



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

## Baptism and Sin

Acts 2:36-39

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### Introduction

1. Have you ever completely misread a situation and come to realize you were dead wrong? Have you ever missed the thing you had been looking for forever, completely misjudged another person, and then realized that your misjudgment left you in a position of overwhelming despair and foreboding? If you've ever experienced anything like *all* of that, you might begin to feel what Peter's Israelite hearers in Acts 2 felt.
2. With palpable longing, oppressed, downtrodden, scorned, their days of glory long gone, they waited on Messiah to come. God would deliver. Oppressors would be defeated and glory returned to Israel.
3. But if Peter was correct, Messiah had come and they had missed him—completely! Worse, some had followed for awhile, but turned away because they found his teaching too difficult (John 6:60, 66); and they had joined the mob that demanded his crucifixion (Luke 23:21).
4. Convinced by Peter's case that Jesus of Nazareth was in fact the Messiah whom God had vindicated, some cried out from the depths of despair and foreboding, "Brothers, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37). Peter's answer keeps giving hope.

### Body

- I. What They Needed to Happen.
  - A. The people on Pentecost had the same problem everyone has: Sin controls and enslaves.
    1. Paul used the word that way throughout Romans, where he depicted sin as "that power which has caused countless individuals of good will but inadequate resolve to cry out in deep despair: 'I can't help it,' 'I can't fight it'" (James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 112-113). Cf. Romans 7:8-25.
    2. As Paul summarizes it in Romans 3:9, all are "under sin."
  - B. While that understanding ought to make us take sin more seriously than we often do, we typically experience sin's control and our powerlessness through specific wrong deeds and the guilt we feel when we know we've done wrong.
    1. We feel guilt because we are guilty. "The sinner has broken God's law and thus has incurred its penalty" (Jack Cottrell, *Baptism: A Biblical Study*, 46).

- a) Although we do *feel* something, guilt is ultimately “an objective problem, a problem of wrong relationships with God and with His law” (Cottrell, 46).
- b) God can solve the problem by offering full pardon for our sins, and therefore “complete liberation from the fear of condemnation and hell” (Cottrell, 46).
2. But even after we are forgiven, we can be tempted to surrender to sin.
  - a) That’s why Paul wrote Romans 6:1, 12-16.
  - b) It’s also why he wrote Romans 8:9-11; Ephesians 1:13-14 (cf. 2 Corinthians 1:22; 5:5); etc.
- C. On Pentecost, Peter answered both the questions of guilt and power to battle sin, declaring baptism vital for both issues.

## II. What They Needed To Do.

- A. He responded to them where they were: there is no call to “believe in the Lord Jesus” (cf. Acts 16:31), for it was obvious from their question that they had done that.
- B. Based on the evidence of their belief, he told them to repent and be baptized.
- C. Why was doing these things so important? Because, Peter said, they showed how God handles the problem of sin.
  1. The immediate consequence of repentance and baptism is “the forgiveness of sins.”
  2. But, notice the second consequence that Peter says is attached to repentance and baptism: “the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Cf. Acts 5:32).
    - a) This would not have surprised Peter’s hearers since Israel expected the Messianic age would see the Holy Spirit poured out in a new way (Acts 2:17-21=Joel 2:28-32; cf. Isaiah 44:3; Ezekiel 36:27; Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:7-8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33).<sup>1</sup>
    - b) It also fits the context beginning in Acts 2:1-4 where the outpouring of the Holy Spirit governed the events—and promises—of Pentecost (cf. vv 14-21, 33, 39).

## III. Is Baptism Necessary?

- A. As important as it is to see how the whole text fits together, in our world, we must take the time to address the issue of whether Peter was really saying baptism is essential for receiving forgiveness and entrance into the relationship where have God’s Spirit.
- B. Consider, first, that it is connected to repentance.
  1. Repentance is readily seen as sensible, since the problem that needs to be resolved is the effect of sin willingly entered into.
  2. So obvious is this point that “repentance as a condition for salvation is not a controversial point, even among those who like to emphasize ‘faith alone.’ It is generally recognized that the faith which God requires for salvation cannot really exist without repentance” (Cottrell, 47-48).
- C. Still, many do not accept that baptism is as essential as repentance.
  1. But, consider the various translations.
    - a) “For the forgiveness / remission of your sins” (KJV, NKJV, NASB, NIV, RSV, ESV).
    - b) “Unto the remission of your sins” (ASV).
    - c) “So that your sins may be forgiven” (NRSV)
  2. What appears to be straightforward and obvious has been disputed.

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<sup>1</sup> See Cottrell, 43-45, for more discussion of this background and the point generally.

- a) Often, the objection takes some form of the idea that baptism can't be essential here because "everyone knows" it's never taught as essential.
- b) In other words, the position taken is the result of a theological presupposition—the belief that it can't possibly be that the New Testament connects baptism with the forgiveness of sins (see Cottrell, 48).

D. The argument turns on the Greek preposition εἰς (eis).

1. Lexically, the fundamental meaning of this preposition is the idea of reaching a goal or place; sometimes it refers to the entrance into a state of being or a change from one state to another; at other times, it refers to the result of an action.
  - a) It also denotes purpose, meaning "in order to," or "so that," which is the meaning the Arndt-Gingrich-Danker lexicon (3rd edition) cites for Acts 2:38.
  - b) Some, however, argue that there is a secondary meaning, a "causal" meaning and thus the rendering in Acts 2 would be "baptism because your sins have been forgiven" or "as a token of the forgiveness of your sins."
  - c) The biggest problem for this view in recent times is that scholars have increasingly rejected it, even sometimes when for other reasons they argue that baptism is not essential.<sup>2</sup>
2. The final determinant of a word's meaning is always the context, which in this case also supports the essentiality of baptism.
  - a) In the immediate context, to say "because of" would mean that Peter changes the question he is answering in the middle of his answer.<sup>3</sup>
  - b) There is also the broader context of the New Testament, where the same phrase (*eis* the forgiveness of sins) is used four other times, all of which require the meaning of purpose (Matthew 26:28; cf. Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3; 24:47).
3. There is solid scholarly support for the understanding that what Peter's hearers would have heard was that baptism secures forgiveness of sins and puts us into a relationship wherein we receive God's Spirit.
  - a) The importance of seeing what the text actually says cannot be over emphasized and has been well stated by one whose tradition has typically accepted the "causal" view. Referring specifically to the debate "between Baptists and Campbellites", James Willmarth wrote:
 

... We are gravely told that if we render *eis* in Acts ii. 38 *in order to*, we must give up the battle and must forthwith become Campbellites; whereas if we translate it *on account of*, or *in token of*, it will yet be possible for us to remain Baptists.

<sup>2</sup> Grammarian Daniel Wallace makes an argument in this vein. See his *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 369-371. The changes in the different editions of the Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich *Lexicon* are also worth noting. Under "other uses," the first edition acknowledges the "causal" view and labels it "controversial." The second and third editions acknowledge that some argue for the view, but drop the word "controversial" and simply cite significant references for and against the causal view. Each edition refers the reader to a section of the entry on βαπτίζω (*baptizō*), which the 3rd edition, section 2c, says is "the Christian sacrament of initiation after Jesus' death," and goes on to affirm that Acts 2:38 declares the *purpose* of baptism to be the forgiveness of sins (emphasis mine). See BDAG, 164, 291.

<sup>3</sup> Cottrell elaborates this point: "We must remember that Peter's statement is part of his answer to the Jews' question of how to get rid of the guilt of their sins, especially the sin of crucifying Christ. They specifically asked, 'What shall we do' to get rid of this guilt? Any instruction Peter gave them would have been understood by them in this light, and must be so understood by us today. When he told them to repent and be baptized '*eis* the forgiveness of their sins,' the only honest reading is that baptism is for the *purpose* or *goal* of receiving forgiveness. This meaning is not just warranted but is actually demanded by the context" (pp. 56-57).

Such methods of interpretation are not worthy of Christian scholars. It is our business, simply and honestly, to ascertain the exact meaning of the inspired originals, as the sacred penman intended to convey it to the mind of the contemporary reader. Away with the question – “What *ought* Peter to have said in the interest of orthodoxy?” The real question is, “What *did* Peter say, and what did he mean, when he spoke on the Day of Pentecost, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.” . . .

The truth will suffer nothing by giving to *eis* its true signification. When Campbellites translate *in order to* in Acts ii. 38 they translate correctly. Is a translation false because Campbellites endorse it? (*Baptist Quarterly*, July 1877, 304-305, in J. W. Shepherd, *Handbook on Baptism*, 357-359.)<sup>4</sup>

4. This is significant for our discussion, for it is important that we see that this is a *biblical* teaching, not a “Church-of-Christ” teaching.
  - a) Some outside our fellowship teach and baptize according to what Acts 2:38 *says*.
  - b) Some have seen the point and been baptized in accord with what it says despite the fact that the one baptizing them did not see it that way.<sup>5</sup>
5. What Acts 2:38 says is that baptism, in conjunction with belief that Jesus is Lord and Christ and repentance, leads to forgiveness of sins and removal of guilt.

### Conclusion

1. Augustus Toplady expressed in a phrase what we all need with regard to sin: “Be of sin the double cure; save me from its guilt and power” (“Rock of Ages”).<sup>6</sup> Peter told those on Pentecost that repentance and baptism were essential to receiving that “double cure.”
2. Because of its connection with Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection (Romans 6:3-4), and the importance of being in union with Christ (Galatians 3:26-27), we are not surprised to find baptism tied to the forgiveness of sins. Taking Scripture at face value, we are assured of forgiveness when we are baptized as taught in these passages. We have no assurance of forgiveness and salvation without this kind of baptism.
3. Have you been buried with Jesus, forgiven of your sins, and raised to newness of life?

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<sup>4</sup> For a recent analysis reaching the same conclusion, see: George R. Beasley-Murray’s *Baptism in the New Testament*. Acts 2 is included in the valuable discussion by Robert H. Stein, “Baptism and Becoming a Christian in the New Testament,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, 2/1 (Spring 1998): 6-17.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Campbell is one example of someone who was baptized in accordance with what he believed the Scriptures to teach even though the one baptizing did not understand baptism as he did. However, his case should not be pressed too far with regard to Acts 2:38. It would not be until roughly a decade after his immersion in 1812 that he would formally argue the essentiality of baptism for forgiveness from Acts 2:38 (in the 1823 *McCalla* debate). See Leroy Garrett, “Campbell, Alexander,” *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, pp. 120-121.

Acknowledging these points does not mean that we are not wise to study baptism with people from different backgrounds to help them be sure they were baptized in harmony with biblical teaching. To that observation, we would add that it is wise to study the matter with others within our background for the same reasons. At the very least, teachings are sometimes misunderstood leading to a distorted or incorrect view of this and other subjects. We should always be willing to examine what we are taught in light of the Word (Acts 17:11).

<sup>6</sup> See Cottrell, 45. He returns to this figure and its point throughout his book.