

Proof That the Penitent Believer Must Be Baptized In Order To Be Saved; Acts 2:38

by Thomas B. Warren

In obedience to Christ's instructions given in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:44-49), under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, on the day of Pentecost the apostles preached for the very first time the gospel of Christ as a law in force (Acts 2:1-41). While all of the apostles preached on that first day (Acts 2: 1, 14, 37), only the sermon of Peter is recorded in the New Testament. In that sermon, Peter gave proof that the Jews (to whom he was speaking) had crucified, not a mere human being who falsely claimed to be the Messiah, but the very Son of God, the Christ. In closing what can be termed the evidential part of his sermon, Peter said, "Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God hath made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom ye crucified" (Acts 2:36, cf.: 2:22-23).

Peter's sermon convinced the Jews; they came to realize that they were guilty of the terrible sin of crucifying the Christ (Messiah). Out of that conviction, they said unto Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?"

What were they asking? They were asking to be told what they must do in order to have their sins remitted (forgiven). It is clear that, in spite of the fact that, at the time they asked the question, they were already believers in Jesus Christ, they were not yet saved; they were still in their sins! Men are not saved at the point of faith.

What did Peter tell them to do? Did he say, "Since you are already believers, you have nothing to do - you are already saved"? No. Both Peter and his auditors knew that they (the auditors) were not saved. So Peter (guided by the Holy Spirit) told these believers, "Repent ye and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (2:38, A.S.V.)

The meaning of Peter's reply to their question should be easily understood by all. He simply tells these lost believers that they must (1) repent and (2) be baptized so that their sins will be forgiven.

Opposition To This Clear Truth

In spite of the simplicity of Peter's answer to such a simple question, there are many people now living who reject the truth that penitent believers are to be baptized (immersed in water) in order to be saved by the blood of Christ (Eph. 1:7). But, in order to deny this necessity, they must reject the obvious truth of Acts 2:38. What tactics are used by some in making such a rejection?

Two Basic Elements Of The Plan For Rejection Of The Truth Of Acts 2:38

Since Acts 2:38 so obviously teaches the necessity of baptism, if one is to hold (and/or convince anyone else of) the view that the lost man is saved the very moment he believes in Christ as the Son of God, then he must find some means of denying (to his own satisfaction at least) the obvious import of this passage. So, to avoid the force of Acts 2:38, some religious leaders have done two things; (1) they have come to hold that "unto" (A.S.V.) and "for" (K.J.V.) mean "because of" or "on account of" in Acts 2:38, and (2) to avoid the resulting implication in regard

to repentance, they have come to hold that the prepositional phrase "unto the remission of your sins" cannot modify both "repent" and "be baptized."

Why have they come to hold these two positions? For these reasons: (1) if they can prove that "unto" (from the Greek *eis*) here means "because of" they will have shown that Acts 2:38 does not teach that baptism precedes the remission of sins, and (2) holding that "unto the remission of your sins" means "because your sins have already been forgiven," then, unless they can prove that "unto the remission of sins" cannot modify both "repent" and "be baptized," they would have espoused a position which implies that one is saved before and without repenting.

In other words, if one holds both (1) that "unto" means "because of" and (2) that "unto the remission of sins" modifies both "repent" and "be baptized" then he would be saying not only that one is to be baptized because he has already been saved but also that one is to repent because he has already been saved. But even Baptists, who oppose the essentiality of baptism so strenuously, know that repentance is necessary to salvation. So, since they know that repentance is essential to salvation (II Peter 3:9-10; Luke 13:3-5; Acts 17:30-31), they make the effort to prove that "unto remission of sins" cannot modify both verbs.

In the remainder of this editorial it will be shown that a negative answer should be given to each of the following questions: (1) Does "unto" mean "because of" in Acts 2:38? (2) Is it the case that there are grammatical grounds which absolutely forbid one to hold that "unto the remission of your sins" can modify both "repent" and "be baptized"?

The First Question: Does "Unto" Mean "Because Of" In Acts 2:38?

Sound scholarship answers this question with one voice: "No! 'Unto' in Acts 2:38 does not mean 'because of.'" When the apostle Peter told the believers to be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins," he was telling them to submit to the rite (i.e., to obey Christ in being baptized) in order to be forgiven of their sins!

And, it must be noted, the penitent believer is saved (when he is baptized) not by water but by the blood of Christ (Ephesians 1:7; Acts 20:28; Hebrews 9:22; Romans 5:8-9). But the blood of Christ will not be used by the Lord to forgive the sins of anyone who is not "born of water and the Spirit" (John 3:5). Salvation is in Christ (II Timothy 2:10) and one is baptized into Christ (Romans 6:3-5; Galatians 3:26-27).

The Second Question: Can The Prepositional Phrase "Unto The Remission Of Sins" Modify Both Verbs ("Repent" and "Be Baptized")?

Since the words of Peter were given in answer to the question, "What shall we do?" the context indicates that the phrase "unto the remission of sins" not only can but should be tying both "repent" and "be baptized".

Even outstanding Baptist scholars recognize this truth. In opposing the contention of Methodists that babies should be baptized, J. M. Pendleton said, "It is clear as the sun in heaven that the same persons are commanded to repent and be baptized." (Three Reasons for Being A Baptist, p. 20.)

Another Baptist scholar, H. B. Hackett, said, "We connect naturally with both the preceding verbs." (Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles, p. 53.)

J. H. Thayer, outstanding Greek scholar said, "I accept the rendering of the revised version 'unto the remission of your sins' (the eis expressing the end aimed at and secured by the repentance and baptism' just previously enjoined" (quoted by J. W. Shepherd in Shepherd, Handbook on Baptism, p. 356).

This editor sent a diagram in English to English scholars and a diagram in Greek to Greek scholars in some of the most prestigious universities of this nation. The diagram indicated that the prepositional phrase "unto the remission of sins" modifies both "repent" and "be baptized." These scholars were asked if there is any reason, grammatically speaking, why the sentence should not be thus diagrammed. Not one scholar gave a negative answer. They all agreed that "unto the remission of sins" can modify both "repent" and "be baptized."

When the people who had become believers in Christ as the Son of God (Acts 2:22-37) asked, "What shall we do?" they had just been convicted of sin and, thus, wanted to know what to do to be saved from sin. Peter plainly told them to repent and be baptized unto the remission of sins. Clearly, these lost believers are here commanded to do two things in order to be forgiven. But this truth Baptists (and other "salvation is by faith only" advocates) must deny, if they are to be consistent with their view of salvation. But it is also clear that in denying that "unto the remission of sin" can modify both verbs, they deny what clearly is true: the believer is instructed to both repent and be baptized in order to obtain (by the blood of Christ) the remission of his sins.

One cannot be saved without being baptized in the name of (by the authority of) Jesus Christ. and one cannot be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ unless he is baptized in order to be saved - not because he thought he was already saved before he was baptized. Obedience to the gospel of Christ will save a lost person, but obedience to a mere human doctrine will not save anyone (Hebrews 5:8-9; II Thessalonians 1:7-9; Matthew 7:13-23; II Thessalonians 2:10-12).

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