

A Second Look At Acts 2:38

Note: Another article on Acts 2:38 can be found under the *Becoming A Christian* link.

Most of the common versions of the New Testament translate Acts 2:38 pretty much as the King James Version does: *"Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost."*

One will find a similar rendering in the RSV, NASB, NIV, NKJV, and many others; but this translation leaves some questions still to be asked.

The phrase *"for the remission of sins"* is especially disputed, since some religious groups hold that baptism follows salvation rather than precedes it.

Interestingly, some of our brethren are now making this argument, while some in denominational churches who have made the argument in the past have changed their view!

This controversy surrounds the Greek word *eis* (ice), translated *"for"* or *"unto"* in most translations.

Those who argue that baptism follows forgiveness would translate the word *"for"* to mean *"because of,"* arguing that one should be baptized because he has already received the remission of his sins.

A 19th Century article from Volume IV of Lard's Quarterly indicates that the American Baptist scholar, Dr. John A. Broaddus proposed this view in the mid-1800's. Based on this article, Dr. Broaddus' view seems to have first publicly appeared in The Religious Herald in Greenville, South Carolina in 1867. The article was responded to by J. W. McGarvey, who observed that it was the first time he had encountered such an argument.

There is broad and irrefutable evidence from the language and from history that *"for"* points not to before but to after both repentance and baptism.

I am convinced that Peter was telling the Jews to repent and be baptized in order to receive the remission of their sins and the Holy Spirit. He was not telling them to repent and be baptized because their sins had already been forgiven.

There are three lines of evidence to support this conclusion:

First, the context makes sense only if baptism precedes their salvation.

Second, modern lexicons and versions strongly support baptism as preceding forgiveness.

Third, the early church's testimony overwhelmingly confirms that baptism precedes forgiveness.

I. THE EVIDENCE FROM CONTEXT ARGUES THAT BAPTISM PRECEDES FORGIVENESS. (Read Acts 2 for background.)

When the day of Pentecost had come, the apostles, who had been baptized in the Holy Spirit, took their stand in the temple area with the first gospel sermon.

They preached Jesus, crucified and resurrected. Peter did not hesitate to let that multitude know that they themselves were in part responsible for the terrible death of the One that God had named both Lord and Christ. He said, *"Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ – this Jesus whom you crucified"* (Acts 2:36).

Such a statement must have shaken the people of that day to their very core. Luke says that they were *"pierced to the heart."* They had been awakened to the awful reality of the seriousness of their sin. They had killed the Son of God; their hands were stained with blood. They knew that they had sinned against their God in the most grievous way. Luke says, *"Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brethren, what shall we do?'"* (37).

It is guilty men who ask this kind of question; not innocent men, but desperate men who know in their hearts that they are carrying a burden with eternal consequences.

Don't you think these Jews would have done anything to have this stain removed? Their greatest desire is to be forgiven for this sin and to be reconciled to the God that they love. They asked, *"What shall we do,"* because they knew that this guilt must be removed.

God in His grace had a plan for them. He wanted them to be saved, to be restored to His love and care. Though they had committed so great a crime, the love of God was greater!

With many words Peter was exhorting them, *"Be saved from this perverse generation!"* They wanted to know what to do! He told them, *"repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."*

When Peter told them to repent and be baptized, he was telling them what to do in order to obtain the forgiveness they longed for. He was answering their question, *"What shall we do?"*

It is illogical to think that he would tell them to be baptized because they had already had their sins forgiven!

Such an answer does not make sense; it does not fit the question. Such an answer, however, does fit the belief that *faith alone saves*. By this I

mean *faith alone* as defined by some modern theologians (from the mid-1800' forward).

Some have regarded baptism as a work; and since one cannot be saved by works (Ephesians 2:8-9), baptism cannot have anything to do with our salvation (so they reason).

They have accused those who believe that baptism precedes salvation with the charge that they believe in a *causa*. It is from this stance that they must deal with *eis* in Acts 2:38.

They cannot sustain a "*faith alone*" theology and believe that baptism precedes salvation. They must find an optional view of *eis*, so that they can harmonize their belief with the text.

As a result, they must read into the text a view that no one held for more than 1600 years!

The evidence from ancient times, as we will see, supports the view that baptism is the time when one receives cleansing from sin.

Baptism is indeed a work, but we must understand that baptism is not primarily man's work, but God's!

Colossians 2:12-13 says, "*Having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions.*"

The exhortation to "*be baptized*" is a passive imperative, a command to have something done to you. Baptism is an ordinance we submit to; but it is God Himself who is working on us -- saving, cleansing, redeeming, and justifying us.

While the commands to believe, to repent, and to confess are active, the command to be baptized is passive. You do the believing, repenting and confessing; but you submit to someone else who dips you in water, and you submit to God who saves you in the blood of Christ.

God is the active party in baptism; and you, the passive party, receive in baptism the forgiveness of your sins. God is the active party in baptism because only God can forgive.

That we are saved by faith is indisputable (Romans 5:1), but affirming that we are saved by faith alone is indefensible.

The Scriptures teach that we are likewise saved by:

- * Grace (Ephesians 2:8).
- * The blood of Christ (Revelation 1:5).
- * Baptism (Mark 16:16; Acts 22:16; 1 Pet. 3:21).

- * The gospel (Romans 1:16).
- * Obedience (Hebrews 5:8-9).
- * Confession (Romans 10:9-10).
- * Repentance (Luke 24:47).

If one is saved by faith alone, why mention these other things? Are we to dismiss them too? Of course not!

Our salvation is somewhat like life. We are alive because we breathe, eat, drink fluids, and have shelter. Cut any one of these things off indefinitely and we would die. We need air to live, but without water we would surely die. We need shelter from extreme heat and cold, but without food we will perish.

Faith is essential to our salvation; but repentance, love, confession, and baptism are also essential. To suggest that we are saved by faith apart from these other things is to ignore plain Bible teaching.

We can further argue that other passages of Scripture plainly teach that baptism is the time of our salvation.

Ananias, who was sent from God to Saul of Tarsus, plainly said, "*And now why do you delay? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name*" (Acts 22:16).

Peter himself understood this when he wrote, "*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 Peter 3:21).

Paul, in the first part of Romans 6, says we are baptized into the death of Jesus Christ. He further says that we are buried with Him in baptism and raised with Him to walk in newness of life. Just as Jesus did not have new life until He was resurrected, we do not have new life until we are resurrected in baptism with Him. It is at that time that our body of sin is done away (Romans 6:4-7). Since we have died with Him, we are free from sin.

The Bible is not a book to contradict itself. It is a mishandling of the Scriptures to make Acts 2:38 contradict these other passages. God desires that we give diligence to be workmen who do not have to be ashamed, handling accurately the Word of Truth (2 Timothy 2:15).

Pitting one passage against another brings about confusion and division; it always leads to error.

II. THE EVIDENCE FROM VERSIONS AND LEXICONS ARGUE THAT BAPTISM PRECEDES FORGIVENESS.

If indeed *eis* should be translated "*because of*" one would expect to find versions of the New Testament and Greek lexicons which support that translation.

When we research what the versions actually do say, we find that the versions and the lexicons DO NOT support that position at all.

In fact, it is remarkable that the only people who defended that view, until recent times, were people influenced by Calvinist theology; and that defense is neither wholehearted nor unanimous, even among them.

In the following list of versions are some that, for honesty's sake, have gone against the prevalent beliefs of their tradition. They have done this simply because they are committed to an accurate translation. I salute them for their integrity. Here is a sample list of versions and lexicons which support the historic understanding that "for" is purpose (in order to, so that) rather than causal ("*because of*").

Williams: "You must repent -- and as an expression of it, every one of you be baptized, that you may have your sins forgiven."

Young's Literal Translation: "Peter said unto them, 'Reform, and be baptized each of you on the name of Jesus Christ, to remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'"

J. B. Phillips Translation: "Peter told them, 'You must repent and every one of you must be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, so that you may have your sins forgiven and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'"

Today's English Version: "Peter said to them: 'Turn away from your sins, each one of you, and he baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins will be forgiven; and you will receive God's gift, the Holy Spirit.'"

Amplified New Testament: "And Peter answered them, 'Repent -- change your views, and purpose to accept the will of God in your inner selves instead of rejecting it -- and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Spirit.'"

Goodspeed: "You must repent, and every one of you be baptized ... in order to have your sins forgiven."

New Revised Standard Version: "Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'"

New Evangelical Translation: God's Word to The Nations: "Peter answered them, 'Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the Name of Jesus Christ so that your sins will be forgiven, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'"

Contemporary English Version: "Peter said, 'turn back to God! Be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins will be forgiven. Then you will be given the Holy Spirit.'"

Easy-To-Read Version: "Peter said to them, 'Change your hearts and lives and be baptized, each one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ. Then God will forgive your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'"

William Barclay's Daily Study Bible: "Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'"

The Jerusalem Bible: "'You must repent,' Peter answered, 'and every one of you must be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'"

New Revised Standard Version: "Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'"

New International Version: "Peter replied, 'Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'"

New American Standard Bible: "Peter said to them, 'Repent and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'"

The Message: "Peter said, 'Change your life. Turn to God and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, so your sins are forgiven. Receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'"

New Living Translation: "Peter replied, 'each of you must repent of your sins and turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'"

English Standard Version: "And Peter said to them, 'Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'"

Contemporary English Version: "Peter said, 'turn back to God! Be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins will be forgiven. Then you will be given the Holy Spirit.'"

Darby Translation: "And Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptised, each one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for remission of sins, and ye will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'"

Worldwide English: "'Stop your wrong ways and turn back to God,' answered Peter. 'And then everyone of you can be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ. Your wrong ways will be forgiven you, and you will receive the Holy Spirit.'"

International English Bible, 2001: "Then Peter answered, 'Change

your hearts and each one of you must be immersed by the authority of Jesus the Messiah, so that your sins may be forgiven. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

The list could be multiplied. So far as I know, there is NO major, credible version that has ever translated Acts 2:38 with the words “*because of*.”

LEXICONS AND GREEK WORKS ON THE GREEK WORD EIS:

Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: “to obtain the forgiveness of sins, Acts ii.38.” (P. 94)

Kittle’s Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: “Eis” in Matt. 12:41; Lk. 11:32 (“with a view to the preaching of repentance”) states the reason and denotes a logical connection. “In Acts 2:38 eis denotes the direction of an action to a specific end as it does in Matt. 26:28; Mk. 1:4; Lk. 3:3.”

Bauer’s A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature: “to denote purpose in order to; for forgiveness of sins; so that sins might be forgiven (Cf. Matt. 26:28; cf. Mk. 1:4; Lk. 3:3; Acts 2:38.”

A. Oepke in Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: “The preposition denotes the direction of an action to a specific end. This means that the act of the repentance and baptism is directed toward the specific goal of the forgiveness of sins.” He specifically cites: “John baptizes, and Jesus sheds His blood for the forgiveness of sins (Mk. 1:4; Lk. 3:3; Matt. 26:28; cf. Ac. 2:38). The pairing together of these passages shows that the reason why Jesus shed His blood is the same reason that one is to be baptized, i.e., ‘so that sins might be forgiven.’”

Barkley M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida in A Translator’s Handbook on the Acts of the Apostles: Newman and Nida write that the phrase “so that your sins will be forgiven (literally ‘into a forgiveness of your sins’) ... modifies both main verbs: turn away from your sins and be baptized.”

The Expositor’s Greek Testament (R. J. Knowling): “Eis... signifying the aim (that is, the aim of the command is the forgiveness of sins).”

C. F. D. Moule, An Idiom-Book of New Testament Greek: Moule clearly regards eis in Acts 2:38 as “final or consecutive,” meaning “in the sense with a view to, or resulting in. The grammatical idea is that repentance and baptism result in the forgiveness of sins.” (P. 70.)

Although neither a lexicon nor a version, G. R. Beasley-Murray’s Baptism in the New Testament is a classic presentation of the apostolic teaching on baptism. In this scholarly work, he says: “Whatever the relationship between baptism and the gift of the Spirit elsewhere in Acts, there appears to be no doubt as to the intention of Acts 2:38: the penitent believer baptized in the name of Jesus Christ may

expect to receive at once the Holy Spirit, even as he is assured of the immediate forgiveness of his sins." (P. 108)

This evidence could be multiplied!

III. THE EVIDENCE FROM EARLY CHURCH HISTORY.

If baptism was for the forgiveness of sins – if it preceded forgiveness -- the early church would have known that fact. It is inconceivable that the early church would not know when their sins were first forgiven. If baptism preceded salvation, we would surely know this from the writings of the early church.

On the other hand, if salvation came before baptism, early authors would have been clear about that too.

Everett Ferguson, one of the most highly regarded scholars in America on the writings of the early Christians, said in *Early Christians Speak about baptism*:

"Among the blessings ascribed to baptism in these writers are the following: remission of sins, salvation. Illumination, eternal life, regeneration, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The unanimity and vigor of the early second-century statements about baptism are presumptive of a direct relationship between baptism and forgiveness of sins from the early days of the church. The consistency with which second-century authors make the statements which they do would have been impossible if this had not been the common Christian understanding earlier. It is inconceivable that the whole Christian world reversed its understanding of the meaning of its central rite of conversion within fifty years of the lifetime of the apostles." (P. 38)

Evidence suggesting that salvation is at the time of faith and without baptism is just not encountered in the writings of men who lived close to the time of the apostles.

While a second century argument is not decisive in and of itself, it does confirm what has already been shown to be the teaching of the first century -- i.e., baptism is when God forgives our sins.

The following quotes present some of the early Christian writers' own words:

The Epistle of Barnabas: "Let us inquire if the Lord was careful to make a revelation in advance concerning the water and the cross. Concerning the water it was written with regard to Israel how they will not receive the baptism which brings forgiveness of sins but will supply another for themselves ... Blessed are those who place their hope in his cross and descend into the water. . We descend into the water full of sins and uncleanness, and we ascend bearing reverence in our hearts and having hope in Jesus in our spirit." (11:1, 8, 11)

Shepherd of Hermas: The Shepherd doesn't directly quote Acts 2:38 but he does allude to it. "And I said, 'I heard, sir, some teachers maintain that there is no other repentance than that which takes place when we descended into the water and received remission of our former sin.' He said to me, 'That was sound doctrine which you heard; for that is really the case.'" (Mandate 4:3:1, 2)

Justin Martyr: "Then they are led by us to where there is water, and in the manner of the regeneration by which we ourselves were regenerated they are regenerated. For at that time they obtain for themselves the washing in water in the name of God the Master of all and Father, and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit. For Christ also said, 'Unless you are regenerated, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.' Since we have been born without our knowledge or choice at our first birth from the moist seed at the union of our parents and have existed in bad and evil conduct, in order that we might not remain children of ignorance and necessity but become children of choice and knowledge and might obtain in the water the forgiveness of past sins, there is called upon the one who chooses to be regenerated and who repents of his sins the name of God the Master of all and Father.... This washing is called illumination since they who learn these things are illuminated in their understanding." (Apology 1:61)

Theophilus (115 to 181 or 188 AD): "Moreover, the things which come from the waters were blessed by God, in order that this might be a sign that men were going to receive repentance and forgiveness of sins through the water and the 'washing of regeneration,' namely all those who come to the truth and are born again, and receive blessing from God." (To Autolycus, 2:15)

Clement of Alexandria (150 to 220 A.D.): After his conversion from paganism, he became an elder and is credited with founding a school in Alexandria to teach Christians the Scriptures. He wrote "The Instructor" to teach new converts how to develop the proper character and live a Christian life. In this work, he alluded to both Acts 2:38 and Acts 22:16: "Being baptized, we are illuminated; illuminated, we become sons; being made sons, we are made perfect; being made perfect, we are made immortal... This work is variously called grace, and illumination, and perfection, and washing. Washing, by which we cleanse away our sins; grace, by which the penalties accruing to transgressions are remitted; and illumination, by which that holy light of salvation is beheld, that is, by which we see God clearly... Instruction leads to faith, and faith together with baptism is trained by the Holy Spirit.... We who have repented of our sins, renounced our faults, and are purified by baptism run back to the eternal light, children to their father." (Instructor 1:6:25:3-26:2; 30:2; 32:1)

Cyprian: "For he who has been sanctified, his sins being put away in baptism, and has been spiritually reformed into a new man, has become fitted for receiving the Holy Spirit; since the apostle says, 'As many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.'" (Epistles 73:5)

Tertullian: "It has assuredly been ordained that no one can attain knowledge of salvation without baptism. This comes especially from the pronouncement of the Lord, who says, 'Except one be born of water he does not have life.'" (On Baptism 12)

While these quotations are brief and only a small sample of the writings of the early church, I hope that they are sufficient to demonstrate that the early church believed that baptism is the time that ones sins are washed away. [If you are interested in further pursuing what the early Christians said on this subject, you can find lots of sites on the Internet.]

CONCLUSION:

Based on the three lines of evidence, I believe that the argument that one is baptized so that their sins may be forgiven is the correct Biblical understanding.

If this be true, then Christians ought to be wary of those who are teaching otherwise or are disturbing congregations by creating doubt.

If the apostles originally explained their doctrine of salvation and the place of baptism within that doctrine as most Evangelicals propose, then why did **ALL** the "*Church Fathers*" who wrote on the subject, plus the Latin and Aramaic translators, explain it so differently?

Even more puzzling is, why have all new major translations -- including the Calvinistic slanted NIV -- translated Acts 2:38 and related passages according to traditional renderings, ignoring the "*modern day analysis*" and the view about baptism of "*evangelical theology*" in general?

There are some doctrines of which I have no doubt. I have no doubt about the doctrine of the Deity of Christ. I have no doubt about the doctrines of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. And I have no doubt that "*baptism is FOR the remission of sins.*"

The best thing anyone can do who wants to know the truth is to study the teachings of the New Testament itself. I encourage you to look beyond this attempt to understand one passage to a richer study of the New Testament teaching on baptism. We need to make a deep and exhaustive study of Mark 16:15-16; John 3:1-7; Acts 22:16; Romans 6:3-7; Colossians 2:12-13; Ephesians 5:26; Titus 3 5-7; and 1 Peter 3:21. Each of these passages, individually and collectively, can help one gain a better knowledge of the will of God on this matter.