation. The contrast between flesh and Spirit in v. 6 is an explication, not a duplication, of v. 5; v. 6 distinguishes the origin of natural life from the origin of regenerated life, while v. 5 names the means by which the regenerated life is brought into being.

C. The Johannine Baptism View

A third view holds that “water” refers to John the Baptist’s baptism of repentance, and “Spirit” to the subsequent baptism of the Spirit promised by John (1:33). On this reading, Jesus is requiring of Nicodemus what the populace had already received: submission to John’s preparatory baptism plus reception of the Spirit. This view has the merit of staying within the historical horizon of the dialogue.

Its weakness is that John’s baptism is nowhere required as a precondition of kingdom entry; the requirement on John’s lips is repentance and faith in the one coming after him. Moreover, the

absolutist framing of John 3:5 (“unless anyone is born of water and the Spirit”) does not fit a temporary, geographically restricted ministry of repentance that ended with John’s imprisonment. The kingdom would then have been closed to anyone not present in first-century Judea during John’s ministry.

D. The Hendiadys View (Ezekiel 36)

The most exegetically defensible reading treats ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος as a hendiadys: a single concept expressed by two coordinated terms. The phrase describes one birth, characterized as a cleansing-and-Spirit-renewal in fulfillment of Ezekiel 36:25–27. The water is symbolic of the cleansing that the Spirit accomplishes; the kai joins the two terms as descriptors of the same divine work. D. A. Carson, Andreas Köstenberger, Leon Morris, B. F. Westcott, and many others adopt this reading.

This view satisfies every contextual constraint. It is intelligible to Nicodemus, who as “the teacher of Israel” ought to know Ezekiel. It accounts for the single preposition governing both genitives. It coheres with the narrowing focus of vv. 3–8 onto the Spirit alone. It harmonizes with Johannine usage elsewhere, where water and Spirit are linked symbolically (3:5; 4:10–14; 7:38–39). And it preserves the broader New Testament soteriology of salvation by grace through faith, without requiring a sacramental insertion into the means of regeneration. This is the reading adopted in the present paper.

V. The Roman Catholic Position and the Mosaic Typology

A. Magisterial Statements

The Roman Catholic position rests upon a tradition of magisterial pronouncements grounded principally in John 3:5. Trent (Session VII, canon 5 on baptism, 1547) declares: “If anyone says that baptism is optional, that is, not necessary for salvation, let him be anathema.” The Catechism states that “the Lord himself affirms that baptism is necessary for salvation” and immediately cites John 3:5 (CCC §1257). The Church recognizes baptism of desire and baptism of blood as exceptional cases, but the ordinary necessity of water baptism is held as a matter of divine command rooted in this verse.

B. The Mosaic Typology in Catholic Exegesis

Catholic theologians, both classical and contemporary, have buttressed the sacramental reading of John 3:5 by appeal to a typological argument drawn principally from 1 Corinthians 10:1–2. The argument runs: as Moses led Israel through the waters of the Red Sea, and the people emerged on the far side as the redeemed people of God, so Christ — the greater Moses — leads His people through the waters of baptism into the kingdom. The water of baptism mirrors the water of the Exodus; just as Israel was not delivered apart from passing through the sea, so the believer is not delivered apart from passing through the baptismal font. The patristic typology was elaborated by Tertullian (*De Baptismo* 9), and in modern Catholic theology by figures such as Jean Daniélou (*The Bible and the Liturgy*, ch. 5).

The text upon which this typology is built reads:

“For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.” (*1 Cor 10:1–4, ESV*)

Catholic exegesis takes the phrase ἐβαπτίσθησαν (“they were baptized”, aorist passive of βαπτίζω) as authorizing the typological correspondence: the sea crossing was a baptism; therefore Christian baptism is the antitype that effects what the sea crossing prefigured. Joined to John 3:5, the resulting theological construction is that water baptism is the necessary means by which the believer is incorporated into the people of God and brought into the kingdom.

C. The Internal Coherence of the Catholic Argument

Within its own frame, the Catholic argument has a certain symmetry. Christ is the greater Moses; the kingdom is the greater Promised Land; baptism is the greater Red Sea. The typology is suggestive and has shaped Christian iconography and liturgical imagination for nearly two millennia. If Paul indeed teaches that the sea crossing was salvifically efficacious, and if the antitype must be greater than the type, then the sacramental efficacy of baptism would seem to follow. The question is whether Paul actually teaches what the typology requires — and to that question we now turn.

VI. The Pauline Theology of Baptism

A. Justification by Faith Apart from Works

Any discussion of Pauline soteriology must begin with the apostle's programmatic statement of the gospel in Romans and Galatians. The thesis of Romans is set out in 3:21–28:

“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law ... the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe ... they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus ... For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.” (*Rom 3:21–28, ESV*)

Paul's declaration that justification is “by faith apart from works of the law” (χωρὶς ἔργων νόμου) admits of no carve-out for sacramental works. The “works of the law” in Pauline usage are not narrowly limited to ceremonial precepts but encompass any human performance of religious obligation. Whatever its sphere — moral, ceremonial, sacramental — the act of the creature does not contribute to the verdict of justification. To insert water baptism into the instrumentation of justification is, in Pauline categories, to revert to a covenant of works.

Ephesians 2:8–9 ratifies this point with equal clarity:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (*Eph 2:8–9, ESV*)

The negation οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων (“not of works”) is universal in scope. The instrumental cause of salvation is faith, and the meritorious cause is grace; the means of grace is the Word and Spirit working faith in the heart. The ritual washing of baptism, however hallowed and biblically commanded, falls on the side of ἔργον (work) when considered as a human action, and therefore cannot be the instrument of justification without contradicting the Pauline gospel.

B. Paul's Own Statement of Priority

A particularly striking statement is found in 1 Corinthians 1:17, where Paul subordinates baptism to preaching in his own apostolic commission:

“For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.” (*1 Cor 1:17, ESV*)

If baptism were the instrument by which salvation is conveyed, Paul's relegation of it as something he was “not sent” to do is inexplicable. The apostle, who pronounces an anathema on any other gospel (Gal 1:8–9), here cheerfully states that he was not commissioned for the very act that the sacramental reading would deem essential to salvation. The only coherent reading is

that baptism, while commanded, is not the instrumental means by which the gospel saves; the gospel—the proclaimed word received by faith—is the means. Baptism follows.

C. The Significance of Baptism in Romans 6:3–4

Paul’s most theologically dense treatment of baptism appears in Romans 6:3–4, where the apostle expounds the union with Christ that baptism signifies:

“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” (*Rom 6:3–4, ESV*)

The crucial verbs are ἐβαπτίσθημεν (“we were baptized,” aorist passive) and συνετάφημεν (“we were buried with,” aorist passive). The baptism in view is not merely a ritual administered with water; it is the believer’s identification with Christ’s death and resurrection. The water signifies what the Spirit has already accomplished: union with Christ in his death and union with Christ in his resurrection. The aorist passives describe a completed reality, not a sacrament whose efficacy lies in the ritual itself. The waters of baptism are the picture; the death-and-resurrection-with-Christ is the thing pictured.

Paul’s pastoral application in Romans 6 confirms this. The apostle does not exhort his readers to be baptized in order to be saved; he reminds them of what their baptism means in light of what they already are. The indicative precedes the imperative: because you have been united with Christ in his death and resurrection (already accomplished), therefore reckon yourselves dead to sin and alive to God. The baptism dramatizes the union; it does not constitute it.

D. Colossians 2:11–12 and the Circumcision-Baptism Connection

Colossians 2:11–12 extends the picture by connecting baptism with circumcision:

“In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.” (*Col 2:11–12, ESV*)

Three observations are decisive. First, the operative circumcision is one “made without hands” (ἀχειροποιήτω) — an unmistakable contrast with any physical, hand-administered rite, whether circumcision in the old covenant or its baptismal counterpart in the new. Second, the

agency of raising-with-Christ is explicitly attributed to “faith in the powerful working of God” (διὰ τῆς πίστεως τῆς ἐνεργείας τοῦ θεοῦ), not to the water itself. The baptism is the locus where the burial-with-Christ is signified; the faith in God’s power is the means by which the raising-with-Christ is appropriated. Third, the parallel with circumcision is illuminating: circumcision in the old covenant was the sign of a covenantal status conferred by God, not the instrument of justification (Rom 4:9–12, where Paul demonstrates that Abraham was justified before his circumcision). The Pauline analogy thus implies that baptism, like circumcision, signifies and seals a reality already established by faith.

E. Titus 3:5 and the “Washing of Regeneration”

Titus 3:5 has sometimes been read as ratifying baptismal regeneration:

“He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.” (*Titus 3:5, ESV*)

Yet the verse itself denies the sacramental reading in its own clause: “not because of works done by us in righteousness.” The phrase λουτροῦ παλιγγενεσίας (“washing of regeneration”) is most plausibly read as a metaphorical description of regeneration itself — a Spirit-effected cleansing — not as a designation of the water rite. The parallel construction joins λουτροῦ παλιγγενεσίας with ἀνακαινώσεως πνεύματος ἁγίου (“renewal of the Holy Spirit”), echoing once again the Ezekielian pairing of cleansing-and-Spirit. The instrument is the Spirit, the action is regeneration, and the imagery is that of washing. To convert this metaphor into a literal sacrament that justifies the sinner is to import a meaning the verse expressly excludes when it denies that salvation rests on “works done by us in righteousness.”

VII. How the Mosaic Typology Fails

A. The Full Argument of 1 Corinthians 10

The Catholic appeal to the Red Sea typology depends upon reading 1 Corinthians 10:1–2 in isolation from its argumentative purpose. When the passage is read in full, the typology argues precisely the opposite of what the sacramentalist reading requires. Paul’s purpose in 1 Corinthians 10 is not to establish the salvific efficacy of baptism, but to warn the Corinthian church against the presumption that participation in Christian sacraments guarantees final salvation. The argument proceeds as follows:

“For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.” (*1 Cor 10:1–5, ESV*)

Note the rhetorical structure. Paul amasses an inventory of corporate participations: all were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized, all ate the same spiritual food, all drank the same spiritual drink. The Eucharistic and baptismal resonances are deliberate. Paul presses the language of Christian sacrament onto the wilderness experience to establish the strongest possible parallel. And then comes the fulcrum: ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἐν τοῖς πλείοσιν αὐτῶν εὐδόκησεν ὁ θεός — “Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased.” They were overthrown in the wilderness.

The point is exegetically devastating to the sacramental reading. Paul deliberately constructs the typology in order to deny that participation in the type guarantees the inheritance. If the type does not infallibly save, the antitype is not required to do so either; rather, the antitype likewise signifies and seals a reality that must be appropriated by faith and confirmed by perseverance. The Mosaic typology, when read in its argumentative entirety, militates against precisely the conclusion the sacramentalist would draw from vv. 1–2 alone.

B. The Application Paul Draws

Paul makes his application explicit in vv. 6–12. The wilderness narrative was written for our admonition (τύποι ἡμῶν ἐγενήθησαν, v. 6) lest the church presume that its sacramental participation insulates it from divine judgment. “Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall” (v. 12). The sacramentalist must explain how baptism can be both the necessary instrument of regeneration and the very thing whose typological precedent Paul cites to disprove the security of those who participate in it. The two propositions are not consistent.

C. The Type Was Not Salvific in Itself

What, then, did the Red Sea crossing accomplish? It accomplished what the type properly accomplishes: it inaugurated the journey, separated the redeemed people from Egypt, and prefigured the greater salvation to come. But the journey had to be completed; the inheritance had to be entered; faith had to persevere. The crossing did not, in itself, deposit Israel in the

Promised Land. The generation that experienced the crossing died in the wilderness. The journey from the sea to Canaan was undertaken by faith, and where faith failed, the participants of the type forfeited the antitype.

Applied to baptism, the lesson is precise. Baptism inaugurates the believer's visible identification with the people of God; it dramatizes union with Christ in his death and resurrection; it signs and seals the covenantal blessings. But baptism does not, in itself, complete the believer's salvation. The faith that grasps Christ is the faith that perseveres; where the heart's embrace of Christ is absent, the water leaves the recipient as it found him. As Paul says of his Jewish kinsmen in Romans 9:6, "Not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel." The visible covenant member is not always the regenerate covenant member; the typology of the wilderness establishes precisely this distinction.

D. The Argument from Cornelius

An empirical confirmation appears in Acts 10:44–48. While Peter is still speaking, the Holy Spirit falls upon Cornelius and his household. The Jewish believers are astounded that the gift of the Spirit has been poured out upon Gentiles, and only then does Peter command that they be baptized. The order is decisive: the Spirit comes first, then water baptism. If water baptism were the instrumental means of regeneration, the order of Acts 10 would be inexplicable. The Spirit cannot regenerate before regeneration's necessary instrument has been administered — yet here He does precisely that. The Cornelius narrative establishes that the Spirit's sovereign work precedes and grounds the sacramental sign; baptism does not effect what is already done, it confesses it.

Equally compelling is the thief on the cross (Luke 23:42–43). Without baptism, without church membership, without any sacramental administration, the thief receives the personal promise of Christ: "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise." The promise is grounded in faith, not in the absence of opportunity for baptism. If baptism were the necessary instrument of salvation in the strict sense the Roman Catholic position requires, the case of the penitent thief would constitute a counter-example that no doctrine of "baptism of desire" can fully evade, since the thief did not desire baptism; he believed in Christ, and on that ground alone was justified.

VIII. The Meaning of John 3:5 in Its Canonical Setting

A. The Hendiadys Resolved

We are now positioned to state, with the support of the grammar and the canon, the meaning of ἐὰν μή τις γεννηθῇ ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος. Jesus is declaring to Nicodemus that entry into the kingdom of God requires the eschatological birth promised in Ezekiel 36 — a cleansing-and-renewal effected by the Holy Spirit. The water is not the water of John’s baptism, nor the water of Christian baptism, nor amniotic fluid; it is the symbolic water of prophetic cleansing, set in apposition with the Spirit as descriptors of one divine work. The construction is hendiadys: “water-and-Spirit” names a single eschatological birth, in which the Spirit cleanses the heart and renews the will.

This reading is confirmed by the narrowing focus of the immediately following verses. In v. 6, the contrast is between flesh and Spirit; the water has dropped out, because it was always a descriptor of the Spirit’s cleansing work rather than an independent element. In v. 8, the wind/Spirit alone is the agent of the new birth. The whole discourse, when read as a coherent unit, places the burden of regeneration squarely on the sovereign work of the Spirit, with water serving as the prophetic-symbolic descriptor borrowed from Ezekiel.

B. The Universality and Particularity of the Statement

The saying is universal in scope: ἐὰν μή τις (“unless anyone”) places every human being under the same requirement. It is also particular in agency: the new birth is given by God, not achieved by the creature. Jesus thus presents Nicodemus with both the indispensability of regeneration and its sheer gratuity. The kingdom is open to all, but only on God’s terms; and God’s terms are that He Himself effects the new birth by His Spirit, granting it to whomever He wills (v. 8, ὅπου θέλει πνεῖ, “where it wishes it blows”).

C. Why the Verse Cannot Bear Sacramental Weight

If John 3:5 is read sacramentally, several theological and exegetical problems arise simultaneously. The verse becomes anachronistic in its context; it becomes unintelligible to Nicodemus; it contradicts the order of the Spirit’s work in Acts 10; it conflicts with Paul’s relegation of baptism in 1 Corinthians 1:17; it stands in tension with the absolute denial of

works-righteousness in Ephesians 2:8–9; it requires the typology of 1 Corinthians 10 to mean the opposite of what Paul argues; and it leaves the thief on the cross either anomalous or covered by an ad hoc supplementary doctrine. Read prophetically and canonically, by contrast, the verse coheres seamlessly with the wider biblical witness: the new birth is the work of the Spirit, prefigured by the prophets, effected by grace, received by faith, and signified — not effected — by water baptism.

IX. The Theology of Water Baptism as Symbol

A. The Sign-and-Thing-Signified Distinction

Reformed and Baptist theology, drawing on Augustine’s distinction between signum and res, has long maintained that baptism is the sign of an inward reality without being identical to or instrumentally causative of that reality. The water is the sign; the Spirit’s regenerating work is the res. The sign is divinely instituted (Matt 28:19), commanded for all believers (Acts 2:38), and not optional in the sense that disobedience is not licit. But the sign does not coerce the reality; one may receive the water without the Spirit (as Simon Magus, Acts 8:13–23), and one may receive the Spirit without water (as Cornelius before his baptism, Acts 10:44–48).

B. Baptism as Public Confession and Identification

Baptism in the New Testament is the public, embodied confession of a faith that has already taken hold of Christ. The Ethiopian eunuch is baptized after his confession (Acts 8:36–38, though some manuscripts include v. 37 explicitly). The Philippian jailer is baptized “the same hour of the night” after his believing (Acts 16:33). The Corinthian converts are baptized after they hear, believe, and are baptized in that order (Acts 18:8). Across the Lukan record, the sequence is uniform: gospel proclamation, faith, baptism. The water seals the faith; it does not generate it.

C. 1 Peter 3:21 and the Definition of Baptism’s Salvific Reference

Perhaps the clearest exegetical formulation of baptism’s symbolic function is 1 Peter 3:21:

“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 good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” (*1 Pet 3:21, ESV*)

Peter's qualification is exhaustive: not σαρκὸς ἀπόθεσις ὕπου ("not the removal of dirt from the body"), but συνειδήσεως ἀγαθῆς ἐπερώτημα εἰς θεόν ("an appeal to God for a good conscience"). The apostle expressly denies that the physical washing has salvific power, and locates the salvific reference of baptism in the inward disposition of faith — the appeal of the conscience to God. The phrase δι' ἀναστάσεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ("through the resurrection of Jesus Christ") anchors baptism's saving reference in Christ's redemptive work, not in the water itself. Baptism saves in the sense that it is the appointed sign of faith's appeal to God on the basis of Christ's finished work; it does not save in the sense that the water possesses inherent regenerating power.

D. The Outward Sign of an Inward Grace

From these considerations the classical Reformed-Baptist definition emerges: water baptism is the outward sign of an inward grace. It is the divinely commanded symbol of the believer's union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection; the public confession of the heart's faith in the gospel; the visible incorporation into the visible church; the seal of the covenant blessings already conveyed by faith. It is not optional in the sense that a believer may disregard the command; it is optional in the sense that no exegetically defensible reading of Scripture makes it the instrumental cause of the inward grace it signifies.

E. The Order of the Ordo Salutis

The order is therefore: hearing of the word (Rom 10:17), conviction by the Spirit (John 16:8), regeneration as monergistic gift (John 3:8; Eph 2:5; Titus 3:5), faith and repentance as the believing response (Acts 16:31; Mark 1:15), justification by faith alone (Rom 5:1), baptism as the public confession of faith (Acts 2:38), and a life of progressive sanctification by the Spirit (Phil 2:12–13). Baptism appears in this order not as the instrumental cause of justification or regeneration but as the public seal of what God has accomplished. The reverse order — baptism first, then justification through the sacrament — inverts the Pauline gospel and re-introduces a covenant of works under the guise of sacramental grace.

X. Conclusion

John 3:5 is the saying of Jesus to Nicodemus that unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. The grammar of the verse, with its single preposition governing both genitives and its passive verb of generation, points toward a unified rather than bifurcated birth. The literary context, with its appeal to “the teacher of Israel,” presupposes an Old Testament rather than a sacramental referent. The prophetic background of Ezekiel 36:25–27 supplies precisely the conceptual coordinates required: God will sprinkle clean water upon His people, and He will put His Spirit within them, effecting the new birth that constitutes citizenship in the eschatological kingdom. The water of John 3:5 is the prophetic water of cleansing; the Spirit of John 3:5 is the agent of the new covenant’s renewal; and together they describe one divine work, accomplished sovereignly upon the elect.

The Roman Catholic typology of Moses bringing Israel through the waters of the Red Sea, when read in the full context of 1 Corinthians 10, does not establish the sacramental efficacy of baptism but rather undermines it. Paul appeals to the typology not to ground a sacrament of regeneration but to admonish the Corinthian church that participation in even the most exalted typological event does not guarantee perseverance to the inheritance. Those who were baptized into Moses were overthrown in the wilderness. The lesson is precisely the inverse of what the sacramental reading requires.

The Pauline corpus, read in its plain sense, reserves the instrumental cause of salvation to grace through faith, apart from works of any description. Paul subordinates his own baptismal ministry to the preaching of the gospel (1 Cor 1:17); he treats baptism as the sign of union with Christ already established by faith (Rom 6:3–4; Col 2:11–12); and he denies that any external rite is salvifically operative in itself. The Petrine corpus expressly clarifies that the saving reference of baptism is not the removal of physical dirt but the appeal of a good conscience to God through the resurrection of Christ (1 Pet 3:21).

Water baptism, accordingly, is the divinely commanded outward symbol of an inward salvation already wrought by the Spirit through faith. It is the public seal of the believer’s union with Christ in his death and resurrection. It is the sacramental sign of the covenant of grace as administered in the new covenant economy. It is not the means by which the new birth is conferred, nor the instrument by which justification is achieved, nor the necessary mechanical cause of entry into the kingdom of God. To make it so is to misread John 3:5, to invert the

typology of 1 Corinthians 10, to contradict the gospel as Paul preaches it, and to obscure the gratuity of grace which is the very heart of the New Testament's good news.

The conclusion may therefore be stated with biblical-theological precision: born of water and Spirit, the believer enters the kingdom of God by virtue of the sovereign regenerating work of the Holy Spirit promised in Ezekiel 36, received by faith in Jesus Christ, and confessed publicly in the waters of baptism that signify, but do not effect, the salvation freely given in the gospel.

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