

Article: JAA238

## DOES ACTS 2:38 TEACH BAPTISMAL REMISSION?

This article first appeared in the Practical Hermeneutics column of the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 28, number 2 (2004). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

One controversial issue concerning salvation has been whether water baptism is necessary for the remission of sins. Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches have insisted that water baptism itself is the means of the remission of sins. Evangelical churches, with their roots in the Protestant Reformation, have taught that, though baptism is important as the sign and seal of justification by faith and as the sacrament of initiation into the visible church, it is not the means of remission of sins. Certain cults and even some descendants of Protestantism, however, have embraced the sacerdotal<sup>1</sup> views of Romanism and Orthodoxy and taught that sins cannot be forgiven apart from baptism, though they have insisted that baptism cannot be effective for remission of sins apart from faith.

The most commonly cited biblical “support” for the latter view is Acts 2:38. After Peter’s Pentecost sermon recorded earlier in the chapter, his listeners asked what they should do, and Peter responded, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (ESV). On the surface, in English, it seems that Peter meant that the purpose of baptism was to effect the remission of sins, which explains why baptismal remissionists so readily appeal to this verse.

For example, in *The Bible Plan of Salvation*, published by the press division of the cultic, anti-Trinitarian United Pentecostal Church, Carl E. Williams wrote, “We should notice the purpose of baptism as stated in Acts 2:38. Water baptism is ‘for the remission of sins.’ We are to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the purpose of obtaining the remission of sins. The word *for*...means ‘in order to obtain.’”<sup>2</sup> J. L. Hall likewise wrote, “United Pentecostals recognize that water baptism is ‘for the remission of sins’ (Acts 2:38).”<sup>3</sup>

Does the verse really prove their case? A Bible verse *proves* a doctrine only if that doctrine is the only interpretation the grammar and word definitions permit. If there are other plausible interpretations, the verse might be used as evidence in a cumulative case for the doctrine, but its evidential value rises or falls in inverse proportion to the plausibility of the other options.

Whether one understands Acts 2:38 as supporting baptismal remission of sins is determined not by the verse alone but by how one understands the rest of the Bible’s teaching about forgiveness of sins. Even if we consider the verse by itself, two major considerations, one lexical (involving the definitions of words) and the other grammatical (involving rules of language and their effect on meaning), undermine the value of Acts 2:38 as evidence for the doctrine of baptismal remission and point to another, more likely interpretation.

**The Lexical Objection.** Consider simply the typical English translation. A key phrase is “for the forgiveness of your sins,” and a key word is *for*. Eight of the eleven definitions of the preposition *for* in *Webster’s New International Dictionary* would make no sense here, but three make good sense. Definition two indicates *the end with reference to which anything acts, serves, or is done; that is, the purpose*. Definition seven indicates *the cause, motive, or occasion of an act, state, or condition; hence, because of*. Definition ten indicates *that in respect to which something is considered*.<sup>4</sup> Baptismal remissionists assume that *for* here uses definition two, and therefore denotes purpose, as if the phrase meant “*in order to obtain* the forgiveness of your sins.” Might one not, however, in accordance with definition seven, be baptized *because* his sins have been forgiven, that is, receive the sign because he has the reality? If you have any trouble thinking of *for* in this sense, remember the old proverb,

For want of a nail the shoe was lost. For want of a shoe the horse was lost. For want of a horse the rider was lost. For want of a rider the battle was lost. For want of a battle the kingdom was lost. And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.

The point is not that someone lost a kingdom in order to lose a battle, lost a battle in order to lose a rider, and so on to lose a nail; rather, it is that because a nail was missing a horseshoe was lost, because of that a horse was lost, and so on until a kingdom was lost.

Or might baptism simply be *in respect to* (definition ten) the forgiveness of sins—perhaps as signifying it (whether the one baptized has it or not)? This, too, would make good sense.

We can make a similar case about the Greek preposition translated *for*. It is *eiV* (*eis*), a word with many meanings. One of them is “to denote reference to a person or thing *for, to, with respect or reference to*” (e.g., Matt. 5:13; Luke 14:35; Acts 17:21; Rom. 8:28; 2 Cor. 13:3; Col. 1:12; 2 Tim. 2:21; 4:11; 2 Pet. 1:17).<sup>5</sup> If this is the meaning of *eis* in Acts 2:38—and the option cannot be ruled out—then the verse would indicate that baptism is performed *with reference to*, that is, as a sign or symbol of forgiveness of sins, *not for the purpose of or in order to obtain* forgiveness of sins. (This assumes that the verse connects baptism with remission of sins, but we shall see why that is unlikely.)

The plausibility of these alternative understandings of *for* reduces the evidential value of Acts 2:38 for the doctrine of baptismal remission of sins. It is enough to dispossess the baptismal remissionists of Acts 2:38 as *proof* of their doctrine, but we should not stop there. We can show, by a careful analysis of the grammar, that another interpretation is much more *probable*—and the wise person, faced with alternative interpretations, chooses the more probable over the less.

**The Grammatical Objection.** In Peter’s command, the verb *repent* (Greek *metanoēsate*, *metanoēsate*) is second-person plural. Adopting a Southern dialect for a moment, we can translate it “Y’all repent.” The verb *be baptized* (*baptisqhwtw*, *baptisthētō*), however, is third-person singular. We can translate it, for emphasis’ sake, “let him [or her] be baptized.” In the phrase *for the forgiveness of your sins*, the word *your* (*uJmwÇn*, *humōn*) is second-person plural again. In that Southern dialect, it would translate, “for the forgiveness of y’all’s sins.”

Imagine the implications of ignoring this switch from second-person plural to third-person singular and back. Since the command *be baptized* is third-person singular, and the pronoun *your* in *your sins* is second-person plural, the sense would be that each one should be baptized for the forgiveness of not only his own sins but also the sins of all the others there. Mormons may think they can be baptized for the forgiveness of others’ sins, but Peter certainly didn’t teach that!

Some object to this reasoning by pointing out that *be baptized* is followed by *every one of you* (*e”kastoV uJmwÇn*, *hekastos humōn*), and that in that phrase *you* (*uJmwÇn*, *humōn*) is second-person plural.<sup>6</sup> Wouldn’t it follow, then, that the connection is between this *you* and the forgiveness of *your* sins?

That ignores the grammar, too. In Greek, *every one of you* is comprised of the adjective for *each* (*e”kastoV*, *hekastos*), which is used as a noun here, and the partitive genitive pronoun for *you* (*uJmwÇn*, *humōn*). (That is, *every one* is part [hence partitive] of *you* [plural].) *You* identifies the class of which *every one* is a part. The command [*let him*] *be baptized*, moreover, is third-person singular, and its subject is not *you* but *every one*. For *you* to have been the subject of the command to be baptized, it would have to have been in the nominative, or subject, case (*uJmeiæV*, *humeis*), not in the genitive, or possessive, case (*uJmwÇn*, *humōn*), and the command *be baptized* would have to have been in the second-person plural (*baptivesqe*, *baptisesthe*), not in the third-person singular (*baptisqhwtw*, *baptistheitō*).

In short, the most precise English translation of the relevant clauses, arranging them to reflect the switches in person and number of the verbs, would be, “You (plural) repent for the forgiveness of your (plural) sins, and let each one (singular) of you be baptized (singular)...” Or, to adopt our Southern dialect again, “Y’all repent for the forgiveness of y’all’s sins, and let each one of you be baptized....”

When I showed this translation to the late Julius Mantey, one of the foremost Greek grammarians of the twentieth century and co-author of *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (originally published in 1927), he approved and even signed his name next to it in the margin of my Greek New Testament.

These arguments, lexical and grammatical, stand independently. Even if one rejects both lexical meanings of *for*, he still must face the grammatical argument, and even if he rejects the grammatical conclusion, he still must face the lexical argument.

Does Acts 2:38 prove baptismal remission? No, it doesn't even support it as part of a cumulative case.

— *E. Calvin Beisner*

## NOTES

1. Sacerdotalism is the belief that priests mediate between God and men, and particularly the belief that they do so by administering the sacraments, which convey salvation, and apart from which salvation is impossible.
2. Carl E. Williams, *The Bible Plan of Salvation* (Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame Press, 1988), 11.
3. J. L. Hall, *The United Pentecostal Church and the Evangelical Movement* (Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame Press, 1990), 53.
4. Condensed from Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language, 2nd ed. (1937), s.v. "for."
5. Walter A. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed., trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, rev. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), s.v. "cijV," 230.
6. E.g., Daniel L. Segraves, "Ask Dr. Segraves: Acts 2:38—Grammatical Explanation," 1999, <http://www.clc.edu/askdr/Archive/Acts238.htm>.