

Baptism: “For the remission of sins”

By Bob Young

Since the beginning of the church, the Christian community has studied and debated the meaning and importance of Christian baptism, especially its relationship to salvation. Students of Scripture have wrestled with the meaning of New Testament teachings. Baptism is a significant part of the teachings of the New Testament and is intricately connected to other biblical teachings.

Much of what has been written about baptism is not consistent with the teachings of the New Testament. Confusion has long existed. In Corinth Paul connected baptism and unity (1 Cor. 12:13), yet many today say baptism is divisive. Some who had been baptized at Ephesus¹ had experienced an incomplete baptism (apparently because of their misunderstanding or lack of understanding when they were baptized); they were re-immersed (Acts 19:1-6). What is the connection, if any, between baptism and remission of sins?

The relationship between baptism and the forgiveness of sins has been explained in two basic ways. On the one hand are those who affirm that baptism properly accepted and performed results in forgiveness of sins. The opposing view is that baptism is an act of obedience which serves as a symbol or indication of a spiritual experience which has already occurred. The denial of the importance of baptism for salvation from sin diminishes its urgency and may even question its importance. If salvation comes at the exact moment of sincere prayer for salvation², it is hard to explain the biblical reason for baptism.

One must always ask, “What does the Bible say?” Is there evidence that baptism anticipates salvation rather than affirming it? Is there evidence that salvation is given after baptism and not before it? The long-standing discussion of Acts 2:38 demonstrates the disagreement: is baptism “unto” or “for the purpose of” salvation (looking toward it) or “because of” salvation (looking backward to salvation already accomplished)? The answer turns on the meaning of the Greek phrase and the preposition *eis*. Finding the Biblical answer is important.

The Bible gives us help as we study the question. The prepositional phrase of Acts 2:38 appears four other times in the Greek New Testament. Its use and meaning in other contexts help us understand the meaning in Acts 2:38.

First, in 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? Certainly, the Matthew 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 forgiveness preceded even the repentance to which John called them? 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 in Luke (24:47) finds Jesus explaining that repentance is to be preached in his name “for the forgiveness of sins.” Does this verse affirm that those 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.

The meaning of the phrase in these other texts is clear. To affirm an opposite meaning in Acts 2 is surely inconsistent. Peter connects salvation with the blood of Christ. Luther wrote of this connection, 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

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.

sins.”³ More recently, Eugene Peterson in his paraphrase 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!”

While some might see a symbol in the word ritual, Peterson’s explanation 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 agrees with Paul’s statement in Gal. 3:27 that we are baptized into Christ.

Note from the author

I you have never received baptism with the purpose of receiving salvation, I urge you to study the Bible passages above 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 makes the same argument, adding that participation in the death of Christ is the only hope of participation in the ultimate resurrection with Christ.