

WATER BAPTISM IN ACTS 2:38

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“Then Peter said unto them, 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 Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Peter’s exhortation delivered at Pentecost has been a source of ongoing controversy and debate. Virtually all understand baptism here as water baptism (cf. 2:41; 10:47; 11:15) and “the remission (forgiveness) of sins” as a synonym for salvation. The question is, What is the relationship between the two commands “repent” and “be baptized” and the phrase “for the forgiveness of sins?” And, more specifically, how are we to understand “be baptized...for the forgiveness of sins?”

Although the passage is notoriously difficult, two points can be established at the outset that will help in arriving at a proper interpretation. The first is that Peter’s command to repent also includes the command to believe the gospel, that is, to exercise faith in the person and work of Christ. Repentance (a complete change of mind concerning personal sin and guilt) and faith (trusting Christ) are corollaries; they are essentially two sides of the same coin. Both must be exercised in order for someone to be saved. Scripture identifies them not only individually (e.g., Acts 3:19; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38–39; 16:31; 26:18; cp. Luke 5:20; 24:47), but also collectively (e.g., Acts 20:21) as the sole prerequisites for salvation. Therefore, when either appears without the other in a passage such as Acts 2:38, the other is to be understood as well.

The second point that must be granted is that Peter’s statement should be interpreted in harmony with what Scripture teaches elsewhere regarding salvation. This point expresses a standard principle of interpretation. Namely, we are to interpret the more difficult passages in the Bible in light of those passages whose teachings are clear. Without question, the unanimous consensus among fundamentalists (and we could add evangelicals as well) is that God’s Word describes salvation as an unmerited gift. It is that which we receive by faith alone, apart from works (cf. John 20:30–31; Rom 3:21–28; 4:4–5; Gal 2:16; 3:8–14; Eph 2:8–9, etc.). As such, water baptism is excluded as a condition for salvation. It is a physical act commanded by God which, like circumcision in the Old Testament, is, by definition, a work (cf. Rom 3:27–4:25). Consequently, we cannot interpret Acts 2:38 as requiring water baptism as a prerequisite for salvation.

Three interpretations are found that operate within these guidelines. The first isolates the phrase “for the forgiveness of sins” from the command “be baptized” and takes it exclusively with the first command “repent.” The resultant translation would be, “Repent (and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ) for the forgiveness of sins.” In this instance, forgiveness is understood as the goal or outcome of the command “repent.” While such an interpretation is in harmony with the gracious nature of the gospel, it appears unlikely in light of the word order of the verse. Peter’s two commands, “repent and be baptized,” are connected by a simple “and” and appear to be parallel. Furthermore, the phrase, “for the forgiveness of sins,” follows the second command. Accordingly, the only options would be to take the phrase “for the forgiveness of sins” with both commands or to take it with the second alone.

The second interpretation takes the phrase “for the forgiveness of sins” with both “repent” and “be baptized.” As with the preceding view, forgiveness is understood as the goal or outcome,

but in this case it is the goal or outcome of both commands. To paraphrase, Peter is saying, “Repent and be baptized so that your sins be forgiven.” It must be noted, though, that proponents of this view see the focus with the second command, “be baptized,” not on the ordinance itself, but on what the ordinance signifies. In other words, water baptism is viewed as an initiatory event where the believer not only publicly identifies with Christ, but also publicly gives allegiance to Christ. Peter’s first command was for the hearers to repent of their sins (and believe the gospel). Those whose repentance was sincere would obey Peter’s second command and be baptized, thus identifying with Christ and proclaiming publicly their allegiance to Him. It is these whose sins were forgiven. Technically, then, water baptism is viewed here not as a condition for the forgiveness of sins, but as the mark of those whose repentance was genuine.

The third view takes the phrase “for the forgiveness of sins” with the second command only. The translation in this case would be, “Repent, and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins.” Unlike the previous interpretation, however, forgiveness is viewed, not as the goal or outcome of Peter’s command, but rather as the basis or motivation for the command. In other words, Peter is saying, “repent, and (having done that) let everyone of you be baptized in response to the forgiveness of sins.” The critical word is the preposition translated “for.” As with the previous view, it could point to the goal of that which precedes, in which case “forgiveness” is viewed as the consequence of Peter’s command. They were to (repent and) be baptized looking forward to the forgiveness of their sins. Or, it can mean “in response to” or “on the basis of” in which case the opposite would be true. They were to be baptized because of the fact that (having repented) their sins were already forgiven. Although this use of the preposition is not common, there are other passages in the NT where it is used in this sense (e.g., Matt 3:11; 12:41; Mark 1:4; Luke 11:32).

Mark 1:4 offers an interesting parallel to Acts 2:38. In Mark 1:4, John’s baptism is called a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” In both passages water baptism and forgiveness are associated and in both the same preposition is found. Using this same preposition, John elsewhere describes his baptism simply as a baptism “for repentance” (Matt 3:11). From Matt 3:7–8, it can be seen that John demanded repentance as a prerequisite for his baptism. One could not be baptized unless he had already repented. A baptism “for repentance” clearly meant a baptism that was based on repentance. The same may be said of the expression in Mark 1:4. It was a baptism “for” or “on the basis of the forgiveness of sins.”

As was mentioned earlier, this is a difficult verse to interpret, not because of the words Peter uses, but because of the need to harmonize what Peter says with what God’s Word says elsewhere about salvation. Either of the last two approaches provides a satisfactory handling of the verse. Both follow proper rules of interpretation and neither one violates the clear, overall tenor of Scripture as to the gracious nature of salvation. Salvation is a gift of God, received by faith alone. And, regardless of what some groups have held, this verse, when properly interpreted, does not argue to the contrary.