

Acts 2:38, the Controversy: 2 Interpretations: (A) Harmony of Pronouns & Verbs & (B) Syntactical Break; Antecedents, Parentheses, & Problems with “Eis”

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 that supports this claim is Acts 2:38 which reads:

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 apparently 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. The problem is that throughout Scripture the overwhelming majority of passages that present the Gospel base salvation on faith alone in Christ alone. This verse appears in all English translations to add repentance and baptism to this and thus creates a conundrum that has split churches, created denominations, and caused the heresy of works to intrude upon the grace gift of 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, *metanoeō*: y’all change your minds],

and let each one [3d person singular of ἕκαστος, *hekastos*]

of you [2d person plural pronoun ὑμῶν, *humōn*: y'all]

be baptized [3d person singular, aorist passive imperative of the verb βαπτίζω, *baptizō*] in the name of Jesus Christ

for [preposition εἰς, *eis*: or “because of”] the forgiveness

of your [2d person plural pronoun ὑμῶν, *humōn*: y'all's] 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.

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

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. (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**.”
9. These pronouns’ antecedent must agree with them in person and number. Therefore the 3d person singular, “**each one**,” refers to the verb *baptizō* 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.”

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 notes the pronoun-antecedent principle and concludes that this grammatical application indicates a break in the syntax of the sentence and thus the phrase “and let each one of y’all be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ” is treated as a parenthesis.

Acts 2:38 - And Peter said to them, “All of you repent, (and let each one of y’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.”

3. Both of these approaches hold up well but still questions remain as to how this verse is best interpreted. And this leads us to a third interpretation which not only explains this passage but sheds light on other instances of baptism in the book of Acts and baptism in general.