

Baptism....Again

By Bob Young

Across the centuries since the beginning of the church, believers have studied and debated the meaning and importance of Christian baptism. Great Christian thinkers have wrestled with the doctrine of baptism, and rightly so, given that baptism is a significant part of the teachings of the New Testament and is closely connected with other great Christian doctrines.

With a long history of study and discussion, it is amazing that much of what has been written about baptism is not consistent with the teachings of the New Testament. In fact, some of what is written and taught is directly opposed to the teachings of Scripture. This confusion has long existed. During Jesus' lifetime, some rejected baptism (of John) and are described as having also rejected the purpose of God (Luke 7.30). In Corinth, Paul connected baptism with unity (1.12.13), and yet many today say baptism is divisive. Some who had been baptized at Ephesus¹ had experienced an incomplete baptism (apparently based on their misunderstandings or lack of understanding at baptism) and were re-immersed (Acts 19.1-6). The purpose of this paper is to revisit the connection between baptism and remission of sins.

Questions about the relationship between baptism and the forgiveness of sins seem ever present. Basically, the question is whether baptism properly accepted and performed leads to forgiveness of sins. The opposing viewpoint is that baptism is an act of obedience which serves as a symbol or indication of a spiritual experience which occurred previously—sometimes many years earlier. If the correct view were determined by the number of people who accept one or the other of the options, the symbolic view would easily prevail. The most popular evangelical leaders today openly deny the importance of baptism for salvation from sin and diminish its importance. Once one affirms a saving process dependent on and operational at the exact moment of sincere prayer for salvation², it is hard to find a place for baptism.

Regardless of popular belief, one must always ask, "What does the Bible say?" What evidence exists that baptism anticipates salvation rather than affirming it, that salvation is reality after baptism and not before it? The long-standing discussion of Acts 2.38 well demonstrates the question: is baptism "unto" or "for" salvation (looking toward it) or "because of" salvation (looking backward to salvation already accomplished)? The Greek phrase, and specifically the little preposition *eis*, has been hotly debated by grammarians and exegetes. Baptist scholars argue that the preposition means "because of" and that sins are already forgiven at the point of baptism. Most New Testament Greek scholars have found this position linguistically unacceptable. Despite the linguistic evidence, some Baptist scholars continue to affirm an impossible meaning for *eis* in this context. The very fact that the discussion continues suggests that this question must be significant. No reason exists to spend so much time and energy in study and debate if the question is peripheral or without validity.

The prepositional phrase of Acts 2.38 appears four other times in the Greek New Testament. Its use and meaning in these other contexts helps us understand its meaning in Acts 2.38. First, in

¹ Richard Oster, Jr. refers to these as the Ephesian Baptists. In his essay on baptism and remission of sins, he writes of "the Baptists at Ephesus".

² A "sinner's prayer," although such terminology or process is not found in the New Testament.

Matt. 26.28, Jesus' blood is shed "for the forgiveness of sins." Does this verse mean that Jesus shed his blood because sins were already forgiven, or in order that sins might be forgiven in the future? The former makes God more sadist than Savior. Certainly, the text anticipates forgiveness contingent on the shedding of Jesus' blood. Next, in Mark 1:4 and Luke 3:3, John the Baptist preached a baptism of repentance "for the forgiveness of sins." Was John saying that the sins of his Jewish hearers had already been forgiven? Were they to be baptized because of the forgiveness they had already experienced? Would this not suggest that their forgiveness preceded the repentance to which John called them? Clearly, John was calling them to be baptized as an indication of their repentance (baptism of repentance) so their sins could be forgiven. Finally, the Great Commission section of Luke (24.47) finds Jesus explaining that repentance is to be preached in his name "for the forgiveness of sins." The same question echoes. Does this verse affirm that the pagans to whom the message would be preached would be forgiven even before they heard the call to repentance, and prior to their own repentance? Surely Jesus was not saying that repentance was to be preached because sins were already forgiven.

Given the clear meaning of the phrase in these other texts, to affirm an opposite meaning in the Acts 2 text is possible only with circuitous reasoning and careful (mis)use of the Greek grammar. Peter connects salvation with the blood of Christ. Luther wrote of this connection, saying that the "blood, with its merit and power, has been deposited in baptism so that men attain it there. For the person who is receiving baptism in faith is in effect actually being visibly washed with the blood of Christ and cleaned from sins."³ More recently, Eugene Peterson in his translation of the paragraph of Colossians 2:11-15 (*The Message*) makes the same connection.

"If it's an initiation ritual you're after, you've already been through it by submitting to baptism. Going under the water was a burial of your old life; coming up out of it was a resurrection, God raising you from the dead as he did Christ. When you were stuck in your old sin-dead life, you were incapable of responding to God. God brought you alive—right along with Christ!"

Peterson's treatment makes clear that baptism is the beginning point for the new life, and that the death of the old man and the resurrection of the new do not occur prior to baptism. His initiation terminology suggests that one is not really in Christ until after baptism.⁴ This would agree with Paul's statement in Gal. 3:27 that we are baptized into Christ.

Note from the author

To my readers who have never received baptism with the purpose of receiving salvation, I urge you to study for yourself, and to experience the confident forgiveness of your sins by the blood of Christ. Allow your faith in Christ to move you toward repentance, confess his name, and be baptized in order that your sins might be forgiven. If I can assist in any way, please contact me.

³ *What Luther Says: A Practical In-Home Anthology for the Active Christian*, St Louis: Concordia, 1959, p. 46, no. 128).

⁴ Romans 6 demonstrates the same argument, adding that participation in the death of Christ is the only hope of participation in the ultimate resurrection with Christ.