

Acts 2: 38, an Analysis

Acts chapter two has been rightly called the most pivotal chapter in the Bible. Beginning in Acts 2, we have the implementation or beginning of the age of the gospel, a time to which men heretofore looked and a time to which we look in retrospect. Acts chapter two is the beginning of the Great Commission, a time in which man could enjoy all the spiritual blessings only offered in Christ Jesus (Mk. 16: 15, 16, Eph. 1: 4, 7, 2 Tim. 2: 10). Salvation, directly considered, became a reality in Acts 2. Peter explained that what was happening in Acts 2 (first Pentecost following Jesus' resurrection) was the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy, "And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2: 21, see vs. 17-21 and Joel 2: 28-32). Acts chapter two was a day the "saved were being added" (vs. 47). It is in the setting of Acts 2 that we have recorded the first sermon in which the gospel is being fully and applicably preached (vs. 14-40). Peter boldly charged these Jews with having "crucified and slain" their Messiah (vs. 23, 36). These people, as a consequence of learning of their sins, were "pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?" (vs. 37). The verse that shall occupy our focus, Acts 2: 38, is found in answer to their question:

"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 Ghost" (Acts 2: 38).

It is obvious that while some of the Jews comprising this vast audience asked the prompting question, there are absolutely no indications that Peter's inspired answer found in Acts 2: 38 is limited to Jews. The whole text has all the signs of universality or applicability to all people in this final dispensation (see vs. 7-12, 17-21, 39). We shall engage in a serious study of Peter's answer found in Acts 2: 38 for two reasons: We need to totally understand how to obtain salvation and we want to dispel any extant misinformation and faulty conclusions regarding Acts 2: 38. Let us now begin an exegesis of our study verse by noticing each word, phrase, and clause making up Peter's answer to their important question.

"...Repent...." "Repent" is derived from the Greek metanoesate. Metanoesate is second person, plural in number, aorist 1, and imperative mood (The Analytical Greek Lexicon, pg. 266). The second person in Acts 2: 38 indicates those to whom Peter is speaking, the plural suggests all are being addressed and told to repent, the aorist tense conveys the idea of immediacy of action or accomplishment, and the imperative mood means repentance is not an option but an actual commandment. Regarding the aorist tense and imperative mood in Acts 2: 38, A. T. Robertson states, "Change your mind and your life. Turn right about and do it now" (Word Pictures in the New Testament, A. T. Robertson, Vol. 3, pg. 34). W. E. Vine wrote thus regarding the nature of New Testament repentance:

Verb, metanoeo:

Literally, "to perceive afterwards" (meta, "after," implying "change," noeo, "to perceive;" nous, "the

mind, the seat of moral reflection"), in contrast to *pronoeeo*, "to perceive beforehand," hence signifies "to change one's mind or purpose," always, in the NT, involving a change for the better, an amendment, and always, except in Luke 17:3,4, of "repentance" from sin. The word is found in the Synoptic Gospels (in Luke, nine times), in Acts five times, in the Apocalypse twelve times, eight in the messages to the churches, Rev. 2:5 (twice),16,21 (twice), RV, "she willeth not to repent" (2nd part); Rev. 3:3,19 (the only churches in those chapters which contain no exhortation in this respect are those at Smyrna and Philadelphia); elsewhere only in 2 Cor. 12:21.

Repentance when used in the climate of salvation is a change of mind or will that is precipitated by godly sorrow and results in reformation of life (2 Cor. 7: 10; Matt. 21: 29; 2 Cor. 7: 10, 11). Repentance is required of all men, even Christians when they sin (Acts 17: 30, 31, Rev. 2: 5). Simply stated, it is either repent or perish (Lk. 13: 5).

"...and...." "And" (*kai*) is a copulative or joining word in Greek syntax, simply stated. *Kai* is the most common of all Greek conjunctions. Ray Summers wrote thus regarding Greek conjunctions: "The two main types which appear in the New Testament are coordinating and subordinating conjunctions, coordinating conjunctions usually connect two equal grammatical elements...Examples of coordinating conjunctions used frequently are *kai*...." (Essentials of New Testament Greek, pg. 60). The simple joining force of "and" (*kai*) in Acts 2: 38 is seen in the reason they were to repent and be baptized, "remission of sins" and "the gift of the Holy Spirit." Both attainments involved in repentance and baptism are equally important. The question now is, what is the next item of equal importance in Acts 2: 38 that is involved in satisfying their question about what to do in order to be saved?

"...baptized...." "Baptized" (*baptistheto*) is third person, singular, aorist 1 in tense, imperative mood, and passive voice (Analytical Greek Lexicon, pg. 65). Some have contended that since there is a grammatical change in Acts 2: 38 from second person, plural in the case of "repent" to third person, singular in the case of "baptized," Peter meant to convey to the reader that baptism unlike repentance is not to be viewed as essential to salvation.

The question is, what significant difference is there in the change in the grammar pertaining to the matter of the acquisition of salvation? The singular in number in the case of "baptized" would simply be the distributive singular, meaning "let each one of you be baptized." If anything, the distributive singular would emphasize individual responsibility. Therefore, the wording in Acts 2: 38, "each of you" (*hekastos humon*). However, the individual responsibility would equally apply to "repent," in view of the coordinating conjunction, "and" or *kai*. The passive voice does not diminish the importance of baptism because baptism is something done to one (the subject is acted upon). Hence, the literal translation is, "let be baptized" (Interlinear Greek-English New Testament, by Nestle, Cp. Acts 8: 38). I had part in a religious debate on Acts 2: 38 years ago in which the disputant who held that Acts 2: 38 does not include baptism as essential to salvation said, "Peter sought to de-emphasize any equally shared importance of baptism to repentance by not even addressing the audience in the case of baptism (third person)!" It must be remembered, though, that regardless of why the grammar shifts from the second person to the third person, Peter shows he continues to address the audience in regards to baptism by saying, "each of you" or "every one of you" (*hekastos humon*). What actually could be the significance of the third person, those about whom the writer is speaking instead of those being addressed? Some have

suggested that Peter is saying, "Repent and let each allow himself to be baptized (those who have repented) every one of you...." I do not know of an English translation that so renders the grammar because it would be very awkward to the average reader. It is possible that there was an idiom involved in this grammar concerning which we are simply not aware. (It does appear that the distributive singular "be baptized" joined with "every one of you," hekastos humon does idiomatically form great emphasis as to individual duty). Regardless of the reason for the change in Acts 2: 38 from the second to the third person in the instance of "baptized," the change does not affect the importance of baptism coupled with repentance (see addendum).

It is apparent, I might inject, that the required baptism of Acts 2: 38 is the baptism of the Great Commission, the baptism Jesus said is necessary to make disciples and that precedes salvation (Matt. 28: 19, Mk. 16: 16). This baptism is a burial in water (Col. 2: 12, Rom. 6). Water baptism places one into Jesus where salvation is found and is the official putting off the old man and involves the putting on of the new man (Gal. 3: 26, 27, Rom. 6). Water baptism is involved in the "form of doctrine" about which Paul wrote to the Romans: "But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you. Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness" (Rom. 6: 17, 18, see the context beginning in verse one in regards to baptism).

"...in the name of Jesus Christ...." "Repent" and "be baptized" are to be performed "in the name of Jesus Christ" (epi to onomati Iesou). Commentator Meyer comments thus on the preposition "epi" (translated "in" with the literal meaning of "on"): "On the ground of the name, so that the name 'Jesus Messiah,' as the contents of your faith and confession, is that on which the becoming baptized rests" (Meyer's Commentary on the New Testament, Vol. 4, pg. 66). The baptism of the Unlimited Commission looks to Jesus' power and authority, as it was he who appointed it. It is manifest that Peter is not intending to set forth, "in the name of Jesus Christ" as a formula. I say this because there is no set word combination to be said at the time of baptism (cp. Matt. 28: 19). To be baptized "in the name of Jesus Christ" or of the Godhead, is to form a relationship with God (cf. I Cor. 1: 11-13).

Is Peter teaching "baptismal regeneration" in Acts 2: 38 in the sense that the unchanged sinner can be immersed and because of some efficacy residing in the water, come up changed? The answer is, no. Repentance must precede baptism; hence, drastic change has already occurred. Furthermore, the audience has also been told to believe (vs. 36, it is also inferred that they were required prior to baptism to confess Jesus' deity, Rom. 10: 9, 10).

"...for the remission of sins...." The stated purpose for "repent" and "be baptized" in Acts 2: 38 has occasioned much discussion (eis aphasin ton hamarton humon). Some attempt to argue that "for" (the preposition eis) means "because of." Hence, they were saved at the point of repentance prior to baptism and were to be baptized because they already had remission of sins. "Baptism is just a symbol of the salvation that has already happened," we are told. However, the grammar and syntax of the verse does not support such a view. After discussing the Greek preposition en, meaning in, always taking the dative case (the "in case"), grammarian Machen in his celebrated grammar states, "the preposition eis (one used in Acts 2: 38, dm) meaning into, on the other hand always takes the accusative" (New Testament Greek for Beginners, pg. 40).

Regarding the accusative case in Greek, Daniel Wallace stated, "It is primarily used to **limit** the action of a verb as to **extent, direction, or goal**" (Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics, pg. 178). The accusative case, simply stated, is the case of forward action. Hence, "for" (eis) in Acts 2: 38 means in order to, toward, into, or unto the forgiveness of sins. Remember that kai ("and") joins "repent" and "be baptized" in Acts 2: 38 hence, what is said of one, is said of the other. Both repentance and baptism, then, reach forth to the obtaining of remission of sins (cp. Lk. 24: 47).

Wallace's work Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics contains the typical rejection of "for" meaning toward forgiveness (pg. 369-371). He contends that if we understand "for" (eis) in order to, then we must conclude that salvation is by works, since baptism is a work. Wallace, therefore, rejects the Greek grammar. However, the condemned concept of salvation by works involves works whereby man can boast (Eph. 2: 8-9). Faith or belief itself is said to be a work, a work that God has required (Jn. 6: 29). Baptism is also a work required by God and offers no occasion for boasting. The respected A. T. Robertson reasons that eis in Acts 2: 38 cannot mean with a view to. He sites three cases involving eis in which he believes eis is used in the sense of "because of." However, each of these cases can also support the usual "with a view to" (anticipatory) use of eis. Lutheran scholar and linguist R. C. H. Lenski summed up the matter of eis in Acts 2: 38 as follows:

"It amounts to nothing more than a formal grammatical difference whether eis is again regarded as denoting sphere (equal to en, as Robertson argues, dm) or, as commonly supposed, as indicating aim and purpose, R. 592, or better still as denoting effect. Sphere would mean that baptism is inside the same circle as remission; he who steps into this circle has both. Aim and purpose would mean that baptism intends to give remission; in him, then, who receives baptism aright this intention, aim, and purpose would be attained. The same is true regarding the idea of effect in eis. This preposition connects remission so closely with baptism that nobody has as yet been able to separate the two...." (Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles, pg. 107, 108).

Some object to the obvious use of eis regarding the purpose of repentance and baptism in Acts 2: 38 by saying, "if one understands eis as meaning 'with a view to' instead of 'because of,' then one must accept 'holy water salvation.'" Such is not the case. While the scriptures plainly associate salvation with baptism, the salvation or remission is contingent on Jesus' blood, not the literal water (I Pet. 3: 21; Matt. 26: 28). Thus, in the act of baptism having been preceded by belief, repentance, and confession of Jesus' deity, one spiritually contacts Jesus' blood; hence, obtaining the forgiveness of sins (Matt. 26: 28, Acts 2: 38).

Let us recall the context and the aim of Peter: These people are convicted of their sins and they have asked Peter what to do to be saved and Peter is answering them in Acts 2: 38. "Remission" is the Greek aphesin that means "to send away." The penitent Saul was told to, "...arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22: 16, notice how there is no "for" in this verse to quibble over and yet men reject the simple meaning).

"...and..." Not only is remission of sins the object of "repent and be baptized" in Acts 2: 38, the "gift of the Holy Spirit" is also the goal. Kai ("and") shows this to be the case.

"...ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost (lempsesthe ten dorean tou hagiou pneumatōs)." The miraculous influence (miracle working ability) is not meant because only the apostles are seen working miracles until there was a subsequent "laying on of hands" to impart miracle working ability to others (Acts 2: 43, 4: 9-16, 33, 5: 12; 6: 6-8, cp. 8: 18). This blessing of the gift of the Holy Spirit is universal in scope, enjoyed by all whom the Lord shall call (vs. 39). All saved, then, enjoy this gift but not all saved performed miracles, even in the first century (Acts 8: 12-19).

In the parallel verse to Acts 2: 38, Peter stated instead of "ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit," "when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3: 19). I submit that the "gift of the Holy Spirit" that Peter promised to all who will repent and be baptized in Jesus' name is the attainment of the Abrahamic blessings promised through Christ, even designed for Gentiles (Gal. 3: 13-29). In short, this blessing embraces every nuance and aspect of salvation. Since it is the Holy Spirit who has made known this blessing through the revelation of truth to the apostles, it is natural for the language to be, "the gift of the Holy Spirit" (not a personal, bodily and direct indwelling of the Spirit because the scriptures do not teach such).

Fellow student of the word, all the above is found in the language, "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 Ghost." (For a similar study, click on "[Acts 22: 16, an Examination](#).") (Related reading would be, "[Scriptural Baptism for the Remission of Sins](#)")

Addendum: There are several arguments that are advanced based on the shift from the second to the third person in the case of "repent" and "be baptized" in Acts 2: 38 all of which are designed to argue that baptism is totally detached from the "remission of sins," the goal. Some attempt to connect "every one of you" (hekastos humon) grammatically with "repent," based on both humon ("you") and "repent" being plural. In so doing, they think that they can then directly link "repent" to "for the remission of sins..." in Acts 2: 38 and totally remove "be baptized" as a pre-requisite and have it only as something done **after** salvation has been obtained. Such grammatical treatment does violence to the syntax and I know of no reputable English translation that supports such translation of Acts 2: 38. The inescapable fact remains that the people asked what to do and Peter told them. He told them to do two things in order to have remission of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. These two things are: "Repent and be baptized" (both in the imperative or command mood) we either accept or reject the inspired answer. If our theology will not allow us to believe Acts 2: 38, then we need a new "theology."