

## Acts 2:38

M. W. Bassford, 2009

As Solomon observes in the first chapter of the book of Ecclesiastes, there is nothing new under the sun. Nations change, languages change, peoples change, but in all the things that matter, our life is the same as that of people who lived hundreds or thousands of years ago. We are born, we grow up, we work, we have children, and we die. Everything else is just window dressing on the pattern of human existence that God first ordained.

Because this is so, because we share in a basic round of existence with people from all places and times, because we share the same problems and the same goals, God's word is able to speak to all of us. Ever since the gospel was first preached on the day of Pentecost, its message has pierced the hearts of men everywhere with equal force, and the things that mattered to men long in their graves still matter to us. Let's consider an example. In the early nineteenth century, one of the preachers who were centrally involved in the Restoration movement, of which we are heirs, was a man named Walter Scott. Brother Scott went on preaching trips throughout the Ohio Valley, and he led hundreds if not thousands of people to obey the gospel. He preached many sermons in his life, but his most famous is often known as the five-finger sermon, because it had an outline with five points, and as he reached each point, he would hold up a new finger.

As quaint as this method may seem to us in an age of air-conditioned church buildings and zippy PowerPoint presentations, his message is every bit as important to us as it was to his listeners back then. It is so important because it was based not on the human wisdom of Walter Scott, but on the word of God. His five-finger sermon, in fact, was nothing more than a restatement of the five main points of Acts 2:38. This simple five-point outline contains enough truth to save the souls of the entire world if they would hear it. Let's turn our attention, then, to Acts 2:38

### Obeying the Gospel.

The first thing that Peter asks his audience to do in Acts 2:38 is to **REPENT**. We see a fairly full explanation of what repentance involves in 2 Corinthians 7:10-11. Repentance begins with godly sorrow, that is, not sorrow at the consequences of our sin or sorrow that we got caught, but sorrow that we did evil in the first place. As vs. 11 here observes, godly sorrow produces a number of good effects. Among these effects are fear of divine punishment, zeal to serve God, and righteous actions that vindicate us and prove us to be free of desire to do further evil.

This seems just as obvious as the color of the sky to us, but for many people in the world, repentance is not a part of the way they think to approach God. What's really underneath the idea of repentance is the idea of subjection to God's law. When we repent, we acknowledge that God has the right to impose a standard of conduct on us, that we have failed to live up to the standard, and that we must strive to do better in future. For a lot of folks, even those who claim to be religious, that sounds way too restrictive. They say, "The Bible is just God's love letter to us, and we just need to love other people and trust in His grace and not worry so much about all that law stuff." They want to claim to have a relationship with God while still living however they want. A heart like that, a heart that embraces the idea of God while rejecting His will, is a heart that will never truly come to Him. We must truly repent before we can expect to be saved.

After we repent, Peter tells us that we must **BE BAPTIZED**. It's just amazing how much confusion this extremely simple Biblical idea creates. In the religious world around us, all kinds of different ideas masquerade as baptism. Different denominations say today that things ranging from the sprinkling of infants to an imagined outpouring of the Holy Spirit to a rite of fellowship with a particular church are actually different kinds of baptism. We see the Bible's take on this in Ephesians 4:5. There are not many different baptisms, according to the doctrinal quirks of each particular assembly. God hasn't set things up so that we can do whatever we want, slap the label of baptism on it, and expect that it fulfills the command to be baptized. Instead, there is only one baptism. It's not particularly hard to understand; it is not particularly hard to do. However, only one activity falls under the Scriptural category of baptism. Unless we engage in that one activity, we are not obeying Peter's command here and cannot hope to be saved.

Luke sheds more light on what this one activity involves in Acts 8:36, 38. The actions of the Ethiopian eunuch here are quite telling. He has decided that he wants to be saved from his sins, so he cries out and asks to be baptized when he sees water beside the road. He and Philip go down into the water, he is baptized, and he comes back up out of the water. From this, we see that baptism clearly involves water, not some unseen indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Second, we see that baptism involves immersion, being completely submerged in the water. Neither sprinkling nor pouring would have required Philip and the eunuch to go down into the water like this, and indeed the Greek word for "baptism" simply means "immersion." So, then, the one baptism that is described by Scripture is a physical immersion in water.

Peter explains how it is that we are baptized when he tells us that we do it **IN THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST**. This too is a very old idea, not necessarily familiar to people in our culture. When Peter says that we are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, he means that we are baptized on the basis of His authority. What assurance do we have that we can be saved from our sins if we are immersed in water? Jesus made that promise, and it is entirely within His authority to make that

promise, according to Matthew 28:18. Jesus says this after His resurrection from the dead, which has proven that God stands behind everything He says. Now that He has returned to life, He has the right to demand obedience from anything in heaven or on earth. If Jesus says this is the way things are, that's the way they are. If Jesus says that we must be baptized, and that baptism will be effective for our salvation, those things are true too.

Of course, the impact of Jesus' authority is not limited to baptism only. We see just how far that authority reaches in Colossians 3:17. Back in England 200 years ago, there was a saying that went, "If you take the king's shilling, you do the king's bidding." Apparently, recruiters for the army would go through the English countryside, looking for naïve young men, and when they ran across one, they would offer him a shilling, about like a quarter in our monetary system. If the young man took the shilling, by that simple act, he was agreeing to enlist in the English army and obey the king's orders until his enlistment expired. In the same way, when we receive grace from Jesus in the act of baptism, we are accepting a favor from Him, and in return for that favor, we are agreeing to obey Him until the end of our lives.

The obedience that Jesus expects reaches every corner of our existence. In our worship and the things we do as a church, we must obey Jesus. When we start adding ideas to our religious practice that are not contained in His word, we go beyond His authority and are no longer in submission to Him. Likewise, in our personal lives, we must also obey Jesus. The way we earn our living, the way we treat our families, and the kind of entertainment we seek out all must be according to His will. Disobedience is not an alternative. As Christians, we must live according to the name of Jesus.

### **The Results of Obedience.**

The reason why Peter says we must be baptized is **FOR THE REMISSION OF SINS**. Remission is just a fancy church word. All it means is "forgiveness." We are baptized for the forgiveness of our sins. That seems like an extremely clear concept—we are immersed in water so that our sins can be washed away—but various denominations have generated thousands and thousands of pages of tortured logic trying to explain this verse away. For example, one denomination claims that we are baptized for the forgiveness of sins in the same way that a soldier receives a medal for courageous conduct. Baptism is just a recognition of the salvation that has happened earlier, not salvation itself.

Sadly for them, that's not the way the phrase "for the forgiveness of sins" is used in Scripture. Consider, for instance, the words of Jesus in Matthew 26:28. Notice that this and Acts 2:38 word this phrase exactly the same way. It's exactly the same in Greek, too, and so must mean the same thing. If those denominational scholars are right, and baptism is a sign of salvation that has already occurred, then Jesus was saying that He was going to pour out His blood on the cross to recognize a salvation that was already available to men. That's nonsense. The essence of Christianity is that we are saved by the power of the blood of Jesus. He would not have died if His death were not necessary to rescue us. In just the same way, baptism is necessary for our salvation. Through it, we receive the forgiveness of sins.

That brings us to the final part of Peter's answer in Acts 2:38, that if we are baptized for the forgiveness of sins, we will receive **THE GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**. There are two possible things this text could mean. It could mean first of all that God is going to give us the Holy Spirit Himself as a gift, or it could mean that the Holy Spirit is going to give us a gift of something else. Admittedly, this is not as obvious a question as the question of forgiveness of sins, but if we turn our attention to the text, we'll have little trouble figuring out what is going on.

The first place we need to look is back at Acts 2:21. This is the tail end of the quotation from the book of Joel with which Peter begins his sermon. The quotation describes all kinds of supernatural events, and concludes with this verse, which declares that those supernatural events are going to be a sign that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. The apostles' miraculous behavior on the day of Pentecost demonstrated that from then on, anyone who wanted to could come to Jesus and find salvation from his sins. Joel, of course, didn't say these things on his own initiative. Instead, he was inspired by the Holy Spirit. This verse, then, is a promise made by the Holy Spirit that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Peter's command to repent and be baptized, down in Acts 2:38, is nothing more than the description of exactly what God meant in Acts 2:21. When people are baptized, they can expect to receive the gift promised by the Holy Spirit—the gift of salvation.

We can confirm that salvation, and not the Holy Spirit Himself, is the gift of Acts 2:38 by looking at the rest of the chapter. If, indeed, all of these people who were being baptized were receiving some literal indwelling of the Holy Spirit, we would expect to see all kinds of new Christians with all kinds of miraculous spiritual gifts doing their thing through the rest of the chapter. However, that's exactly what we don't see. On the evidence of the text, only the apostles have miraculous spiritual gifts in Acts 2. The text, then, doesn't support the idea that all of these new Christians were receiving an indwelling. We see what the text does support in Acts 2:47. Not all those people who were being baptized received the Holy Spirit, but every one of them did receive salvation. Salvation must be the gift of the Holy Spirit.