



Does Baptism Come Before Or After The Forgiveness Of Sins?

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Does baptism come before or after the forgiveness of sins? That is, is an individual forgiven of his/her sins prior to being baptized? Or, is an individual required to be baptized in order to be forgiven. Many religious people believe that baptism is something God desires individuals to do after they become Christians in order to demonstrate that they have already been forgiven of their sins. But, what does the Bible say? Let's investigate.

Examining Acts 2:38

The language of Acts 2:38 is central to the question under consideration. In this passage, the apostle Peter said, "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." Now, let's proceed to consider the claim that some attempt to make concerning baptism in this passage and consider what this passage actually teaches concerning baptism.

First, although the English reading of this verse in all of the major English translations of the Bible that reflects the idea of baptism "for the remission [forgiveness] of sins," there are those who take issue with this translation and interpretation of the passage. Instead, they claim that the Greek word translated "for" ("eis") can also mean "because of." So, at issue in this objection is whether baptism is to be done because a person's sins have already been forgiven *or* if it is to be done in order to have sins forgiven.

It is a fundamental principle of language that the meaning of certain words are best determined by examining the context in which they are used. For instance, consider the English word "break." A person could "break" a dinner appointment or could take a "break" from work for dinner. The word is spelled the same, but the meaning is quite different in these examples. So, how is an individual to know which way the word is being used? Certainly, context would clearly indicate the answer.

The same thing is true concerning the use of the Greek word “eis” in Acts 2:38. Though we will also be considering some other points, simply examining the word in its context will provide sufficient information to arrive at the proper conclusion. To begin, understand that Acts 2 finds the time as the first Pentecost after Jesus ascended to Heaven. And, the place is Jerusalem. The apostles of Christ had been told to wait in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father (the Holy Spirit). And, all of the circumstances involved in Acts 2 perfectly fulfill the prophecies that had been made in the Old Testament Scriptures concerning the establishment of Christ’s church/kingdom.

In Acts 2:1-4, there came a sound from Heaven like a “rushing mighty wind” that filled the whole place the apostles were sitting. Then, divided tongues appeared to them (as of fire) and sat on each one of them. Then, verse 4 says, “And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.” So, as the chapter proceeds to describe the teachings the people in Jerusalem heard (as if it was in their own native languages), recognize that the things which were being taught were directly from God and were not merely the opinions of twelve men.

As Peter’s sermon comes into particular focus in Acts 2, his primary message was one about Jesus Christ and establishing the fact that Jesus is Christ and Lord. And, in doing so, he also said that the Jews had been guilty of killing the Son of God whom God had promised to send throughout pages of the Old Testament Scriptures. Consider verse 36. “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”

It was after Peter had drawn this conclusion that the people who had gathered in Jerusalem gave the response recorded by verse 37. “Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Men and brethren, what shall we do?’” Please observe that some of the people who had been listening to Peter preach concluded that they were guilty of killing the Lord’s Christ – and wanted to know what they could do to make that situation right. Verse 38 is Peter’s response (which we will further consider in just a moment). Then, Peter continued to warn and plead with them to save themselves (verse 40). About 3,000 people who heard the message that Peter and the other apostles had preached accepted the message. They were then baptized and added to Christ’s church (see verses 41 and 47).

So, the entire context of Acts 2:38 demonstrates baptism as a requirement for an individual to have the forgiveness of his/her sins. Again, the people had recognized that they had sinned and wanted to know what they could possibly do to be saved. Verse 38 is Peter’s response to that situation. Furthermore, before they were baptized, Peter continued to encourage them to save themselves. And, it was not until they were baptized that they were added to Christ’s church and counted among the saved. In this context, it would make no sense for Peter to instruct the people (who were asking what they needed to do to be saved) to repent and be baptized because their sins had already been forgiven – and then to go on and tell them to save themselves! Surely, the context dictates that Peter commanded baptism for (in order to obtain) the forgiveness of sins.

Now, let's consider verse 38 a little more closely. Peter actually told these people to do two things "for the remission of sins." Therefore, repentance is just as necessary for the forgiveness of sins as baptism is. Other passages also demonstrate this to be true. For instance, Jesus said that people would perish if they did not repent (Luke 13:3, 5). Paul said that God now commands all people everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30). And, Peter instructed repentance as necessary in order to have sins wiped away in Acts 3:19. Now, please recognize that Peter joined repentance and baptism as both being required for the same thing. Therefore, they are either *both* unnecessary for the forgiveness of sins or they are *both* required for the forgiveness of sins. Of course, we have already seen that Peter is requiring these in order to have the forgiveness of sins. And, baptism is a requirement for everyone to have the forgiveness of sins – according to Acts 2:38.

Then, I want you to also consider the use of the Greek word "eis" in other passages that discuss salvation (just as Acts 2:38 clearly does). Romans 10:10 is a commonly quoted passage about salvation (even by those who would deny the essential nature of baptism). "For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation." The word "unto" is the Greek word "eis" – and it is used twice in this passage. So, is Paul teaching that a person must believe because he/she is already righteous or in order to be righteous? And, must a person confess with his/her mouth because he/she has already obtained salvation or in order to be saved? Clearly, the meaning is "in order to" in both of these cases.

Another example can be found in Matthew 26:28. Whenever Jesus was instituting the Lord's Supper, He said, "For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins." Now, did Jesus shed His blood upon the cross because people had already been forgiven of their sins or so that they could be forgiven? Surely, Jesus died in order that people would be forgiven of their sins! Interestingly, the phrase "for the remission of sins" in Acts 2:38 is the same as the phrase in Matthew 26:28 – in both the English and the Greek! So, what is the justification for making it mean "because of" in one passage and "in order to" in the other? The context of both passages demand that the word "eis" means "in order to" be forgiven! If not, why not?

Other Passages Teach Baptism As A Condition For Being Forgiven

Acts 2:38 very clearly and certainly teaches that baptism is necessary in order for sins to be forgiven. But, not only can we know this to be true from observing the text itself; but, other Bible passages also teach the same truth. Let's consider a few.

First, consider Acts 22:16. "And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord." This is what Saul was commanded to do by the individual appointed by God to teach Saul what he needed to do to be saved (compare with the accounts of his conversion recorded in Acts 9 and 26). Notice carefully that Saul was clearly instructed that baptism was necessary in order for him to have his sins washed away! This is the same as baptism being necessary in order for sins to be forgiven, as Peter taught in Acts 2:38.

Second, consider Mark 16:16. “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.” In this text, Jesus teaches that both belief and baptism are necessary for salvation. Peter also taught the same thing in 1 Peter 3:20-21. And, if baptism is necessary in order for an individual to be saved, it must also be required in order for an individual to be forgiven of his/her sin. This is necessarily true because it is not possible to be saved while still living in sin!

Third, consider Galatians 3:26-27. “For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” Only as many as have been “baptized into Christ” have “put on Christ.” Therefore, those who have sinned and have not been baptized are not “in Christ.” The significance of this in relation to this study can be seen by considering Ephesians 1:7. Along with every spiritual blessing (Ephesians 1:3), it is only in Christ that “we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace.” So, those sinners who have not been baptized are not “in Christ” – and those who are not “in Christ” have no access to the forgiveness of sins through the blood of Christ.

Conclusion

The Bible plainly teaches that baptism is necessary in order for an individual to have his/her sins forgiven. Acts 2:38 is one of several passages that demonstrate this. Therefore, if an individual has not been baptized for the forgiveness of his/her sins, he/she is still in sin and is separated from God.

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