

Jesus Teaches Us How to Interpret the Bible – Catholic Style

By Robert Sungenis, Ph.D.

Driving in my car the other day, I turned on the radio and came across one of the local Protestant stations. A preacher was expounding on John 3:5 where Jesus says, “Unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”

In his exegesis, he was absolutely sure that John did not mean *physical* water. Instead, he proposed that John’s water referred to the “word of God.” He cited Ephesians 5:26 and claimed that because Paul referred to “washing her with water by the word,” water was a symbol for Scripture. He transferred this meaning back to John 3:5 and concluded: unless one is born of the word of God (hearing and believing the Bible) and the Spirit (being “born again” by accepting Jesus in your heart) he cannot enter the kingdom of God. So, forget baptism with water as a necessity for salvation.

But how can this radio Bible preacher be so sure that his exegesis and interpretation is the true one, that it should be trusted by his radio audience? What about the other interpretations given by both Protestant and Catholic scholars to this passage? The Catholic Church, along with many Protestant Churches, have taught constantly since the Early Church Fathers that the water of John 3:5 refers to water baptism, which is not a symbol but the very means to receive the grace of God to cleanse one from Original Sin.¹ By what authority does one confidently determine which interpretation is true?

We could approach this question by debating whether the Bible alone is sufficient as the final, infallible rule of faith for man, or whether the Church and her Sacred Tradition are to be considered on equal footing, as taught by the Fathers of the Church.² This would draw us into a discussion about Church authority and/or the validity of Oral Tradition, discussing passages like Matthew 16:18-19 and 2 Thessalonians 2:15, which deal with Peter’s prerogative to ‘bind and loose’ and the preservation of oral tradition, respectively. However, this might cause us to elude the primary *hermeneutic* issue being questioned: can we determine by logical principles of textual exegesis whether John’s water refers to effectual water baptism and is neither referring to the Bible nor a symbolic ceremony signifying salvation?

If you are game for this, let’s begin by examining some principles the Bible itself teaches about interpretation. A good passage in this regard is Mark 12:18-27. Jesus is in a discussion with the

¹ Catholic Catechism, ¶¶ 1213-1228.

² Catholic Catechism, ¶ 82: “As a result the Church, to whom the transmission and interpretation of Revelation is entrusted, ‘does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scripture alone. Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence.’”

Sadducees about the resurrection. Trying to prove their belief in no future resurrection, the Sadducees³ pose a seemingly unanswerable question to Jesus concerning a woman who was married to seven men, each dying before they had children with her. They ask Jesus whose wife she will be in the resurrection, knowing that he cannot commit to one of the seven, thereby giving themselves a reason to deny the concept of resurrection. Jesus answers by saying, “Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God?” He then proceeds to tell them that those who rise are no longer in the married state, but are like the angels in heaven who are attached to no one. What is important to note is that we will search in vain to find any information in Scripture which denies marriage in heaven or that we will be like the angels. Scripture does not cover this particular aspect of the Sadducees’ question and thus Jesus is relying on his own divine knowledge. Is it not safe to conclude, then, that part of Jesus’ answer is not based on Scripture, and that he isn’t therefore relying on “Sola Scriptura?” This is not unlike what the Catholic Church does today when she answers questions which Scripture does not address or on which Scripture does not give precise information, e.g., abortion, contraception, cloning, surrogate motherhood, polygamy, slavery, etc. The Catholic Church claims authority to teach in these areas of faith and morals, relying on divine guidance outside of Scripture in order to give correct answers to its people.⁴ This is the first principle Jesus teaches us.

Now watch what Jesus does as he teaches us a second principle of interpretation. After answering the “marriage” question, Jesus proceeds to the “resurrection” question. It is only here that he uses Scripture. But as we will see, Jesus’ does not merely cite a ‘proof text.’ Rather, Jesus uses his own reasoning ability to draw a conclusion that is only implicit in that Scripture.⁵ He says:

Now about the dead rising — have you not read in the book of Moses, in the account of the bush, how God said to him, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!”

The above text does not explicitly say there is a resurrection. Rather, Jesus reasons, and expects the Sadducees to accept his reasoning, that Exodus 3:6’s statement can only be true if Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are still living in conscious existence, albeit in another realm, even though their bodies are in graves. The separation of their consciousnesses from their dead bodies is, according to Jesus, a

³ Since they didn’t believe in the resurrection, and therefore, could never enjoy the bliss of heaven, that is why they were: Sad, you see!

⁴ Catholic Catechism, ¶ 113: “Read the Scripture within ‘the living Tradition of the whole Church.’ According to a saying of the Fathers, Sacred Scripture is written principally in the Church’s heart rather than in documents and records, for the Church carries in her Tradition the living memorial of God’s Word, and it is the Holy Spirit who gives her the spiritual interpretation of the Scripture...”

⁵ This is similar to what happens when the Church formulates explicit teachings from implicit information in Scripture, for example, on the doctrines of Mary. She is relying on powers outside the raw text of Scripture to arrive at truth. These powers are guided by the Holy Spirit, just as Jesus was guided by the Holy Spirit to answer the Sadducees.

“resurrection.”⁶ What is Jesus doing? Well, having already answered the question about whether people will be married in heaven, Jesus goes beyond the Sadducees’ original inquiry to an aspect of resurrection they have probably never given much thought. Jesus shows that resurrection is more than raising a physical body; it is also raising a soul to heaven.⁷ In fact, the resurrection of the soul is the more critical of the two, since it must precede the resurrection of the body for the latter to occur.

In his usual manner of teaching, Jesus is ‘killing two birds with one stone.’ The first ‘bird’, is the use of extra-scriptural information to nullify false belief. The second ‘bird’, is showing the Sadducees they have misinterpreted Scripture, and are probably not saved themselves, because they have never understood the primary message of the Old Testament: that one first has to be changed on the inside, in his soul, to experience the resurrection. If you can’t believe in the resurrection of the body, then you certainly can’t believe in the resurrection of the soul, which also means that you have not become a child of God. Conversely, if you experience the resurrection of the soul, then you will also enjoy the resurrection of the body to eternal life. The Sadducees got so bogged down with irrelevant religious minutia that they lost sight of the true essence of resurrection, not unlike their counterparts, the Pharisees.

Notice what is happening. Interpretation depends on the reasoning ability of a thinking person. Reasoning is the ability to gather independent facts and determine how they relate to each other. Scripture itself cannot “interpret” Exodus 3:6, because Scripture cannot reason or think. Scripture can only give us the *testimony* of what God said in Exodus 3:6; it cannot, in fact, “interpret itself.” Jesus’ reasoning is astounding. Without Jesus’ penetrating interpretation, someone could read Exodus 3:6 for a whole lifetime, as the Sadducees apparently had done, and never extract from it the conclusion that Jesus reached. Since Exodus 3:6 does not explicitly, only implicitly, teach that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob have already experienced a resurrection and are alive with God in heaven — perhaps more “alive” than they were on earth since they are not subject to sin or death any longer — we see that “interpretation” depends on much more than cataloguing facts from the text. In fact, we should all stand back in abject fear because of what has just been revealed to us about the nature of interpretation. We have discovered that Scripture is far deeper and mysterious than we may have imagined. We see how easily it can be misinterpreted or even ignored. As far as we know, no one before Jesus ever used Exodus 3:6 to prove the resurrection.

Do you know what the real irony of this whole thing is? Scripture itself (that is, Mark 12:18-27), is telling us about the nature of interpreting Scripture! Scripture is warning us that we can read a Scripture for a whole lifetime and never know its true meaning, unless someone divinely gifted in interpretation reveals it to us, as Jesus did with the Sadducees. No wonder 2 Peter 3:16 says that there are some Scriptures “that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.” For this reason Catholicism has always insisted that only a God-directed, infallible Magisterium be given the first and last word on the interpretation of

⁶ Cf., John 5:25; Eph. 2:6; Col. 2:12.

⁷ Ap 6:9; 20:4; Acts 7:59.

Scripture. One glance at what is transpiring in Mark 12:18-27 should make everyone drop to their knees in utter humility concerning the nature and interpretation of Scripture.⁸

With this incident in the background, let us now go back to our radio preacher's interpretation of John 3:5. If we could speak with him directly, we would ask him, as Jesus did to the Sadducees: "*Have you not read* where the prophet says, 'I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh' (Ezekiel 36:25-26). Now if the water of John 3:5 is merely symbolic, why does the prophet say that it is the water which is *making* the individual clean from impurities and providing a new spirit to rest *in* him? One might protest that this is merely in the Old Testament. But so were Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3. In fact, in John 3:10 Jesus says to Nicodemus, "You are Israel's teacher and you do not understand these things? I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen," implying that Nicodemus should have known these truths from the Old Testament. Just like the Sadducees, we have another case of someone who, though very familiar with Scripture, missed its true interpretation.

Now are we saying that baptism was practiced in the Old Testament? No, but we are saying that the Old Testament foreshadowed baptism and its spiritual effects — effects which apply to people both in the Old and New Testament. *Have you not read* in 1 Corinthians 10:1-2: "...our forefathers were all under the cloud and they all passed through the sea. They were all *baptized* into Moses in the cloud and in the sea." And *have you not read* in Acts 16:22 what Ananias says to Paul, "Get up and be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name." Now, why would Ananias say that Paul's sins were washed away precisely at water baptism if the water represented only the word of God or was merely symbolic? *Have you not read* what Peter says in 1 Peter 3:20-21 in explaining the flood waters of Noah's day, "and this water is the antitype of baptism which now saves us." Why would Peter say "baptism saves" if the water was merely symbolic or represented only the word of God? Moreover, if one insists that the water represents only the word of God, *have you not read* in John 1:31-34 and John 4:2 in which baptism was administered with physical water? Is it not unreasonable to think that the water of John 3:5 so suddenly takes on a different meaning, especially since it is surrounded by a context that only refers to literal water?⁹

The question may now arise, "Okay, I see your reasoning, but how do you know your interpretation is correct? How do you know for sure that the water of John 3:5 is not the word of God and that baptism is not merely symbolic? You've only given me a possible interpretation from your defensible exegesis of the texts."

⁸ Catholic Catechism, ¶ 119: "For, of course, all that has been said about the manner of interpreting Scripture is ultimately subject to the judgment of the Church which exercises the divinely conferred commission and ministry of watching over and interpreting the Word of God."

⁹ Catholic Catechism, ¶¶ 115-116: "According to an ancient tradition, one can distinguish between two senses of Scripture: the literal and the spiritual, the latter being subdivided into the allegorical, moral, and anagogical senses. The profound concordance of the four senses guarantees all its richness to the living reading of Scripture in the Church. The literal sense is the meaning conveyed by the words of Scripture and discovered by exegesis, following the rules of sound interpretation: "All other senses of Sacred Scripture are based on the literal."

Ah! Now we're getting to the essence of our issue, for we can begin to see what mere human interpretation does. It only gives plausible answers, but we can never know for sure if the plausible answer is the correct answer, unless we have help from another source. What is that source? That source is John the apostle. After discovering all the exegetical possibilities, we have to go back and ask John what he meant when he used "water" in John 3:5.¹⁰ But how does one ask John? He's dead. Granted, but we know the people who knew John. They wrote down what John taught them. For example, Polycarp writes about knowing John the apostle personally, and Ignatius was a disciple of Polycarp. Justin Martyr also lived during that time. These Fathers said they received their teachings from the apostles and they passed them on to other Fathers.¹¹ In fact, did you know that *all* the Fathers who dealt with John 3:5 understood the water as referring to water baptism and the means by which God infuses the grace of salvation? So, you see, we know our exegesis of John 3:5 is *possible* by using sound principles of exegesis, but we can only be sure that this interpretation is correct because we have the recorded testimony from those closest to John.

"But what if some of the Fathers disagree on a doctrine?" Well, that's where the divine guidance that Jesus promised to special people in the Church comes in. *Have you not read* what Jesus said to Peter in Matthew 16:19, "whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven"? Well, the Church has historically understood this statement as applying to the interpretation of Scripture, among other things.¹² *Have you not read* what Jesus said in John 14:13: "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you *forever* — the Spirit of Truth," and John 16:13: "But when the Spirit of Truth comes he will guide you into all truth," and Paul in 1 Timothy 3:15: "...the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth." You see, Jesus said the Spirit of Truth would be with us "forever," and his work is to guide the Church in her interpretation of Scripture so she can be the "foundation of truth." Jesus is clear that the Spirit's guidance to the Church would transpire till the *end of time*. The Spirit will tell the Church, out of all the plausible interpretations of a passage, which one is true. In this way, Scripture, Tradition and the Church all work together to provide God's truth to God's people.¹³

¹⁰ Catholic Catechism, ¶ 110: "In order to discover the sacred authors' intention, the reader must take into account the conditions of their time and culture, the literary genres in use at the time, and the modes of feeling, speaking, and narrating then current."

¹¹ Justin Martyr (c. 100-165 AD): "And for this [baptism] we have learned from the apostles this reason...and may obtain in the water the remission of sins formerly committed, there is pronounced over him who chooses to be born again, and has repented of his sins, the name of God the Father and Lord of the universe; he who leads to the laver the person that is to be washed calling him by this name alone...And this washing is called illumination, because they who learn these things are illuminated in their understanding" (ANF, *First Apology of Justin*, Chap. LXI, p. 183). See also ANF, *Epistle of Barnabas* (c. 70 AD), Chap. XI, p. 144; ANF, Ignatius of Antioch (c. 110 AD), *Letter to the Smyrnaeans*, Chap. VIII, p. 89; *Letter to Polycarp*, Chap. VI, p. 95.

¹² Catholic Catechism, ¶ 553: "The power to 'bind and loose' connotes the authority to absolve sins, to *pronounce doctrinal judgments*, and to make disciplinary decisions in the Church."

¹³ Catholic Catechism, ¶ 95: "It is clear therefore that, in the supremely wise arrangement of God, sacred Tradition, Sacred Scripture, and the Magisterium of the Church are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others." 2 Timothy 1:13: "Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you — *guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.*"

“Then what does “washing with water by the word” mean in Ephesians 5:26?” Well, the way it has been historically understood is in reference to the ancient formula said at the time one is baptized: “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Without these words, the Church says there is not a legitimate baptism. So you see, the “Word” is very important, probably even more important than you thought previously. The “word” does not necessarily refer to a general knowledge of the Bible, but nothing less than the audible invoking of the Trinity to effectuate the baptism unto salvation.¹⁴

“But how can a little water actually save someone — make them ‘born again?’ Many today are born again when they walk forward, say the sinners’ prayer, and accept Christ as their personal savior. Why would God use such an insignificant element to bring salvation?”

Well, there is a principle God uses when he deals with man. Paul explains it for us in 1 Corinthians 1:27-29:

But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things — and the things that are not — to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.

You see, salvation is not a matter of pomp and circumstance, for it can come to a little baby, or to a 105 year old great-grandmother, neither of whom can walk or talk very well. God uses the very things the world takes for granted, like water, to show the “wise” that they must humble themselves before God to receive salvation.

So, what do you think. Do you want to become Catholic now? “Well, maybe someday, but there’s this doctrine about Mary. You know how you Catholics worship Mary and you.....”

¹⁴ Catholic Catechism, ¶ 1238: “The baptismal water is consecrated by a power of epiclesis. The Church asks God that through his Son the power of the Holy Spirit may be sent upon the water, so that those who will be baptized in it may be ‘born of water and the Spirit.’” See also ¶ 1228.