

## **SPECIAL STUDY ON BAPTISM**

Taken from Baptism: A Biblical Study  
by Jack Cottrell

Material reprinted with permission from College Press Publishing Co.,  
Joplin, MO 64802

Dr. Jack Cottrell is Professor of Theology at Cincinnati Bible Seminary,  
Cincinnati, OH

### **ACTS 2:38-39 (I)**

Probably the clearest - and probably for that reason the most controversial - passage concerning the meaning of baptism is Acts 2:38,39, "And Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself.' " This passage is important because it describes the function of Christian baptism at the point of its very inauguration on the day of Pentecost. It is part of the apostolic instruction to sinners who are asking how they might be rid of their sin and guilt. It states quite clearly that baptism is the focal point of God's promise of forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit.

#### **The Messianic Outpouring of the Spirit**

On the Jewish calendar the events of Acts 2 occurred on the day of Pentecost. To the Christian community the day is significant because it was the birthday of the church. On a deeper level still, it was the formal and historical point of transition from the Old Covenant age to the New Covenant age, the actual foundation for which had already been laid in the death and resurrection of Christ.

The central event marking the inauguration of the new age was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Of course the Holy Spirit was present and working among the saints of God in Old Testament times, but both the prophets and the Gospel promised a new and special presence of the Spirit as part of the Messianic hope. Isaiah 44:3 says, " 'For I will pour out water on the thirsty land and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out My Spirit on your offspring, and My blessing on your descendants.' " Joel 2:28 says, " 'And it will come about after this that I will pour out my Spirit on all mankind.' " Ezekiel 36:27 puts it thus: " 'And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes.' " John the Baptist promised that the Spirit would be given to believers as an indwelling presence (Luke 11:13; John 7:37-39). At His ascension He renewed this promise, as recorded in Acts 1:4-8. He told His apostles to "wait for what the Father had promised."

The activities recorded in Acts 2:1-4 are the initial fulfillment of these promises. The outward, miraculous manifestations were not the main point of Pentecost, but only

the signs or evidence that the invisible, inner presence of the Spirit was now available for the first time.<sup>i</sup> The miracles - especially the speaking with “other tongues” (Acts 2:4) succeeded in their purpose of gaining the attention of the crowd and disposing them toward the message Peter was to deliver. The people asked in amazement, “What does this mean?” (Acts 2:12). Peter proceeded to explain what it meant. This is the outpouring of the Spirit promised by Joel, he said. It is one of the primary blessings of the accomplished work of Jesus the Messiah. You crucified Him, said Peter to the Jews assembled there, but God raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His own right hand. “And having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear” (Acts 2:33). For this Jesus whom you crucified has been exalted as your Lord and Christ (Acts 2:15-36).

The audience that heard Peter’s sermon was a large group of devout Jews who worshipped God according to the Old Covenant relation. No doubt many of them had encountered Jesus and rejected Him, thinking they were defending Yahweh’s honor. What they heard from Peter, as confirmed by the miraculous manifestations of the Spirit, shook them to the very foundations of their faith. Jesus, whom they had sent to His death, was their God- the exalted Messiah! From His heavenly throne, as the inaugural expression of His Lordship, He had sent forth the long awaited Holy Spirit! When this realization dawned upon them, they sensed themselves as sinners exposed to the wrath of God. “They were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brethren, what shall we do?’ ” (Acts 2:37).

“What shall we do” about what? About the burden of their sin and guilt. What could they do to be free of this burden? Here is a primary example of the point made earlier while discussing Matthew 28, that even the most faithful Jews, when confronted with the new revelation of the Gospel of Christ, became lost sinners unless and until they accepted Jesus as their Savior and Messiah. Peter’s audience now felt this state of lostness and cried out for help. “What shall we do” to be saved?

Peter’s statement concerning baptism in Acts 2:38,39 must be understood against this background. Baptism is at the very heart of his answer to the question about what must be done to be free from sin and guilt.

## **The Gospel Offer**

Peter’s reply to the sinner’s question may be analyzed in two parts: first, the nature of the salvation offered; and second, the conditions for receiving it.

The Gospel offer made here in Acts 2:38 is a classic representation of the “double cure” referred to in the song “Rock of Ages,” viz., “Be of sin the double cure; save me from its guilt and power.” An alternative version says, “Save from wrath and make me pure.” This double cure is God’s answer to the “double trouble” sinners bring upon themselves through their sin.<sup>ii</sup>

The first and most immediately pressing problem caused by sin is *guilt*. The sinner has broken God’s law and thus has incurred its penalty. He stands under the

constant condemnation of the wrath of God. This is an objective problem, a problem of wrong relationships with God and with His law. God's solution to man's guilt is the death of Christ, in which He took our sin with its guilt upon Himself, paying its penalty through His own suffering. As a result God is able to offer the sinner full pardon for his sin, full remission, complete justification, complete liberation from the fear of condemnation and hell.

This is "the forgiveness of your sins" that Peter offers in Acts 2:38, and it is no doubt what his Jewish audience was inquiring about. Forgiveness itself is not a new blessing of the Messianic age, but was enjoyed by all believers in the pre-Christian era also. The newness is that now it is offered only "in the name of Jesus Christ" since His death and resurrection are the events that make it possible in the first place. In any case Peter's offer included first of all what was most wanted and most needed by his audience.

The second part of the double trouble is not as readily perceived and understood as the first. It is the effect that sin has on the soul itself. It can be described as sinfulness, depravity, spiritual weakness, spiritual sickness, even spiritual death. The vitiating effects of sin permeate the soul just as the ravages of disease permeate the body; they make the soul weak in the face of temptation and inclined to sin more and more. In other words, sin affects not just our *relationship* to God and His law; it also affects us *personally*. Our very nature is corrupted.

The Gospel offer to sinners in the Christian era includes a divine cure for this disease of the soul. It is the new birth or regeneration, as discussed earlier in connection with John 3:3-5. As noted there, this was not made available to sinners in the Old Testament era. Though they were provided with some resources to combat the power of sin, still they were not given the gift of rebirth. This is one of the principal new blessings of the Messianic age and one of the main aspects of the Gospel offer. Thus the Jews who asked "Brethren, what shall we do?" probably were not even aware of this side of the sin problem and thus were not asking about any solution to it. So when Peter's offer included the words, "and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit," this was an unexpected bonus! For "the gift of the Holy Spirit" is the person and presence of the Spirit Himself, who will enter the receptive sinner's heart in order to regenerate him and will remain there in order to give him strength to overcome sin day by day. The offer of the Holy Spirit *is* the offer of regeneration.

This was Peter's ultimate explanation of the tongues and other phenomena recorded in Acts 2:1-4 and about which the audience originally asked, "What does this mean?" (Acts 2:12). What this means, says Peter, is that God through Christ has now poured out the promised Spirit. And what it means for *you* is that, if you will repent and be baptized in the name of Christ for the remission of your sins, *you* will receive this very Holy Spirit as a gift. For the promised Spirit is *for you* (Acts 2:39; the word order makes the "you" emphatic).

## **The Conditions**

As is the case in Mark 16:16, the Gospel offer in Acts 2:38 is conditional. A large segment of conservative Protestantism teaches that God's gracious salvation is

completely unconditional, but this view is based on a faulty view of divine sovereignty and some questionable exegesis.<sup>iii</sup> Scripture clearly connects the sinner's reception of salvation with his meeting of certain basic conditions. In Mark 16:16 faith and baptism are specified; here in Acts 2:38 repentance and baptism are specifically mentioned.

When his Jewish brethren asked "What shall we do?" Peter's first instruction was that they should *repent*. Repentance as a condition for salvation is not a controversial point, even among those who like to emphasize "faith alone." It is generally recognized that the faith which God requires for salvation cannot really exist without repentance. The latter is basically an attitude toward *sin*. It is a hatred of sin in general and especially a hatred of the sin in one's own life; it is a determination and commitment to be rid of all sin as quickly as possible. Since the holy God Himself hates sin, one cannot truly believe in Him without sharing this hatred. Since Christ's very purpose and work was to oppose and conquer sin in all its forces and forms, and since His very blood was shed to accomplish this, one cannot truly believe in Christ without hating the sin which caused His suffering. Thus even in passages where it is not specified (as in Acts 16:31), it is understood that repentance is the Siamese twin or silent partner of faith.

In Acts 2:38 repentance is the first condition mentioned because the thing foremost in the minds of those who heard Peter's sermon was the conviction of their sin, especially their sin of rejecting Christ and causing His death. Their question specifically meant, "What shall we do *about these terrible sins?*" First, says Peter, you must have the right attitude toward them: you must repent.

The only other condition given by Peter is baptism: "Let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins." Since Mark lists baptism as a condition for salvation, and since John gives it as a condition for entrance into the kingdom of God, we should not be surprised that it is presented here as a condition for the forgiveness of sins, as well as for receiving the gift of the Spirit.

Of course many do find it difficult to accept what Peter says about baptism and look for ways to avoid its implications. One such way is to deny that Acts 2:38 refers to *water* baptism. As one writer says, "I doubt very seriously whether Peter was referring to water baptism," because there would not have been enough water in the temple area to immerse 3,000 people (Acts 2:41) and because neither here nor anywhere else is *water* baptism specifically connected with the forgiveness of sins.<sup>iv</sup>

Such an idea is not very well thought out, however. Peter must have meant water baptism for the following reasons. First, he must have been speaking of the same baptism prescribed in the Great Commission, which had to be water baptism because it was something the apostles themselves were to administer. Second, the baptism prescribed by Peter was something the sinners themselves were to do ("What shall we do?"); it was their decision and initiative. A purely *spiritual* baptism would be at God's initiative. Third, Peter's language would have immediately called to his audience's mind the baptism of John (which was "a baptism of *repentance* for the *forgiveness of sins*," Mark 1:4), which was known to all as water baptism. Finally it should be noted that there

was ample water in the Jerusalem area (it did not have to be in the *temple* area) for immersing 3,000 people.<sup>v</sup>

Thus there is no good reason for seeing this as a reference to anything besides water baptism. It is set forth alongside repentance as a condition for receiving the blessings of salvation. This should not be surprising in view of the prominence of baptism in the Great Commission as reported by both Matthew and Mark. In fact, it would have been surprising if Peter had *not* mentioned baptism when asked “What shall we do?”

This leads to a final consideration relative to the conditions specified in Acts 2:38, namely, why is *faith* not included here, especially since the commission in Mark 16:16 includes both faith and baptism? We could not infer from both the question in Acts 2:37 and the reply in Acts 2:38 that it was not necessary to specify faith since those who heard the message and were “pierced to the heart” by it (verse 37) *already believed*. This is why they asked for further instruction on what to do. If Peter had perceived that they did not yet believe, he surely would have required this first of all.

This may be compared with the situation in Acts 16:30,31, when the Philippian jailer asked basically the same question, “What must I do to be saved?” This man, a pagan, had not as yet had the benefit of hearing a message about the true God or our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus Paul’s reply focused on the foundation requirement: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved.” This instruction was not meant to be comprehensive and all-inclusive; it was an opening statement immediately followed by more teaching: “And they spoke the word of the Lord to him” (Acts 16:32). Though neither repentance nor baptism is specifically mentioned, we can fairly infer that they were included in this “word of the Lord.” This is surely the case with baptism, since the jailer was immediately baptized after hearing the teaching (Acts 16:33).

In a similar way we can consider Peter’s instruction in Acts 2:38 to have been determined by the level of response already achieved by his hearers. Since a measure of faith was already evidenced by their question, there was no need to mention it specifically.

In this connection one other point may be noted. Even though faith is not specifically mentioned here as a condition for salvation, the content of Peter’s reply was an *implicit* call for faith, and not just the faith of the Old Testament saints. It was a call for these devout Jews to rise to a new level of faith, to focus their faith upon a God who is Three as well as One. As we noted in the discussion of Matthew 28:19-20, from this time forward saving faith must include faith in Jesus as the divine Redeemer and faith in the Holy Spirit as the divine gift. A conscientious response to Peter’s instruction would have to include these elements, since he told this group to be baptized *in the name of Jesus Christ* in order to *receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*. Their Old Covenant faith was no longer adequate; whether they had been baptized with John’s baptism was now irrelevant. They are now required to accept God’s word about Jesus Christ and the Spirit as part of their acceptance of baptism itself.

In summary, then, the conditions for receiving the “double cure” according to Acts 2:38 are repentance and baptism, plus an implied faith.

---

<sup>i</sup> See Jack Cottrell, “*Are Miraculous Gifts the Blessing of Pentecost?*”, Christian Standard (May 9, 1982), 117:9-11.

<sup>ii</sup> See Jack Cottrell, *Thirteen Lessons on Grace: Being Good Enough Isn't Good Enough* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press, 1988 reprint of 1976 edition published by Standard Publishing), chs. 5-7.

<sup>iii</sup> See Jack Cottrell, *What the Bible Says About God the Ruler* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press, 1984), chs. 5,9 and *What the Bible Says About God the Redeemer*, pp. 389-99.

<sup>iv</sup> Richard A. Seymour, *All About Repentance* (Hollywood, Fla.: Harvest House, 1974), p. 123. The last point of course is a case of begging the question.

v. Several large pools were available, such as the Pool of Siloam (just south of the temple area), which measures approximately 15 by 50 feet. A large reservoir on the southwest side of the city had a surface area of about 3 acres. See J.W. McGarvey, *Lands of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1881), pp. 189-202, for a full description of the pools of Jerusalem.

## **ACTS 2:38-39 (II)**

In chapter four above we noted that in Acts 2:38-39 Peter specifies two conditions for receiving the Gospel blessings of forgiveness and the Holy Spirit, namely, repentance and baptism. In this chapter we will explore in more detail how baptism is related to each of these blessings.

### **Baptism and Forgiveness**

Baptism for the forgiveness of sins in the Christian age is not without antecedents in the previous era. It was foreshadowed by the Old Testament ritual purification ceremonies, also called lustrations or washings.

In the context of the Mosaic law, some acts and conditions produced a state of ritual or ceremonial uncleanness, e.g., having certain bodily discharges (Lev. 15) and touching a corpse (Num. 19:11-22). The state of uncleanness produced thereby was not moral in nature, but ritual or ceremonial. No moral fault of guilt was attached; some of the situations causing it were natural and unavoidable. The principal effect was that the person rendered unclean was considered unfit to engage in the religious services before God. To remove such defilement, certain purification rites were prescribed, most of them involving water (e.g., Lev. 11:32; 14:8; Deut. 23:10-11).

---

On certain occasions and for worship leaders especially, water purification was required before one could approach God even when no specific offense was in view. See Exodus 19:10,14; 29:4; Lev. 16:4. The bronze laver used for priestly washing was particularly significant. The ministering priests were required to wash therein before serving in the tabernacle; “they shall wash with water, that they may not die” (Exod. 30:20).

In what sense did the water or the act itself have such a dramatic effect or bring about purification? The fact is that neither water nor the act of washing *caused* any change. It was a matter of divine decision and declaration. God simply declared that before the act of washing, the person was unacceptable in His sight; afterwards the person was regarded as acceptable.

If the state of uncleanness and the washing rites themselves had only a ceremonial significance, then what was the purpose of this whole system? Basically it had a symbolic or typical purpose. The whole system of *ceremonial* uncleanness and purification was an object lesson to teach about *moral* pollution and true *legal* guilt before God, and the necessity of the heart’s being cleansed from these. This is how the prophets made use of the ceremonies in their teaching. They used the ritual cleansings as analogies of the moral cleansing with which God is especially concerned. Typical teaching involving this conceptual transition from ritual to moral includes Psalm 51:2,7, “Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin....Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow”; Isaiah 1:16, “Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from My sight”; Jeremiah 4:14, “Wash your heart from evil, O Jerusalem, that you may be saved”; and Ezekiel 36:25, “Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols.”

The Old Testament water ceremonies, together with the prophetic imagery of divine spiritual cleansing, are the forerunners of Christian baptism. The latter unites outward washing and inner moral cleansing into a single act, viz., baptism for the forgiveness of sins. Baptism is to moral and spiritual defilement what the Old Testament washings were to ritual defilement.

John the Baptist’s baptism also had a connection with forgiveness, though it is never stated in the same terms as Christian baptism. It was a baptism “for repentance” (Matt. 3:11), “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3). Those who were baptized confessed their sins in the process (Matt. 3:6; Mark 1:5). Thus repentance, confession of sin, and forgiveness of sin were all related to John’s baptism. Whether the baptism was preached as a condition for this forgiveness or whether it was only an aid to quicken and intensify repentance is not clear.

The relation between Christian baptism and forgiveness of sins is much more specific and clear, though, especially here in Acts 2:38, where baptism is said to be “for [eis] the forgiveness of sins.” The key word here is *eis*, translated in different versions in

---

a wide variety of ways including “for,” “unto,” “into,” “in order to,” “in order to have,” “so that,” “with a view to,” and “in relation to.” The preferred terminology is a matter of considerable controversy since exegetes often try to make the word conform to a preconceived view of baptism.

Three main approaches may be identified. The first is that *eis* here retains its most common meaning of *direction or motion toward something*, which includes the concepts of *purpose* and *goal*. On this understanding the purpose or goal of baptism is to bring about forgiveness of sins. This view is consistent with the idea of baptism as a condition for salvation and for entrance into the kingdom of God. A second approach is that *eis* here means *because of*, the idea being that a person is baptized because his sins have already been forgiven. The third view is that *eis* here means the same thing as the preposition *en* (in), which does not mean motion toward but simply *location in*. This view posits only a very general connection between baptism and forgiveness, viz., “be baptized *in relation to* forgiveness of sins.” The last two views are preferred by those who reject the conditional relation between baptism and salvation.

Of these three views, the first is clearly the meaning in Acts 2:38 on both lexicographical and contextual grounds. Regarding its actual meaning, a study of the lexicons shows that the primary meaning and the overwhelmingly most common use of *eis* is “motion toward” in any one of a number of senses, the explanation of which takes two full pages in the Arndt and Gingrich lexicon. In this general category the two most common meanings are “moving from one physical place to another” (88 lines in the lexicon) and “goal or purpose” (127 lines - one full page). By contrast only five lines are devoted to the alleged causal use of *eis*. Arndt and Gingrich call this use “controversial” because there is reason to doubt that it ever has this meaning in Greek usage. M.J. Harris flatly declares that this causal sense “seems unlikely in any one of the passages sometimes adduced,” including Acts 2:38. A meaning similar to that of *en* is not disputed but is still relatively infrequent. Arndt and Gingrich use only 16 lines to explain that *eis* sometimes means “with respect to” or “with reference to.” Most of the cases where *eis* is used where *en* would be expected (30 of 34 lines) refer to physical location.

Of course it is understood that simply counting lines in a lexicon does not decide the meaning of a word in a particular verse. The point is to show that the primary meaning of *eis* involves motion toward or purpose, and that this is how it is used in the overwhelming majority of cases. The meaning “because of” is highly debatable simply because it has no solid basis in the Greek language as such. The meaning “with reference to” is possible but not as likely given its relatively infrequent use. Thus if *eis* has one of these last two meanings in Acts 2:38, that meaning would have to be contextually clear.

In this final analysis the meaning of *eis* in this passage will be determined by the context. The general meaning “with reference to” would be warranted only if the context itself did not suggest a more specific meaning, only if the connection between baptism and forgiveness remained vague in the context. But this is certainly not the case. We must remember that Peter’s statement is part of his answer to the Jews’ question of how to get rid of the guilt of their sins, especially their sin of crucifying Christ. They specifically asked, “What shall we do” to get rid of this guilt? Any instruction Peter gave



---

them would have been understood by them in this light, and must be so understood by us today. When he told them to repent and be baptized “*eis* the forgiveness” of their sins, the only honest reading is that baptism is for the *purpose* or *goal* of receiving forgiveness. This meaning is not just warranted but is actually demanded by the context.

The fact that baptism is paralleled here with repentance confirms this meaning. Surely no one questions that Peter is telling his audience to repent for the purpose of bringing about forgiveness of sins. Even if such a connection between repentance and forgiveness were not already understood, it is perfectly unambiguous in this context. The fact that baptism is part of the same response to the same question makes its meaning just as clear and gives it the same basic meaning as repentance. In whatever way repentance is connected with forgiveness, so also is baptism. If repentance is for the purpose of bringing about forgiveness, so also is baptism.

Even if the so-called “casual” meaning of *eis* were not in doubt on lexicographical grounds, it would surely be excluded in Acts 2:38 by the context itself. “Be baptized because your sins have been forgiven” is the exact opposite of what would be expected and required in the situation. The whole point is that the Jews’ sins are *not* forgiven, and they are asking what to do to receive such forgiveness.

The bottom line is that the only meaning of *eis* that is consistent with the context of Acts 2:38 is its most common meaning of “motion toward,” specifically the purposive meaning of “unto” or “for the purpose of.” The Greek construction is exactly the same as Jesus’ statement in Matthew 26:28, that he shed his blood “for [*eis*] forgiveness of sins,” namely, for the purpose of bringing about forgiveness. Thus we must conclude that Peter is saying in Acts 2:38 that part of what a sinner must do to bring about forgiveness of his sins is be baptized.

One other point must be made concerning the relation between baptism and forgiveness. Quite often we hear that a person is baptized “for the remission of sins that are past.” The idea that baptism brings forgiveness for every sin committed up to that point, and that a person thus remains completely forgiven until he sins again. Then he reverts to a state of lostness because of the newly committed sin, and remains in this state until some further forgiving act is performed, such as partaking of the Lord’s Supper or making specific confession of such sin (I John 1:9). Such thinking underlies the development of the Roman Catholic sacrament of penance.

Such thinking is false, however, and is based on a faulty concept not only of baptism but of forgiveness itself. The forgiveness of sins is in essence the same as justification (cf. Romans 3:28; 4:6-8). When one receives forgiveness in baptism, he becomes a justified or forgiven person. He enters the state of being justified. This is a continuing state that is maintained through continuing faith in the blood of Jesus. Through his sincere and working faith a Christian remains free from guilt and condemnation (Rom. 8:1) even if he is not free from sin itself. This is the heart of the concept of justification by faith.

---

This means that baptism is not for the forgiveness of past sins only, but for the forgiveness of sins, *period*. As long as one remains in the relationship to Christ begun at baptism, he is justified or forgiven as the result of what happened in his baptism. Thus all our lives we should remember our baptism, and be encouraged by that memory when we begin to feel discouraged in our Christian living or to doubt the validity of our hope in Christ Jesus.

## **Baptism and the Holy Spirit**

In our study of John 3:5 we have already seen that there is a close relationship between baptism and the Holy Spirit, in that both are related to the new birth. Here in Acts 2:38 that connection is made even stronger and more specific. The gift of the Spirit Himself as an indwelling presence is promised as the result of Christian baptism: “Be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

The reality of the inner presence of the Spirit in our very lives and bodies is a fact taught forcefully and clearly in Scripture. See Romans 8:9-11; I Cor. 6:19; II Tim. 1:14. Acts 2:38 tells us that baptism is the point of time when the Spirit enters our lives in this way.

Though baptism is a single act involving both water and Spirit (John 3:5), this passage shows that baptism in water actually precedes or is a precondition for the Spirit’s regenerating work accomplished therein. In baptism the Holy Spirit is given; He then gives the new birth by His very presence. Thus, although they are for the most part simultaneous, technically they do not begin at the same time.

As suggested earlier in this chapter, the gift of the indwelling Spirit is the very heart of the Pentecost message and promise. Before His ascension Jesus told His apostles to wait in Jerusalem for “what the Father had promised” (Acts 1:4-5). The phenomena of Pentecost confirmed that this promise was fulfilled on that day (Acts 2:16-17,33); from that time forward the gift of the Spirit has been offered to anyone who repents and is baptized in the name of Jesus (Acts 2:38-39). Thus as unlikely as it may seem, this long-promised and long-expected gift of inestimable value is by God’s design made to depend on baptism! This is indicated in Acts 5:32 also, where Peter notes that God has given the Holy Spirit “to those who obey Him” - an obvious reference to Acts 2:38. From this alone we can see what an important place God has assigned to baptism in the economy of salvation.

A problem is raised by the fact that on several occasions in the book of Acts the Holy Spirit seems to be given apart from baptism, either before it or after it. Some conclude from these events that the giving of the Spirit follows no set pattern and especially that it has no particular connection with baptism.

---

Twice the Holy Spirit is given *before* baptism, namely at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4) and at the conversion of Cornelius and his household (Acts 10:44-48). It is a serious mistake, however, to see these events as typical and as representative conversion experiences. In fact, they are intended to be just the opposite. In the first place, it is not clear whether the pre-baptismal presence of the Spirit in these cases resulted in conversion (the new birth) at all, or whether it was simply a matter of equipping these particular individuals with the miraculous ability to speak in tongues.

In the second place, even if they did involve new birth, the evidential purposes of these two events required them to be unusual and unique and contrary to the normal pattern of conversion. In each case the main point was the miraculous tongues, which functioned as signs of the truth of the apostolic testimony. At Pentecost the tongues established the message that this was the beginning of the new-age outpouring of the Spirit. In Acts 10 tongues were evidence that God wanted the Gentiles to be received into His church along with Jews. Thus these events were not intended to be paradigms of conversion. They were meant to be exceptions to the rule in the sense that every miracle is an exception; this is what gives them their evidential value.

In the third place, Peter specifically indicates that the manner of the Spirit's coming at Pentecost and upon Cornelius stood apart from the normal experience. He notes that Cornelius and his household "received the Holy Spirit just as we did" (Acts 10:47; cf. 15:8), but Acts 11:15 shows that he regards the *manner* in which they received Him comparable only to the Pentecost experience itself: "And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, just as He did upon us at the beginning." And what was the unique thing about these two occasions? These are the only two recorded cases where the Spirit was given without any human intermediary of any kind, where the Spirit *immediately* fell upon the chosen individuals. In every other case a human mediator is involved, either through baptism or the laying on of hands.

The conclusion is that Acts 2:1-4 and Acts 10:44-48 do not negate the truth of Acts 2:38 concerning the appointed connection between baptism and the Holy Spirit. They give no warrant whatsoever for expecting the Spirit to be given prior to baptism.

On the other two occasions in the book of Acts, however, the Spirit seems to be given *after* baptism, in the separate action of the laying on of an apostle's hands: see Acts 8:17-18; 19:6. The assumption that these two passages refer to the gift of the indwelling Spirit is one reason for the rise of the practice of confirmation in some church groups. But that is the question: is the giving of the Spirit in these two cases the same as that promised in Acts 2:38? It seems not to be.

What sets these two events apart from the normal conversion experience in which the indwelling Spirit is given in Christian baptism? Basically, they both appear to involve not the indwelling of the Spirit but the bestowing of *miraculous gifts* of the Spirit. At Samaria what was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands was something observable and awesome (Acts 8:18); in Acts 19:6 the result is specifically given as "speaking with tongues and prophesying." Especially from the account of

---

Philip's mission in Samaria (Acts 8:5-18), we are justified in concluding that miraculous spiritual gifts could be bestowed only through the laying on of an apostle's hands. (This is why the Pentecost and Cornelius events were unique: even the *manner* in which the miraculous abilities were given was a miracle.) Because of the unqualified promise in Acts 2:38 (cf. Acts 5:32), we may thus conclude that both the Samaritan disciples and the Ephesian disciples received the indwelling of the Spirit when they were baptized (Acts 8:12; 19:5); subsequently they were given miraculous spiritual gifts when the apostles laid their hands on them.

Again the connection between baptism and the Holy Spirit established in Acts 2:38 remains unshaken. Events which depart from this pattern are either deliberately unique or are referring to something other than the gift of the indwelling Spirit that provides the new birth. This understanding is consistent with the testimony of other New Testament passages which tie baptism to the regenerating work of the Spirit, viz., John 3:5; Romans 6:3ff; Colossians 2:12; and Titus 3:5.

## **Summary**

In this chapter and the one preceding we have sought to explain the meaning of baptism as found in Peter's instruction in Acts 2:38-39. We have emphasized the significance of the historical context, namely, that this was the day when God gave the long-awaited messianic outpouring of the Holy Spirit. This was also the occasion when the Jews were confronted with their guilt of rejecting and crucifying Christ, who was confirmed as their Messiah by His resurrection and enthronement and by His participation in the sending of the Spirit. Thousands in Peter's audience came under conviction and asked what they could do to be free from the guilt of their sin.

We have seen that Peter's response included the promise of a "double-cure" from the "double trouble" of sin; forgiveness to remove their guilt, and the indwelling Holy Spirit to give them a new birth to new spiritual life. His response also included the conditions for receiving these blessings: repentance and baptism.

We have discussed in some detail the connection between baptism and forgiveness as stated here in Acts 2:38. Of special significance is the use of the Greek word *eis*, which is shown by lexical considerations and by the context to mean "unto" or "for the purpose of." Thus the very purpose of baptism is to bring about forgiveness or justification.

Finally we have discussed the connection between baptism and the Holy Spirit, emphasizing that baptism is a clear precondition for receiving the gift of the regenerating and indwelling presence of the Spirit. Passages in Acts which separate baptism from the gift of the Spirit are deliberately unique exceptions or are not talking about the saving presence of the Spirit in the first place.