

Baptized for Remission of Sins (Acts 2:38)

Acts 2:38 is probably the best known verse used to support baptismal regeneration. If you see a bumper sticker or an advertisement / circular which says "Have you obeyed Acts 2:38", it is almost a certainty that it is put out by a Oneness Pentecostal church (a groups of pentecostal churches that deny the truth of the trinity). The reason that it is advertised so much is probably because it does appear to be the strongest argument that the baptismal regeneration folk have in their favour. Let's look at it:

Acts 2:38

*38 Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."
NKJV*

The baptismal regeneration folk will tell you that this is clear. Unless you repent and are baptized, there is no hope for your sins to be remitted and you cannot receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, therefore baptism is essential for salvation. Let's start with the last claim first and work backwards, simply because the claim about the Holy Spirit is the easiest to address. What does scripture say about receiving the Holy Spirit?

John 7:38-39

*38 **He who believes in Me**, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." 39 But **this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive**; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.
NKJV*

Rom 8:9-11

*10 And if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness. 11 But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.
NKJV*

Rom 8:16-17

*16 The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs--heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.
NKJV*

2 Cor 1:21-23

21 Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us is God, 22 who also has sealed us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.

NKJV

So scripture says that those who believe will receive the Holy Spirit. But the world (unsaved) will not receive the Holy Spirit:

John 14:16-17

17 the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you.

NKJV

How do we receive the Holy Spirit according to scripture? Let's look back at the first verse that we referenced which shows that the Holy Spirit indwells believer, John 7:39:

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NKJV

This says that the Spirit is given to all who believe. Scripture is also clear that the Spirit comes by faith and not by works:

Gal 3:5-6

5 Therefore He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, does He do it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?-- 6 just as Abraham "believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness."

NKJV

In summary, the Holy Spirit comes to those who believe and only those who believe. We in fact have a specific example given in scripture which is specific that the Holy Spirit is given after belief and before water baptism:

Acts 10:44-48

44 While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word. 45 And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. 46 For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God. Then Peter answered, 47 Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit

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just as we have?"
NKJV

Note that the Holy Spirit fell upon them as they heard the word. We have already seen that the Holy Spirit only comes upon those who believe, so we know that they believed. But notice that it was after that that they received water baptism. We therefore know from specific and clear teaching in God's word that water baptism is not a requirement for receiving the Holy Spirit.

What about remission of sins? Doesn't this verse say that water baptism is required for remission of sins? Using the same approach as we did previously, let's examine what scripture says about the requirements for our sins to be remitted.

Matt 26:27-29

28 For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.

NKJV

Heb 9:22

22 And according to the law almost all things are purified with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no remission.

NKJV

Luke 24:46-47

46 Then He said to them, "Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, 47 and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

NKJV

Acts 10:43

43 To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins."

NKJV

Matt 26:28

28 For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.

NKJV

Without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sins. Nowhere in scripture will you find any statement which says the same about water. It is only through the blood of Jesus shed on the cross that we are saved.

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Many of you may be saying, well if the baptism is not for sins and not for receiving the Holy Spirit, then what is this verse actually saying? Well, the first problem in understanding this verse comes if we read it by itself and not in the context of the whole of scripture. Let's start with the local context. What is the topic that Peter is speaking about? If you look earlier in the passage, Peter is preaching Jesus, preaching about Jesus death and resurrection on the cross, and indeed preached salvation though believing Christ, for example:

Acts 2:21

21 And it shall come to pass That whoever calls on the name of the LORD Shall be saved.'
NKJV

And we have already seen that the larger context of scripture does not agree with the interpretation that the Holy Spirit and salvation requires water baptism. And yet that is what this verse appears to say when read by itself. How can that be? It has to do with the grammatic structure of the sentence. Let's look at a different example - If I told you that I took an aspirin for a headache, would it mean that I cannot have the headache without the aspirin? Of course not! If aspirin gave headaches, the company selling aspirins would be bankrupt. We take aspirin because we have a headache, not to get the headache.

Likewise, we are baptized, not to receive salvation, have our sins remitted and to receive the Holy Spirit, but, as we saw in Acts 10:47, because it has already occurred. The act of baptism is our response to have received salvation.

If we look at the original Koine Greek in which this passage was written, the word for is the Greek word "eis". This word has a wide range of meanings and could carry with it the intent of either for, as Acts 2:38 is too often interpreted, or it could carry the intent of "because of", which would make Acts 2:38 consistent with the rest of scripture. We have many passages in scripture where "eis" carries the intent or concept of "because of", for example:

Matt 12:41

41 The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at (eis) the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here.
NKJV

The word "at" is eis. Now did they repent so that they would have the preaching of Jonah? Or is it the other way around?

Rom 6:3-4

3 Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized

into (eis) His death? NKJV

Were we baptized to cause His death?

Matt 3:11

11 I indeed baptize you with water unto (eis) repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. NKJV

Were they baptized with water to get repentance or because they repented?

The point is that the intent of “because of” is commonly used both in English and in Koine Greek, and that is the only sense in which the word “eis” can be understood in the context of scripture for it to be consistent with the rest of scripture. With that in mind, let's have another look at Acts 2:38:

Acts 2:38

38 Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. NKJV

So now understanding that the intent of “eis” in context is “because of”, we could read this to say:

“Repent, and then be baptized because you have received remission of sins and the Holy Spirit.”

So far I have not dealt with the reference to repentance, but repentance is used almost interchangeably in scripture with believing in Christ when salvation is being discussed and for good reason – when one comes to Christ, one must repent. Let's look at some verses on repentance:

Mark 1:14-15

14 Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, 15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel." NKJV

Mark 6:11-13

12 So they went out and preached that people should repent. 13 And they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick, and healed them. NKJV

Luke 13:2-4

3 I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.

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NKJV

Acts 3:19-22

19 Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, 20 and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, 21 whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began.

NKJV

Acts 8:21-23

22 Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you.

NKJV

None of these even suggests or mentions baptism as essential for salvation. In conclusion, we can see that the argument commonly put forward for Acts 2:38 can only stand if the verse is read out of context with the remainder of God's word.

Tom Smith

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<http://discern.ca>

smithj.geo@yahoo.com

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