

22. This instruction began with the baptism ritual which was a visual aid designed to illustrate the doctrine of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Immersion into the water taught the believer's identification with Christ in his death and burial while emersion out from the water illustrated the believer's identification with the Lord in His resurrection, ascension, and session.
23. These concepts are evident in the execution of the Lord's instructions, given in Matthew 28, throughout the book of Acts. However, as we have noted, these passages have been interpreted in a variety of ways that have resulted in a multiplicity of applications and associated controversial doctrines.
24. One of the most controversial is the interpretation of the first application of the baptismal ritual in the Church Age which is documented in Acts 2:38. The context of this verse is extremely important and will assist us in properly analyzing the ritual, its intended purpose, and its present status.

III. Acts 2:38, the Controversy

1. There are several denominations in Protestant Christendom as well as the Catholic Church that make baptism a part of the gospel. One of the major passages used to support this claim is: Acts 2:38 which reads:
Acts 2:38 - And Peter said to them, "Repent, and let each one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (NASB)
2. There are two key words in this verse that are presumed attached to the forgiveness of sins and the reception of the Holy Spirit: (1) repent and (2) be baptized. Both are in the imperative mood thus indicating that forgiveness of sins and the baptism of the Holy Spirit are contingent upon the fulfillment of these two mandates, the first a change of mental attitude and the second an overt act.

3. Throughout Scripture the original languages always present the gospel as faith alone in Christ alone. However, some denominations cite the English translation of Acts 2:38 to include baptism as part of the gospel. This false doctrine has split churches and created divisions while tragically causing parishioners to add works as a requirement for salvation.
4. In order to harmonize this passage with those that clearly present salvation by means of grace, theologians have attempted to construe the grammar of the verse so that it isolates the clause “and let each one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ” from the rest of the sentence. We will note two of the more widely accepted of these interpretations.

A. The Harmony of Pronouns and Verbs Interpretation:

Acts 2:38 - [NASB] And Peter said to them, “Repent, and let each one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for [εἰς, *eis*] the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

1. Many respected theologians maintain that the preposition “for” (*eis*) is causal and should be translated: “Repent and be baptized *because* of the forgiveness of your sins.”
2. This construction places repentance before the act of baptism, the latter occurring *because* one has received forgiveness of his sins due to his faith in Christ.
3. Other theologians however assert that repentance and baptism are necessary *for* the forgiveness of sins. The Church of Christ emphasizes this interpretation of Acts 2:38 and does not consider a person saved unless he “repents” and is “baptized” and then it continues the heresy by insisting on good works in order to validate his salvation.

4. The part baptism plays in the context of Acts 2 must be discovered by noting the isagogics of its context and the exegesis of key words.
5. Let's begin with some exegesis that observes the **person** and **number** of key words in:

Acts 2:38 - And Peter said to them, "Repent [2d person plural, aorist active imperative of the verb μετανοέω, (*metanoéō*): all of you change your minds], and let each one [3d person singular of ἕκαστος, *hékastos*] of you [2d person plural pronoun ὑμῶν (*humón*): all of you] be baptized [3d person singular, aorist passive imperative of the verb βαπτίζω, *baptízō*] in the name of Jesus Christ for [preposition εἰς, (*eis*): or "because of"] the forgiveness of your [2d person plural pronoun ὑμῶν, *humón*: all of your] sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

6. The question that must be resolved is this: Is forgiveness contingent upon the verb "repent" or "be baptized"?
7. A rule of biblical translation requires that harmony be maintained between a noun or pronoun and its antecedent in both person and number, especially in direct discourse as is the case in Acts 2:38.

Concord in Person. The concord between subject and predicate as to person is so uniform as to call for little remark. Only ignorance would allow one to mix his persons in the use of the verb. (p. 402)

Concord in Number. The formal grammatical rule is a singular subject having a singular verb, a plural subject having a plural verb. This is the obvious principle in all languages of the Indo-Germanic group.⁴ (p. 403)

8. As we examine the verse we find three pronouns: (1) the 3d person singular "each one," (2) the 2d person plural "you," and (3) the 2d person plural "your."

⁴ A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), 402–403:

9. These pronouns' antecedent must agree with them in person and number. Therefore the 3d person singular, "**each one**," refers to the verb *baptízō* which is also 3d person singular.
10. The pronouns "**you**" and "**your**" are 2d person plurals and therefore their antecedent must also be a 2d person plural which directs us to the verb "**repent**."
11. From this we get the following translation:

Acts 2:38 - And Peter said to them, "All of you repent, and let each one of you all be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for/because of the forgiveness of the sins of all of you; and all of you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (EXT)

12. Here we find that the phrase "and let each one of you all be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ" is set off from the rest of the statement by analyzing the person and number of the pronouns and their antecedents.
13. Thus all in Peter's audience are commanded to repent "for or because of the forgiveness of their sins" after which all "shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

B. The Syntactical Break Interpretation:

1. The separation of the singular pronoun "each" and singular verb "baptized" from the rest of Peter's statement is also developed by theologians whose interpretation is based on a "syntactical break" in the midst of Peter's statement.
2. This view holds that the pronoun-antecedent principle indicates a break in the syntax of the sentence and thus the phrase "and let each one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ" is treated as a parenthesis.

(End CR14-78. See CR14-79 for continuation of study at p. 781.)

Acts 2:38 - And Peter said to them, “All of you repent, (and let each one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ) for/because of the forgiveness of the sins of all of you; and all of you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

3. Both of these approaches hold up well but still questions remain as to how this verse is best interpreted.

IV. Resolving the Controversy

1. As it stands, many systems of false theology and apostasy have been concocted from verse 38. The most obvious one is so-called baptismal regeneration, that man can actually do something to save himself.
2. Remember that baptism is a work, something that man does. All ritual involves human motion; human energy requires meritorious effort. So all ritual involves works.
3. Water baptism is a ritual in which someone is actually doing something, but the effort required in performing a ritual always depends upon knowing something.
4. The secret of all the ritual involved in Old Testament ceremonies required that participants understood the meaning of the ritual before they performed or observed it.
5. Because some people have taken this ritual and made it a system of salvation, they have introduced the principle of salvation by works (cf. Titus 3:5 and Ephesians 2:8–9.)
6. Peter begins Acts 2:38 with the command “repent,” the aorist active imperative of the verb **μετανοέω (metanoéō)**. “Repentance” is nonmeritorious in this context because it requires a change of mind regarding Jesus as the Christ.
7. It is important to point out that the verbs “to repent,” *metanoéō* and “to believe” *pisteúō* have the same meaning in the sense that they mean, “to change your mind about Christ.”