

THE GOSPEL AND WATER BAPTISM: ANOTHER LOOK AT ACTS 2:38, WITH A NEW AFTERWORD¹

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I. PROLOGUE

Is the demand for baptism (i.e., immersion in water) a part of the gospel? Should every evangelistic sermon and every gospel tract, in order to be Biblical, include a demand for baptism? Should the unbeliever hear in clear and forceful terms that unless he is baptized he cannot be saved, cannot receive eternal life, cannot have the forgiveness of sins? There are many who believe that baptism is essential for salvation and is of the essence of the gospel. Many of these same people point to Acts 2:38, 22:16, and 1 Pet 3:21 (along with other verses) to support their belief.

Many who maintain that baptism is part of the gospel are sincere, thoughtful, Bible-loving, Bible-believing people. In fact, other than their demand for baptism, many of these same people could be considered fundamentalists. I know this for a fact because for years I was taught, and believed, and even preached that baptism was necessary for salvation. I was a minister in a denomination that proclaimed this position.

I no longer hold this position and I have left that denomination in which I proclaimed this false gospel. However, I bear no ill will toward any members of my former denomination. I left it long enough ago that I can now look back and evaluate my experience with them with objectivity, love, and humor. Nor do I have feelings of superiority in my present church. I remember

¹ Editor's Note: The author, a former Churches of Christ minister, wrote his master's thesis on the gospel and water baptism. This article was originally published in *JOTGES* (Spring 1990). He has added several pages at the end as an afterword, and we have changed a long footnote into an appendix.

all too well ministers of other churches who failed to answer squarely my questions regarding Acts 2:38, 22:16, and 1 Pet 3:21. They would cite Ephesians 2 or Romans 4 to prove that salvation was by grace through faith alone. However, when I asked them about those passages which seemed to teach that baptism was necessary, I was told that they were “problem passages” and that they were “unclear” and that one did not build a theology on passages of that nature. I eventually came to see that the problem was that they did not know what to do with these verses. To dismiss them, sometimes in a cavalier manner, was their way of ignoring a crack in their theological system. (Denial is an oft-used method when applying the Word of God to our lives and theology—despite our denials to the contrary.)

Over the years I have come to see that Acts 2:38, 22:16, and 1 Pet 3:21 can be understood at face value while, at the same time, maintaining with integrity the gospel of salvation by grace through faith alone. Therefore, it is my hope that over a period of time I will be able to write a number of articles dealing with each of these “problem passages,” thus sharing with the reader the fruit of my study and encouraging him or her to hold fast with confidence the gospel of grace through faith alone.

II. INTRODUCTION

Much heat has been generated by theological discussions and debates over whether or not Acts 2:38 and its demand for baptism is part of the gospel. One humorous example of this heat is the account (probably apocryphal) of a youngster who was heard to say, “Give me an axe and two .38s and I’ll whip any Baptist preacher in the world.”² Another example, not so humorous, is

² Bob L. Ross, *Campbellism—Its History and Heresies* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1976), 85. Ross has written two books about the Churches of Christ and their position on baptism. The one quoted here is the larger and more comprehensive of the two. The other book, entitled *Acts 2:38 and Baptismal Regeneration* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1976), limits itself more to a refutation of the position of the Churches of Christ on Acts 2:38. Both books are not above sarcasm and are, in my opinion, inadequate treatments of the arguments of the Churches of Christ. In fact, Ross does not give anywhere near enough space to the two strongest passages in favor of the Churches of Christ position, i.e., Acts 22:16 and 1 Pet 3:21. In other words, Ross is guilty of an old debater’s method of attack: Hit the weakest points in your opponent’s argument and hope that others ignore your

of a preacher who, commenting upon the motives of those who disagreed with what he thought was the obvious interpretation of this verse, wrote, “One has to *want* to misunderstand that verse in order to do so” (italics in the original).³ While many more examples could be cited, these are sufficient to indicate the intensity of emotion which discussions and debates over this verse and the subject of baptism can produce. These examples also remind us of the importance of stating accurately, evaluating fairly, and discussing politely the various interpretations of Acts 2:38.

The purpose, then, of this article is to explore the relationship between the demand for baptism and the promise of the remission of sins in Acts 2:38 in order to answer a larger theological question: Is baptism necessary in order to receive the remission of sins? In order to find the best possible answer to this emotional question, we will state and evaluate the various options found within the commentary tradition.

Acts 2:38 reads as follows:

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.”

III. THE SACRAMENTARIAN INTERPRETATION

A. DEFINITION

The first view to be considered might be called the sacramentarian interpretation.⁴ This interpretation holds that baptism

opponent’s strongest points. Debaters win debates, but it is to be questioned whether or not they find truth.

³Mark Lewis, “The Necessity of Baptism for Salvation,” *Firm Foundation* (May 3, 1983): 6.

⁴Some in the Churches of Christ may, understandably, object to this designation because they do not see baptism as a sacrament, but rather as a command to be obeyed by a believing individual. J. W. Roberts, a Churches of Christ Greek scholar (Ph.D. in Greek at the University of Texas) and Professor of New Testament at Abilene Christian University has objected to the understanding that baptism is a sacrament. He comments: “But is there no choice between baptism as a sacrament and baptism as an empty symbol?”

is necessary *in order to* receive the remission of sins and that the phrase “remission of sins” is a synonym for salvation and receiving eternal life. This view would interpret Acts 2:38 in a straightforward manner: “Repent and be baptized in order to (receive) the remission of sins.”⁵ In other words, unless a person is baptized he *cannot* be saved.

Is there no choice between the understanding of baptism as a sacrament in which the validity is in the act performed in the name of Jesus without regard to whether the recipient is an infant or a hypocrite (that is, without regard to faith and penitence of the baptized) and an understanding of baptism as an act of faith of a penitent obeying a command which the Lord in his own name has made a condition of pardon? The preaching of the Restoration Movement has been as strongly against any magical or ‘sacramental’ efficacy in baptism as anyone else. They have repudiated the Roman Catholic doctrine of baptismal regeneration and infant baptism.

It is quite another thing to insist on the Bible teaching that baptism to a penitent believer is for (in order to) the remission of sins. This is the form the proposition usually takes in public discussions. The New Covenant sees baptism as an act of faith (Gal 3:26-27; Col 2:12f.); it is part of that ‘obedience of faith’ unto which the gospel was proclaimed (Rom 16:26); it is connected with faith as a condition of salvation (Mark 16:16) and with repentance as a condition of pardon or remission (Acts 2:38). It is precisely in this respect that the Campbells and Scott in the early Restoration Movement saw their declaration of baptism for remission of sins upon a confession of faith in Christ as a ‘restoration’ of the primitive practice following the centuries of ‘sacramentalism’ in Roman and Protestant theology.” See J. W. Roberts, (“Baptism for Remission of Sins—A Critique,” *Restoration Quarterly* 1 [1957]: 226ff. For a similar viewpoint, yet one held by a Baptist, see G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962), 7, 13, and his *Baptism Today and Tomorrow* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1966), 20-21.

The designation “Sacramentarian Interpretation” is mine. If any object to it they may substitute whatever term they wish to describe this position (provided they avoid such tendentious appellations as “The Only True, Correct, and Biblical Interpretation”).

⁵ Alexander Campbell published a translation of the Bible entitled *The Sacred Writings of the Apostles and Evangelists of Jesus Christ, Commonly Styled the New Testament*, which was shortened to *The Living Oracles* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1954). To this translation Campbell also wrote prefaces, various emendations, and an appendix, all of which are quite interesting. In other words, this translation had Campbell’s “seal of approval.” Therefore, it is of interest to note its translation of Acts 2:38, “And Peter said to them, Reform, and be each of you immersed in the name of Jesus Christ, in order to the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

B. DEFENDERS

With varying degrees of dogmatism, those denominations which are historically related to Alexander Campbell and his efforts to reform the Church (called “the Restoration Movement”) hold this position. These denominations are, in alphabetical order, the Christian Church, the Churches of Christ, and the Disciples of Christ.⁶ Of these three, the most vocal in their defense have been the Churches of Christ.⁷ It should be noted that the Mormons,⁸ the Christadelphians,⁹ and the Roman Catholic Church¹⁰ largely agree with this interpretation.

⁶Of the many works dealing with the history of the Restoration Movement, some of the best are James DeForest Murch, *Christians Only* (Cincinnati, OH: Standard Publishing Co., 1962); Louis Cochran and Bess White Cochran, *Captives of the Word* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1969); J. W. Shepherd, *The Church, the Falling Away, and the Restoration* (Nashville: gospel Advocate Co., 1964); and Earl West, *The Search for the Ancient Order*, 3 vols. (Nashville: gospel Advocate Co., 1965).

⁷For example, see the large volume of recorded debates by Churches of Christ preachers and scholars, a sample of which might include *Hardeman-Bogard Debate* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 1938); *The Nashville Debate on Baptism* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 1951); *Smith-Bogard Debate: The Plan of Salvation* (Dallas: gospel Broadcast, 1953); *Warren-Ballard Debate* (Longview, TX: Telegram Book Co., 1953).

⁸It is most interesting to note that two associates of Alexander Campbell left him. One of them, Sidney Rigdon, left to join the Mormons (Murch, *Christians Only*, 120). For more information about the activities of Rigdon after he espoused Mormonism and about his high status and influence in that movement, cf. John Ahmanson’s *Secret History: A Translation of “Vor Tids Muhamed,”* translated by Gleason L. Archer, Jr. (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1984).

⁹It is also interesting to note that the second of the two associates who left Campbell, Dr. John Thomas, formed the Christadelphians (Murch, *Christians Only*, 120). Thus two cults were formed by Campbell’s followers. We, of course, must avoid the trap of guilt by association. Many of the doctrines of both the Mormons and the Christadelphians are strongly denounced by members of the Churches of Christ.

¹⁰Francois Amiot, in the Roman Catholic *Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1973), edited by Xavier Leon-Dufour, writes: “But faith in Christ does not only mean that the mind accepts the messianic message; it involves a total conversion, a complete abandonment to Christ, who transforms the whole of a man’s life. It normally leads to a request for baptism, which is its sacrament and in the reception of which it finds its perfection. Paul never separates the two, and when he speaks of justification by faith it is only in contrast with the alleged justification by the works of the Law, to which the Judaizers appealed. He always takes it for granted that the profession of faith is crowned by the reception of baptism (Gal 3:26f.). By faith a man responds to the divine call that has become clear to him through the preaching of the apostles (Rom 10:14f.), and this response is, moreover,

C. DEFENSE

This position, as I have noted, has been held with varying degrees of dogmatism. Some, like the Churches of Christ, would hold that the demand for baptism as a condition for salvation is absolute and has no exceptions (i.e., unless a person is baptized he *cannot* be saved). However, others are a little less dogmatic and would see Acts 2:38 as expressing the “normal” manner in which people are saved and are also willing to admit the possibility that a person could be saved without baptism. An example of this less dogmatic position would be, surprisingly, Alexander Campbell himself.¹¹

the work of grace (Eph 2:8). At baptism the Spirit takes possession of the believer, incorporates him into the body of the Church and gives him the certainty that he has entered the Kingdom of God.

It is quite clear that the sacrament does not act in any magic way. The total conversion that it calls for must be the start of a new life in a spirit of unshakable faithfulness,” (“Baptism,” *Dictionary*, 42-43).

¹¹ In his famous reply to the “Lunenburg Letter,” Campbell responded to a lady who wrote him asking if the unimmersed were Christian. In part, he replied: “Who is a Christian? I answer, Everyone that believes in his heart that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, the Son of God; repents of his sins, and obeys him in all things according to his measure of knowledge of his will...I cannot...make any one duty the standard of Christian state or character, not even immersion into the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and in my heart regard all that have been sprinkled in infancy without their own knowledge and consent, as aliens from Christ and the well-groomed hope of heaven.

“Should I find a paedobaptist more intelligent in the Christian Scriptures, more spiritually-minded and more devoted to the Lord than a Baptist, or one immersed on a profession of the ancient faith, I would not hesitate a moment in giving the preference of my heart to him that loved most. Did I act otherwise, I would be a pure sectarian, a Pharisee among Christians. Still I will be asked, How do I know that anyone love my Master but by his obedience to His commandments? I answer, In no way. But mark, I do not substitute obedience to one commandment, for universal or even general obedience. And should I see a sectarian Baptist or a paedobaptist more spiritually-minded, more generally conformed to the requisitions of the Messiah, than the one who precisely acquiesces with me in the theory or practice of immersion as I teach, doubtless the former rather than the latter, would have my cordial approbation and love as a Christian. So I judge, and so I feel. It is the image of Christ the Christian looks for and loves; and this does not consist in being exact in a few items, but in general devotion to the whole truth as far as known,” (*Millennial Harbinger*, September, 1837). For further analysis of this letter see Glenn Paden, “The Lunenburg Letter,” *Restoration Quarterly* 1 (1958): 13-18.

Be that as it may, I will record here the defense of the more absolute and dogmatic position (i.e., the position that says that if a person is not baptized he *cannot* be saved). The defense of this interpretation can be summarized in four points.

First, this interpretation has in its favor the *prima facie* reading of the text. In other words, they take the passage at face value. In fact, it is argued, that if theological issues were not involved one would naturally come to this interpretation.¹² Also, the force of the *prima facie* reading is strengthened upon consideration of many of the proposed alternatives which fail to give a convincing assurance of their validity (i.e., some of the proposed alternatives give evidence of a special pleading and use lexical and grammatical subtleties in the hope of finding anything that will support a meaning other than the *prima facie* reading of the text).¹³

Secondly, this interpretation harmonizes easily with other passages, also taken *prima facie*, which connect baptism with the remission of sins and salvation. Two especially strong passages that are consistent with this interpretation are 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”) and 1 Pet 3:21 (“There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism [not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God], through the resurrection of Jesus Christ”). Thus this interpretation provides theological consistency on the subject of the necessity of baptism for salvation.

Thirdly, this interpretation gives a stated purpose of the demand for baptism. Baptism is for (in order to receive) the remission of sins. Some of the other interpretations of this verse leave the demand for baptism unexplained. In fact, other than Acts 2:38 and 22:16 and 1 Pet 3:21 is there any verse in the NT which *clearly* states the purpose of water baptism? Would God leave such an important command and act unexplained in all of the NT?

¹² Roberts, “Baptism,” *Reformation Quarterly* 1(1957): 233.

¹³ This should become evident as we discuss the various alternatives stated in this article. This is the reason why it was so difficult for me to leave the Churches of Christ: I could see clearly my position, but to refer to Greek and other grammatical niceties which are not reflected in any well-known translation was to leave me unable to judge whether what I was being told was the truth or not.

Fourthly, this interpretation places an emphasis on Acts 2:38 that, according to the defenders of this position, fits the uniqueness of the occasion in Acts 2. Acts 2 records the beginning of the Church Age and contains the *first* recorded evangelistic sermon after the death and resurrection of Christ. For the *first* time in this dispensation, people ask what they must do in light of the fact that the Messiah was crucified. They are told to repent and be baptized in order to be saved (cf. also Acts 2:40). Because of the uniqueness of Acts 2 (i.e., its place in the dispensational scheme of the history of salvation) the quest for a proof-text for the terms of salvation should start here rather than in Ephesians 2 or Romans 4. Acts 2 is, as one Churches of Christ author describes it, “the hub of the Bible.”¹⁴

D. DEFICIENCIES

Obviously, this interpretation is highly debated and a number of objections have been made stating what are believed to be its deficiencies. We will cite only a few of these objections.

First, the most popular objection to the sacramentarian interpretation is theological: If correct, this interpretation would make salvation the result of faith and works. Ephesians 2:8-9 and Rom 4:4-5 and 11:6 are quite clear that salvation is by faith and *not* works. According to this objection, the sacramentarian interpretation makes baptism a means by which a man actively participates in receiving salvation, i.e., he does something: He works to get salvation.

However, in all fairness, it should be said that this objection has received a strong counter-objection. *The Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, a work of Roman Catholic scholars, points out that faith is contrasted with works of Law, not obedience.¹⁵ Also, some Churches of Christ writers point out that because baptism is a once-for-all, non-repeatable act and is related to the free gift of salvation, baptism is, therefore, not to be considered a “work.”¹⁶ In this there may even be some support from Evangelicals who, while rejecting the position that baptism is

¹⁴ In fact, this is the title of James D. Bales’s exposition of Acts 2. Cf. *The Hub of the Bible* (Rosemead, CA: Old Paths Book Club, 1960). Bales, a Ph.D. from UCLA, was Professor of Christian Doctrine at Harding University, Searcy, Arkansas (a Churches of Christ school).

¹⁵ Cf. footnote 9.

¹⁶ See Appendix 1.

necessary for salvation, would admit that it is not a work, at least on the basis that the passive voice (“let every one of you *be baptized*”) indicates that the one being baptized is not “doing” anything.¹⁷

Secondly, this interpretation contradicts the gospel of John’s teaching on the means of receiving eternal life.¹⁸ This gospel, based upon the purpose statement of John 20:30-31, nowhere makes baptism a condition for receiving eternal life. In fact, if baptism is necessary for receiving eternal life, the gospel of John, a self-designated “gospel tract” (John 20:31), with its sole emphasis on faith, is both incomplete and, to that extent, misleading.

Thirdly, this interpretation makes the “gift of the Holy Spirit” something that is given *after* baptism. However, it is clear that Cornelius received the gift of the Holy Spirit *before* his baptism (Acts 10:44-48; cf. especially 10:45 where the identical phrase “the gift of the Holy Spirit” used in Acts 2:38 occurs). Also Acts 19:2 indicates Paul’s assumption that the Spirit was given at the moment of faith. Efforts by Churches of Christ writers to explain away this difficulty have not been successful.¹⁹

In summary, while this view appears to be grammatically strong, it is theologically weak.

¹⁷ An example of this is a Dallas Theological Seminary professor who readily admitted to me that baptism was not a work because it was related to salvation (however, not in the same cause and effect relationship that the Churches of Christ taught).

¹⁸ The only place in John where baptism might be considered as having some bearing upon salvation is Jesus’ reference to water in His conversation with Nicodemus: “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). For an excellent refutation of this view and a statement of the various options possible, cf. James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975): 1:243-48; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), 215-19; Zane C. Hodges, “Water and Spirit—John 3:5,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 135 (July-Sept, 1978), 206-20. The strength of the position that water baptism is indeed meant in John 3:5 primarily rests upon the assumption that the mention of water refers to water baptism. This assumption is gratuitous.

¹⁹ Cf., for example, the already cited work of James D. Bales, *The Case of Cornelius*. Bales tries to argue that the gift of the Holy Spirit which Cornelius received was not the same gift of the Holy Spirit promised in Acts 2:38. This fails to seriously grapple with the fact that the same phrase is used in both Acts 2 and 10. The same author, the same speaker, in the same book, in the same kind of context, the same phrase—with two different meanings? This is most unlikely.

IV. THE CAUSAL *EIS* INTERPRETATION

A. DEFINITION

This interpretation understands the preposition *eis* (“for”) in Acts 2:38 to be causal, indicating the reason or *cause* antecedent to the act of baptism, rather than telic, indicating purpose or result. Accordingly, Acts 2:38 should be translated: “Repent and be baptized...*because* of the remission of sins.” Thus salvation occurred before, not at, the moment of baptism.

B. DEFENDERS

This interpretation has the support of such outstanding evangelical scholars, past and present, as W. A. Criswell, Julius R. Mantey, A. T. Robertson, Charles C. Ryrie, and Kenneth S. Wuest.²⁰ Also, the eminent British grammarian, Nigel Turner, admits that in some contexts, such as Acts 2:38, a causal usage is possible if demanded by one’s theology.²¹

C. DEFENSE

This position has been supported basically for two reasons. First, this interpretation is able to maintain an evangelical theology, since it holds that salvation is by faith alone—not faith plus baptism.

Secondly, this interpretation has been defended by comparing parallel passages where a causal usage is possible. These passages are Matt 3:11; 10:41; 12:41; Rom 1:16; 4:20; 11:32. To use just one of these parallels, Matt 12:41 states that the people of Nineveh repented *because of (eis)* Jonah’s preaching. To say that

²⁰ W. A. Criswell, *Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1978), 96; H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 103-104; also Ralph Marcus, “The Causal Use of *Eis* in the New Testament,” *Journal of Biblical Studies* 70 (1951): 45-48; and “On Causal *Eis* Again,” *Journal of Biblical Studies* 70 (1951): 309-11; A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), 389; also his *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1930), 3:34-36; Charles C. Ryrie, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1961), 24; Kenneth S. Wuest, *Word Studies in the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1966), 3:76-77.

²¹ Nigel Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1963), 3:266.

they repented “for,” or “in order to,” the preaching of Jonah is impossible. They heard his message and then repented. Other parallels have been found in extra-biblical Greek by Mantey.²² Some support comes from the overlap between *eis* and *en* (“in,” “by”) and since *en* has some causal force it is possible that *eis* has some too.

D. DEFICIENCIES

Despite the respected and scholarly defenders of this position, the weaknesses of this position have limited its acceptance.

First, although it is “commentary counting” and, therefore, no sure proof of truth, this interpretation has found limited support from other Greek scholars.²³ Neither Liddell-Scott nor BAGD lists any causal usage for *eis* in their respective Greek lexicons. Furthermore, BAGD cites Acts 2:38 under the category of “purpose.” A causal *eis* is not a normal usage and may indicate special pleading.²⁴

Secondly, the reasons the causal *eis* sounds plausible is because, as J. W. Roberts has pointed out,

... it has long been noted, even by ancient writers,
that there is little difference between causal and

²² Cf. footnote 19.

²³ Roberts observes that the following do not accept this position: “Thayer (p. 94); AG (p. 240); Zorell, F. *Lexicon Graecum Novi Testamenti* (Paris, P. Lethuilleus, 1931); Hermann Cremer, *Biblico-Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* (N.Y., Scribner’s, 1885), p. 126f.; Albrecht Oepke in *Theologisches Woerterbuch*, Vol. I. p. 537; Grundmann on sin in *Theologisches Woerterbuch*, Vol. I, p. 308.” See his “Baptism,” 227.

Also Roberts notes: “One finds *eis* listed for this passage as purpose (final or telic) in the following works: Winer, *N. T. Grammar* (p. 397); Vincent, M. R., *Word Studies in the N.T.* (p. 280); R. J. Knowling, *Expositor’s Greek New Testament*; E. DeWitt Burton, *International Critical Commentary on Galatians*; C. F. D. Moule, *Idiom Book of N. T. Greek* (p. 70); F. F. Bruce’s new commentary on *Acts* (75-77), etc.” (“Baptism,” 228.)

²⁴ It is interesting to note that the only translation I found which adopted the causal usage was Kenneth S. Wuest’s *The New Testament: An Expanded Translation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1961): 276. Wuest translates Acts 2:38 as follows: “And Peter said to them, Have a change of mind, that change of mind being accompanied by abhorrence of and sorrow for your deed, and let each one of you be baptized upon the ground of your confession of belief in the sum total of all that Jesus Christ is in His glorious Person, this baptismal testimony being in relation to the fact that your sins have been put away, and you shall receive the gratuitous gift of the Holy Spirit.”

telic statements especially in statements about the past. If one said, "I went to town because of a suit (of clothes)," he would naturally be understood to mean not because he already had a suit, but in order to buy one. This is a loose use of causal expressions, but it is common. It follows that if a causal *eis* is established, it must be a clear-cut case of retrospective action in order to parallel the argument on Acts 2:38. Further, it ought to be obvious that if such a clear example is found (which has not been found), that it does not follow that Acts 2:38 is another such example. Certainly purpose is the natural sense of the construction where two imperatives with a conjunction follow the question. It is quite certain that if there were no doctrinal issue involved a causal meaning would never be suspected.²⁵

Thirdly, in regard to the other passages in the Scriptures which have been cited for support of this position, Roberts makes this forceful objection:

All the samples of the so-called causal uses will bear closer scrutiny... In Romans 11:32 *sunekleisen eis* ("shut up together into") is the regular idiom for handing over or shutting something to or *into* something: a pregnant use with the idea of giving over so that nothing escapes (Sanday, ICC); compare 2 Mac 5:5; Luke 5:6; Gal 3:22f... Nor does the causal sense of Rom 4:20 ("He wavered not in unbelief *eis* the promise of God") commend itself. The promise was not the cause of Abraham's unwavering; he did not waver "at" the promise; he believed it in all its staggering implications... The more common explanation of Matt 3:11 "I baptize unto (*eis*) repentance" is that the baptism of John bound those receiving it to a life of continued repentance. It is adopted by Lenski; the RSV says "for forgiveness"; Allen (ICC) says, "It symbolized both a present and a future state of repentance." This is the natural meaning; why seek for another? Matt 12:41 reads "They repented at (*eis*) the preaching of

²⁵ Roberts, "Baptism," 233-34.

Jonah.” “Because Jonah preached” misses the point. Thayer is undoubtedly right in holding that it indicates the direction towards which their repentance looked. Compare Acts 20:21: “repentance toward (*eis*) God; faith toward (*eis*) Jesus Christ.” Thus Blass-DeBrunner says it has the sense of *epi* or *pros* and cites Herodotus (3.52): *pros touto to kērugma* of the attitude of subjects “towards the proclamation of a king.”²⁶

Also, parallels in non-biblical Greek which have been used to support the idea of a causal *eis* have been likewise debated.²⁷

Fourthly, the phrase “for the remission of sins” is found five times in the NT (Matt 26:28; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:3; 24:47; Acts 2:38). Matthew 26:28 has our Lord saying concerning the Lord’s Supper: “For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (NKJV). Since no one would argue for a causal usage in Matt 26:28 no one should argue for it in Acts 2:38 either.²⁸

In summary, the causal *eis* interpretation is theologically strong, but lexically weak. The causal usage is, in the words of M. J. Harris in his grammatical supplement to *NIDNTT*, “unlikely.”²⁹

V. THE SYNTACTICAL BREAK INTERPRETATION

A. DEFINITION

The syntactical break interpretation³⁰ holds to the normal meaning of *eis* (“for”) as indicating purpose, but understands

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 234.

²⁷ Cf. Marcus, “On Causal *Eis*,” 309-11; and “The Elusive Causal *Eis*,” *Journal of Biblical Studies* 71 (1952): 43-44.

²⁸ J. C. Davis, “Another Look at the Relationship between Baptism and Forgiveness of Sins in Acts 2:38,” *Restoration Quarterly* 24 (1981): 80-81.

²⁹ M. J. Harris, “Appendix,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 3:1187.

³⁰ Again, this is my designation of the position. I never found anyone who held this position give it a name. I hope that is acceptable; if not, then anyone can give it a more suitable, objective title!

the phrase “for the remission of sins” to be connected with the command for repentance and not directly related to the command to be baptized, which is seen as a parenthetical comment. Thus, this interpretation would translate Acts 2:38 as follows: “Repent (and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ) for the remission of sins.”

B. DEFENDERS

While this interpretation has been held at least as early as 1860,³¹ more recent defenders include Aubrey Malphurs, Bob L. Ross, Frank Stagg, Ned Stonehouse, and Stanley Toussaint.³²

C. DEFENSE

The syntactical break interpretation rests on two major arguments, one grammatical and the other theological.

The grammatical argument is subtle, especially for those who read only the various English translations, and points to a difference in number in the two Greek verbs *metanoēsate* (“repent” which is a second person plural) and *baptisthētō* (“be baptized” which is a third person singular) and the plural found in the phrase “for the remission of your sins.” Toussaint states clearly his defense of this position:

A third view takes the clause **and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ** as a parenthetical...The verb makes a distinction between singular and plural verbs and nouns. The verb “repent” is plural and so is the pronoun “your” in the clause **so that your sins may be forgiven** (lit., “unto the remission of your sins,” *eis aphasin tōn harmartiōn hymōn*). Therefore, the verb “repent” must go with the purpose of forgiveness of sins. On the other hand

³¹ Roberts cites A. P. Williams as holding this position in a work entitled *Campbellism Exposed*, written in 1860 (“Acts 2:38—A Study in Syntax,” *Gospel Advocate* [July 22, 1984], p. 704).

³² Aubrey M. Malphurs, “The Soteriology of the Churches of Christ” (Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1981), 167-69; Ross, *Acts 2:38, 45-49*; Frank Stagg, *The Book of Acts* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1955), 63; Ned Stonehouse, “The Gift of the Holy Spirit,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 13 (1949-1951), 1-15; Stanley D. Toussaint, “Acts,” *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Press, 1983), 359.

the imperative “be baptized” is singular, setting it off from the rest of the sentence.³³

The *theological* argument is based on the relationship between repentance and remission of sins found elsewhere in the writings of Luke. In Luke 3:3 and 24:47, and in Acts 3:19 and 5:31, repentance and the remission of sins are directly linked and baptism is either not mentioned or subordinated. In Acts 10:43 the remission of sins is linked directly to faith alone. This is used to argue that baptism is not directly related to the remission of sins. In fact, in light of Luke 3:3 (“a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins”), it could be argued that baptism is the outward symbol of repentance, but that it is repentance and not the outward symbol that brings remission of sins.

D. DEFICIENCIES

This position is impressive. However, a number of serious objections have been raised which we need to consider.

First, the defenders of this position have not demonstrated that a comparable syntactical break exists elsewhere in the writings of Luke, nor have they tried to demonstrate it from any parallels from non-biblical Greek sources. While this does not negate the possibility of such a break existing in Acts 2:38, it does raise the issue of whether or not there is here a special pleading using niceties of Greek grammar.

Secondly, this interpretation leaves the purpose of baptism unexpressed in the passage. According to this interpretation, one never learns from reading Acts 2:38 why one is to be baptized. Actually, it would be more natural to extend the parenthesis (if there is one here) to read: “Repent (and be baptized... for the remission of sins) and you shall receive...”

Thirdly, it is more natural to connect the prepositional phrase “for the remission of sins” to the nearest antecedent or to both verbs (they are connected with *kai*, “repent *and* be baptized”) rather than to connect it to the first verb only.

Fourthly, this interpretation reflects some misunderstanding about Greek grammar. This position rests upon a difference in number between the two verbs and the prepositional phrase. This is something that the standard Greek grammars

³³Toussaint, “Acts,” 359.

do not address. While the grammars do discuss the agreement of subject and verb, they do not discuss the idea of agreement between verb and prepositional phrases. In other words, the argument that a syntactical break occurs here which makes for a parenthetical statement is very hard to support. In fact, there is evidence that a change in number in the verbs, as in Acts 2:38, strengthens the demand for baptism and in no way affects its natural relationship with the phrase “for the remission of sins.”³⁴

Fifthly, the theological argument for this interpretation is very interesting and not without merit. Baptism can, in the light of the passages cited for support of this position, be understood as expressing ceremonially the repentance which by itself brings forgiveness (cf. Luke 3:3). However, while this *may* explain Acts 2:38, it may be questioned whether this approach gives us a method for dealing with the more difficult passages of Acts 22:16 and 1 Pet 3:21. These verses are not easily dismissed as speaking merely of the importance of the symbolic value of baptism. These two passages, however, must await further articles in this Journal.

In summary, this view is grammatically weak, but theologically possible. However, for an excellent presentation of the theological support of this position see Robert N. Wilkin’s article “Repentance and Salvation—Part 4.”³⁵

³⁴ Cf. Carroll D. Osborn, “The Third Person Imperative in Acts 2:38,” *Restoration Quarterly* 26 (1983), 81-84. Osborn’s work is based on Judy Glaze’s excellent work, “The Septuagintal Use of the Third Person Imperative” (Master’s thesis, Harding Graduate School of Religion, Memphis, n.d.), 24, 33.

³⁵ Robert N. Wilkin, “Repentance and Salvation—Part 4: New Testament Repentance: Repentance in the Gospels and Acts,” *JOGES* (Spring 1990), 16-18.

VI. THE CONVERSION-INITIATION INTERPRETATION

A. DEFINITION

We now come to the view called “conversion-initiation.”³⁶ In essence, this position holds that a person becomes a Christian (i.e., receives the Holy Spirit) by a complicated process composed of three elements: faith, water baptism, and the reception of the Spirit. However, the reception of the Spirit may come before or after water baptism. While faith and the reception of the Spirit work an inner transformation called conversion, water baptism works at an objective and ritualistic level called initiation. This position would not change the translation of Acts 2:38, but would refrain from using this verse as an *automatic* formula for every conversion.

B. DEFENDERS

Several contemporary scholars hold this position, including F.F. Bruce, James D. G. Dunn, and Richard N. Longnecker.³⁷ Others, who have not designated their interpretation of Acts 2:38 as “conversion-initiation” but who have a view compatible with it are G. R. Beasley-Murray, Richard Averbeck, Ian Howard Marshall, and even John Calvin.³⁸ I should also include here, as my personal belief, that the less dogmatic sacramentarian position of Alexander Campbell would also fit here fairly easily.

³⁶ This designation is made by James D. G. Dunn in his book *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970).

³⁷ F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on Galatians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), 185-87; Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*; Richard N. Longnecker, “Acts,” in *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 9:336.

³⁸ Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*; Richard Averbeck, “The Focus of Baptism,” *Grace Theological Journal* 2 (Fall, 1981): 265-301; Ian Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), 5:80-81; John Calvin, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1966), 1:78-82.

C. DEFENSE

This position is basically a theological one composed of three points.

First, according to this position, there is no set theological sequence (i.e., no simple cause and effect order) within the “conversion-initiation” experience of the NT. Acts itself shows that the gift of the Holy Spirit is sometimes contrasted with water baptism (Acts 1:5; 11:16), sometimes unconnected (Acts 2:4; 8:16f.; 18:25), sometimes in natural sequence (Acts 2:38; 19:5), sometimes in a different order (Acts 9:17f.; 10:44-48).³⁹ The ambiguity which is seen in Acts should be taken seriously since it shows that God exercises His freedom. Life is more complicated than formulations of doctrine, but the Lord is able to look after the exigencies of life outside the range of the formulas.⁴⁰

Secondly, the “conversion-initiation” interpretation basically consists of three elements: faith, water baptism, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Faith is the “efficacious” element and the reception of the Spirit is the climax. Water baptism is important for faith as “the necessary step of commitment, without which they could not be said to have truly ‘believed.’”⁴¹ But, the Spirit is given in response to faith, not baptism. Dunn goes to great length to make this clear:

Luke never mentions water-baptism by itself as the condition of or means to receiving forgiveness; he mentions it only in connection with some other attitude (repentance—Luke 3:3; Acts 2:38) or act (calling on his name—Acts 22:16). But whereas water-baptism is never spoken of as the sole prerequisite to receiving forgiveness, Luke on a number of occasions speaks of repentance or faith as the sole prerequisite (Luke 5:20; 24:47; Acts 3:19; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18; cf. 4:4; 9:35, 42; 11:21; 13:48; 14:1; 16:31; 17:12, 34). In other words, water-baptism is neither the sole preliminary nor in itself an essential preliminary to receiving forgiveness...The view which regards 2:38 as proof that water baptism is the vehicle of the Spirit is one which has no foundation except

³⁹ Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, 90.

⁴⁰ Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 301-302.

⁴¹ Dunn, *Baptism*, 96-97.

in the theology of later centuries. Baptism may be a necessary expression of faith, but God gives the Spirit directly to faith, as the case histories of the 120 and Cornelius make abundantly clear. The highly critical audience in 11:15-18 were not at all concerned with the issue of Cornelius's water-baptism. Only one baptism is mentioned—Spirit-baptism; God had baptized them, and that was all that mattered.

If Luke is to be our guide, therefore, water-baptism can properly be described as the vehicle of faith: but *not* as the vehicle of the Spirit. It enables man to approach God, and represents what God has done for men and still does in men, but otherwise it is not the channel of God's grace or the means of his giving the Spirit, as Acts 8 makes clear.⁴² (Emphasis is Dunn's).

Thirdly, regardless of how complicated and irregular the process of "conversion-initiation" may be in Acts, those who hold this view often agree that Acts 2:38 states the normal and expected order for salvation. Dunn states:

Luke probably intends Acts 2:38 to establish the pattern and norm for Christian conversion initiation in his presentation of Christianity's beginnings... Furthermore, it is the only verse in Acts which directly relates to one another the three most important elements in conversion-initiation: repentance, water-baptism, and the gift of the Holy Spirit—repentance and faith being the opposite sides of the same coin... Those who repent and are baptized will receive the gift of the Spirit. It should be noted that no possibility of delay is envisaged here. As with the command and promise of 16:31, the act of obedience to the command receives the promised result.⁴³

Longenecker, in his commentary on Acts, also agrees that Acts 2:38 sets the pattern:

...enough has been said here to suggest that we should understand Peter's preaching at

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 90-91.

Pentecost as being theologically normative for the relation in Acts between conversion, water baptism, and the baptism of the Holy Spirit, with the situations having to do with the Samaritan converts, Cornelius, and the twelve whom Paul met at Ephesus (which is something of a case all to itself) to be more historically conditioned and circumstantially understood.⁴⁴

Thus Acts 2:38 is considered the norm for salvation in Acts in that it mentions the three elements of “conversion-initiation,” but Acts 2:38 should not be understood as stating the exact, always-followed order for salvation. The exceptions are many and striking.

D. DEFICIENCIES

While I like the fact that the “conversion-initiation” interpretation attempts to be evangelical and tries to account for all of Luke’s soteriology instead of simply finding a solution to Acts 2:38 alone, there is something in this position which is very frustrating: It is too ambiguous. In fact, there is so much ambiguity in it that both Alexander Campbell and a modern Evangelical could hold this position—as long as no one pressed the implications of the statements too much or asked for too precise a definition of the terms used.

For example, it is claimed that Acts 2:38 is the theological “norm” for Lucan theology. But then numerous examples are cited which are contrary to this “norm.” To me this raises the question of whether Acts 2:38 is indeed the norm, or, if the statements about it need to be more carefully and clearly modified than they are at present.

Another example is the role of water baptism. Dunn says that the reception of the Spirit is in response to faith, not water baptism. However, to believe and to be baptized are

...interchangeable ways of describing the act of faith; baptism was the necessary expression of commitment, without which they could not have truly “believed.”...Water-baptism is therefore to be regarded as the occasion on which the initiate called upon the Lord for mercy, and the means

⁴⁴Longenecker, “Acts,” 336.

by which he committed himself to the one who was named over him. Properly administered water-baptism must have been the climax and act of faith, the expression of repentance, and the vehicle of commitment.⁴⁵

Although I know that Dunn and the others would reject it, I still feel that this statement could be acceptable to many sacramentarians and used to prove the necessity of baptism. Dunn appears to say that C (the reception of the Holy Spirit) comes because of A (faith), but A is not truly A unless it is accompanied by B (baptism). This raises the question: how does this argument avoid the logical deduction that B is as necessary as A in order to receive C?

This position is certainly in need of better articulation. Until it becomes clearer it will, I believe, be rejected by the vast majority of Bible students.

VII. THE ULTRA-DISPENSATIONAL INTERPRETATION

A. DEFINITION

The ultra-dispensational interpretation understands Acts 2:38 in a straightforward manner (much like the sacramentarian view) but believes that Acts 2:38 applies only to Israel and to a special situation which is no longer applicable. In other words, Acts 2:38 is not for today.

⁴⁵Dunn, *Baptism*, 96-97. There is no doubt that this is why Beasley-Murray (*Baptism*, 393-94), states that "...there ought to be a greater endeavour to make baptism integral to *the gospel*... Baptism is...a proper subject for exposition in the enquirers' class, along with instruction as to the nature of the Church, of worship, of Christian obligation in the Church and to the world, etc. Peter's response, however, to the cry of his conscience-stricken hearers on the Day of Pentecost was not, 'Repent and believe,' but 'Repent and *be baptized*!' (Acts 2:38). Naturally faith was presumed in repentance, but Peter's answer told the Jews how to become Christians: faith and repentance are to be expressed in baptism, and so they are to come to the Lord. Baptism is here a part of the proclamation of Christ. In an Apostolic sermon it comes as its logical conclusion... Baptism and conversion are thus inseparables; the one demands the other, for neither is complete without the other... Finally, there should be an endeavour to make baptism integral to *Church* membership."

B. DEFENDERS

This interpretation has been held by Charles F. Baker, E. W. Bullinger, Harry Bultema, A. E. Knoch, Cornelius Stam, and Charles H. Welch.⁴⁶

C. DEFENSE

The defense of this position is basically theological. It teaches that the concept of the Church *as the Body of Christ* (Jew and Gentile in one body with full equality) was revealed only to Paul during his prison ministry (Eph 3:1-9), after the Book of Acts was written. Therefore, the whole of Acts is not directly applicable to us today any more than the OT is directly applicable. Acts 2 concerns Israel and the judgment coming upon her for her rejection of her Messiah-King (Acts 2:39-40).

Also, this position makes a distinction between the forgiveness of sins and the doctrine of justification by faith. A. E. Knoch explains:

Repentance and baptism lead to a probationary pardon, which may be withdrawn. This pardon is extended by Christ as the King. Its operation is illustrated by the parable of the ten thousand talent debtor (see Matt 18:27-34) whose debt was remitted, but who refused to remit the smaller sum which his fellow slave owed to him. Hence the remission of his debt was canceled. So it is with Israel in this chronicle. Many of those who, in the beginning, received the pardon of their sins, refused to share their pardon with the other nations, objecting to proselytes like Cornelius, raising a riot on the supposition that an alien had entered the sanctuary, seeking to kill Paul even though he brought alms to Jerusalem. They finally fall away (Heb 6:6; 10:27) where there is

⁴⁶ Charles F. Baker, *Understanding the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Grace Bible College Publications, 1981); E. W. Bullinger, *How to Enjoy the Bible* (London: The Lamp Press, n.d.); Harry Bultema, *The Bible and Baptism: A Re-Examination* (Muskegon, MI: privately published, 1952); A. F. Knoch, *On Baptism* (Los Angeles: Concordant Publishing Concern, n.d.); and *Concordant Commentary on the New Testament* (Saugus, CA: Concordant Publishing Concern, 1968); Cornelius Stam, *Acts Dispensationally Considered* (Chicago: Berean Bible Society, 1954); Charles H. Welch, *An Alphabetical Analysis* (Surrey, England: Berean Publications Trust, 1955), 1:102-109.

no longer any room for repentance, but a fearful prospect of judgment. This pardon, however, is in sharp contrast to our justification, or acquittal, from which there can be no fall, as it places us beyond the sphere of judgment. Conciliation (Rom 5:11) is immeasurably beyond any pardon, as it places us in the unclouded favor of God's grace.

The promise was to Israel, both in the land and in the dispersion (Dan 9:27). Those "afar" were Jews in the lands where God had driven them, and not Gentiles or the church.⁴⁷

D. DEFICIENCIES

As a dispensationalist, I find this position attractive. However, the idea that Acts 2 is not the birth of the Church and is unrelated to this dispensation is a serious deficiency. This view has been so thoroughly refuted in Charles C. Ryrie's excellent book *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965) that we need not restate the arguments here.

While the idea that forgiveness is different from justification has merit (and will be considered in our next interpretation), the claim that the Church was not in existence in Acts 2 and, therefore, Acts 2 is not applicable today, is by itself enough to make us look for a better interpretation.

VII. THE TRANSITIONAL INTERPRETATION

A. DEFINITION

This "transitional interpretation"⁴⁸ holds that those who heard Peter's message in Acts 2 and believed it were regenerated at the moment of their faith, whether that occurred before or after their repentance. However, in order to receive the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit, Peter's audience had to repent and be baptized. This condition is applied in Acts

⁴⁷ Knoch, *Concordant Commentary*, 181.

⁴⁸ Again, this is my designation of this view. This position was never designated by anyone who held it.

only to Palestinians exposed to the baptizing ministry of John and of Jesus. It is not applicable to Gentiles at all as the case of Cornelius's conversion shows. Cornelius received the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit at the moment of faith, along with regeneration and justification.

B. DEFENDERS

This view has not had a wide hearing and, therefore, its advocates are few. However, this position is held by Zane C. Hodges and Craig Glickman.⁴⁹ Those who held a position which is somewhat compatible with it include Arno C. Gaebelein and Harry A. Ironside.⁵⁰

C. DEFENSE

The defense for this position is intricate since each of its points builds on the one before it. Broadly speaking, the support for this view is both grammatical and theological.

The grammatical support for this interpretation comes from the *prima facie* reading of the text. In this it agrees with the sacramentarian view. The normal force of both the words and the grammar all point to understanding Acts 2:38 as saying that one must both repent and be baptized in order to receive the remission of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. All efforts at lexical and grammatical subtleties are rejected.

However, the burden of support for this position is theological.

First, this interpretation affirms its belief in the evangelical position that John's doctrine of regeneration and Paul's doctrine of justification are both by faith alone. In this, it disagrees with the sacramentarian interpretation. Hodges notes:

It should be kept in mind that the key word in the Johannine doctrine of eternal salvation is "life," specifically, "eternal life." For Paul the

⁴⁹ Steven Craig Glickman, unpublished class notes in 903 Soteriology and Evangelism (Dallas Theological Seminary, Fall, 1982); Zane C. Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege* (Dallas: Redención Viva, 1981) reprinted in Zane C. Hodges, *The Free Grace Primer* (Denton: Grace Evangelical Society, 2011); and unpublished class notes for 227 Acts (Dallas Theological Seminary, Fall, 1984).

⁵⁰ Arno Clemens Gaebelein, *The Acts of the Apostles* (New York: Our Hope, 1912); Harry A. Ironside, *Baptism* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, fourth edition, 1989).

key word is “justification.” Neither writer ever associates his basic idea with anything other than faith. For John, baptism plays no role in the acquisition of “life.” For Paul it plays no role in “justification.” But the further statement may be made that there is no New Testament writer who associates baptism with either of these issues. The importance of this cannot be overstated.⁵¹

This observation allows the transitional interpretation to take Acts 2:38 at *prima facie* understanding and yet remain evangelical. Acts 2:38 is not telling anyone how to be eternally saved, justified, regenerated, or how to avoid the lake of fire.

Secondly, this interpretation holds that some of Peter’s hearers did believe and were, therefore, justified before Acts 2:38 was spoken. The question of Acts 2:37 (“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?’”) implies that faith was already present. Again, Hodges writes:

Peter concludes his address with the assertion that “God has made this Jesus, whom you have crucified, both Lord and Christ” (2:36). His hearers then reply, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” (2:37). But such a reaction presumes their acceptance of Peter’s claim that they have crucified the one who is Lord and Christ. If this is what they now believe, then they were already regenerated on Johannine terms, since John wrote: “Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God” (1 John 5:1; cf. John 20:31).⁵²

Thirdly, this interpretation holds that Acts 2:38 as well as the rest of Acts 2 is unique and is not directly applicable to us today. This uniqueness is seen in three ways.

First, Acts 2:38 is unique in regard to its situation. On this point Hodges writes in detail:

The requirement of baptism in Acts 2:38 has its full relevance in connection with the guilt of that generation of Jews. Note 2:40 “Save yourselves

⁵¹ Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege*, 100; Hodges, *A Free Grace Primer*, 296.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 101; *Ibid.*, 297.

from this untoward generation.” By the crucifixion of Christ this generation had become the most guilty in all the history of Israel (cf. Matt 23:33-36). When one of these Jews on the day of Pentecost was baptized, he was, in effect, breaking with his generation. He was declaring his death to his past life and relationship, and professing a new relationship to the name of Jesus Christ.

Note the threads of truth: an evil generation—baptism and repentance—baptism with the Holy Spirit; all these recall the ministry of John the Baptist to Israel (cf. Luke 3:3-18; Matt 3:5-12). That this requirement of baptism before the reception of the Spirit is somehow linked with the Jewish responsibility because of John’s ministry to that generation is implied in Acts 19. There is no evidence that anyone not actually, or potentially, reached by the ministry of John receives the Spirit this way (except Samaritans). It is then a condition laid down for the generation to whom John ministered, and, of course, his greater Successor our Lord Himself. If we do not belong to that generation of Jews we have no real biblical ground for supposing that the Spirit is only bestowed after baptism. If we are Gentiles we clearly come under Acts 10 and Romans 8:9!

...In Acts 2:38, forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit are *both* viewed as benefits to be bestowed subsequent to the realization that Jesus is both Lord and Christ (2:27). That realization in itself would be regenerating (cf. 1 John 5:1)—it was inherent in “repentance,” but baptism must precede the other two experiences. Forgiveness would restore harmonious relations between the baptized person and God and would put him in a category where God could bestow the gift of the Spirit upon him. (The gift was only being granted to the forgiven.) The sequence of events is clearly transitional in God’s dealings and is not normative today (Acts 10; Rom 8:9).

It is directly related to the special guilt of Peter's audience.⁵³

Secondly, Acts 2:38 is unique in regard to the matter of forgiveness. The other interpretations considered in this article assume that forgiveness is roughly the same thing as justification. It is not. Again, a detailed distinction is made by Hodges:

The final destiny of the soul is based upon his possession (or not) of eternal life (cf. Rev 20:15). Forgiveness of sins is not the determinative issue. This matter is virtually passed over in the Gospel of John in favor of the subject of "life." The reader of John could get no very clear idea of how his sins could be forgiven, but he would certainly know how to obtain eternal life. Indeed a man may die with unforgiven sins and yet go to heaven (cf. 1 Cor 11:30-32).

Forgiveness is not a legal, but a personal matter. A judge is concerned with carrying out the law, not with personal injury. So in the day of judgment men are judged according to their works—their legal claims to anything from God are searched out—and the final determination of destiny is made from the contents of the book of life. Men go to hell unforgiven, but men do not go to hell *because* they are unforgiven. (Judgment has been committed to the Lord Jesus because He is the Son of Man. He will sit on the Great White Throne *not* as an angry, offended person, but as the unbiased Executor of God's laws.)

Forgiveness, then, is not directly related to eternal judgment. Forgiveness removes the barrier of sin, its estrangement and distance, between man and God. It enables fellowship and communion. Since it is a personal thing, God determines in every age and circumstance what the conditions of forgiveness, the conditions of fellowship, are to be. Under the law a sacrifice might be a means of forgiveness (cf. e.g., Lev 4:10, 26, 31, 35). On the day of *Pentecost* for the Jewish crowd to whom Peter spoke, it was

⁵³ Hodges, "Acts," 15-16.

baptism (which, of course, is a specific kind of confession).

Two kinds of forgiveness in the NT must be clearly distinguished. The first of these may be called positional, i.e., it is ours in Christ (Eph 1:7; 4:28 [Grk.]; Col 1:14). Because it is involved with our being “seated in heavenly places” in Christ, it necessarily involves an instantaneous and perfect relationship with God which cannot be disturbed. Thus it covers all sins, past, present, and future. But the other kind of forgiveness is practical and experiential, and in the nature of the case can only deal with sins as they occur. Thus, at conversion, on a practical level we are forgiven for all the sins of our past and, as we confess our sins, these too are forgiven (1 John 1:9). This is to say that, at conversion, we begin communion with God and we sustain it by acknowledging the failures that can, and do, disrupt it. If a man were converted, yet unforgiven, he would be a person possessing eternal life but unable to enjoy communion with God (Paul is for three days like this...). What is involved in Acts 2:38 is an experience of regeneration (at the point where faith occurs...) with real communion begun only when baptism is submitted to.⁵⁴

Thirdly, Acts 2:38 is unique in regard to the Holy Spirit when compared with the rest of the book of Acts. Concerning the offer of the gift of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2:38, Hodges makes four points:

(a) There was a time when no believer had—or could have as yet—the Holy Spirit (cf. John 7:38-39).

(b) On the day of Pentecost the Spirit did not become the immediate possession of every believer. Baptism had to precede the giving of the Spirit...

(c) In Samaria, Samaritans receive the promised Spirit through the laying on of the Apostles’ hands, that the Jewish-Samaritan

⁵⁴Ibid., 14.

schism might be prevented from injuring the unity of the Church.

(d) In the house of Cornelius the Spirit is received upon the exercise of faith and before baptism. No pure Gentile, according to Scripture, has ever been required to receive baptism before receiving the Spirit.

From Rom 8:9 it may be inferred that the transitional requirement of baptism had vanished and the Apostle equates possession of the Spirit with the mere fact of being a Christian. Eph 1:13 and, by inference, Acts 19:2 concur.⁵⁵

Therefore, in regard to the gift of the Holy Spirit three observations follow: (1) although the OT saint was regenerated, he did not permanently possess the Spirit (John 7:37-39); (2) the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, which is a sign that one has entered the Church Age, was given to the Jews in Acts 2 upon their baptism; and (3) as one goes through the Book of Acts it becomes apparent that regeneration, forgiveness, and the reception of the Holy Spirit occur, normatively, at the moment of faith (Acts 10:44-48). "No Gentile exceptions are noted by Luke in the remainder of Acts, so that in Cornelius Luke no doubt sees normative Gentile experience."⁵⁶

The unique manner in which the gift of the Holy Spirit is given in Acts 2 could be compared to the empowerment of the Spirit which came to our Lord at His baptism. On this analogy, S. Craig Glickman offers this insight:

Furthermore, the church was born on the day of Pentecost, a unique event and *perhaps* the gift of the Spirit to this body following baptism served also to make correspondence with the head of the body, Jesus Christ, who did not receive the special empowerment of the Spirit until after baptism, but thereafter his body always possessed it, as is the case with his body the church. It received the Spirit after baptism on its inauguration but (shortly) thereafter to be in the body was to possess the Spirit! (Rom 8:9).⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Ibid., 15.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 58.

⁵⁷ Glickman, "Soteriology," 148.

D. DEFICIENCIES

Because this view has not been widely circulated it has not been widely criticized. One work was found by a Churches of Christ debater which criticized this interpretation.⁵⁸ However, its objections are of marginal worth because the polemical tone did not allow the transitional interpretation to be understood accurately. However, the chief objection (besides the objection that the view may be too complex) is found in the assumption that in Acts 2:37 some actually believed in Christ. This boils down, naturally, to the nature of faith and repentance (a subject beyond the scope of this paper).⁵⁹ As a result of this article perhaps someone who accurately understands this interpretation will write a paper that surfaces more numerous and difficult objections. However, unless and until insurmountable problems arise, this interpretation is the one that I hold.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article was to state and evaluate the major interpretations of Acts 2:38. Every position has problems, but the goal is to find the position that has the fewest major objections and solves the greatest number of problems. I hope that my article will help the reader to see a refutation of the argument that the gospel contains a demand for baptism. The Scriptures state that Satan blinds the eyes of the unbeliever so that he will not see the gospel clearly (2 Cor 4:4). Let us not do Satan's work for him by further confusing the unbeliever with an unclear gospel of faith plus water baptism.

⁵⁸ Jerry Moffitt, *Is Baptism Essential to Salvation?* (Austin, TX: Jerry Moffitt, 1979).

⁵⁹ See the chapter on "Repentance" in Zane C Hodges, *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Dallas and Grand Rapids: Redención Viva and Zondervan Puhushing House, 1989), 143-63. Cf. also Robert N. Wilkin's series on repentance in *JOTGES*, vols. 1 and following.

IX. AFTERWORD: TWENTY- TWO YEARS LATER

I am thankful to GES for publishing my original article on Acts 2:38 and for having an opportunity to discuss my further reflections some two decades later. I have been amazed and gratified at the interest and compliments my article has generated (only once I was denounced as a heretic and apostate). Further, I could hardly contain my joy when I found that the article was cited by Joseph Fitzmyer in *The Anchor Bible Commentary* on Acts. All of this was something I had not anticipated. I am indeed thankful.

In the intervening years, I have read and thought much about this subject. To be candid, I do not believe that the discussion about Acts 2:38 had advanced much beyond what it was 22 years ago. Nothing that I have read has, in my opinion, strengthened the argument for any of the positions outlined in my article. Nor has anything I have read broken new ground. When I was informed about the possibility of reprinting the original article, I thought about updating the bibliography and perhaps recasting a sentence here and there for better clarity, but, as I felt that would have limited value, I opted instead to write about my current thoughts about this subject.

First, I commend all who, in their writings on Acts 2:38, endeavor to maintain the purity of the gospel of God's grace by rejecting a salvation of faith and works. It is my studied opinion that a false gospel of faith and works inevitably marginalizes or ignores the work of Christ on His cross—much like modern theological liberalism or ancient Pelagianism—and is, to be candid, no Biblical gospel at all.

As an example, I refer to the late Foy Wallace, a popular though controversial preacher and writer in the Churches of Christ, who wrote a book entitled *The Certified Gospel*. In the sermon with the same title as the book, Wallace has only one sentence referring to the cross: "The cross declares God's infinite hatred of sin, and God's infinite love for the sinner."⁶⁰ While few would deny the truth of that statement, Wallace hardly explains why the cross was necessary, nor why it is so

⁶⁰ Foy Wallace, *The Certified Gospel* (Port Arthur, TX: O. C. Lambert and Sons, 1937. Cf. pages 1-5. All discussion of the Atonement needs to explain the "must" of Matt 16:21. Why "must" Christ die?

central to the New Testament, nor does his brief sentence reflect its importance in Paul's preaching, nor the God-ward aspect of the cross. Unfortunately, most of the sermon was about certain sins that Wallace wanted to denounce (evolution, modernism, denominationalism, and faith-only preaching) and to express what he thought was the true Church. The climax was, of course, "the plan of salvation" (i.e., faith, repentance, baptism, with the emphasis upon the later). A false gospel marginalizes or ignores the cross. It is more concerned with man's works than Christ's work in atonement.⁶¹

In a recent exchange with a Churches of Christ minister, the topic of Adam and Christ in Romans 5 came up. The Churches of Christ minister denied that Adam's sin affected anyone. When I replied that if Adam's sin is not imputed to us, then, logically, neither could Christ's righteousness be imputed to the believer. To this he responded most emphatically: "That is correct. I don't need the righteousness of Christ; all I need is God's forgiveness."⁶² A false gospel of faith and works marginalizes or ignores the work of Christ on His cross.

Thus, all efforts to explain Acts 2:38 in such a way as to maintain the purity of the gospel of grace by rejecting the idea of salvation occurs either because of, or, at the time of, one's baptism, is to be highly commended. A gospel that does not require Christ's cross is heresy.

Secondly, I am more convinced than ever that all efforts to separate baptism from the forgiveness of sins in Acts 2:38 by appeals to the grammar are not very promising. I still believe that the "causal *eis*" position is an unnatural way to understand the grammar and the "syntactical break" alternative is too subtle. Further, both have the appearance of a special pleading, of building a case on exceptions. However, of these two, the

⁶¹This is also seen in Alexander Campbell's *The Christian System* (Reprint, Nashville: gospel Advocate, 1964) his only effort to produce something like a systematic theology. His chapter entitled, "Sacrifice for Sin" is about nine full pages; some 53 pages in the section "Remission of Sins" contains a running argument on the necessity of baptism for regeneration. If the amount of space given to a subject is an indication of importance, baptism is more important than Christ's sacrifice.

⁶²I remember hearing a Churches of Christ preacher, in an evangelistic service, preach the gospel without any mention of the cross. His gospel only consisted of the commands to believe, repent, confess, be baptized and be faithful unto death. This contradicts the gospel as outlined in 1 Cor 15:3ff.

“syntactical break” comes closer, in my opinion, to the true solution, but not on the basis of the grammar.

Thirdly, I believe that the best way to explain Acts 2:38 is on the basis of Luke’s theology. Grammatically, Acts 2:38 reads as if there are two conditions (repentance and baptism) to the forgiveness of sins. But when Acts 2:38 is seen in the light of Luke’s theology (and that of the New Testament) it becomes clear that, while baptism is emphasized (even in Acts 2:38⁶³), it is repentance that leads to the forgiveness of sins.

Beginning with 3:3, Luke states that John the Baptist preached “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” The phrase “for the forgiveness of sins” links up with its nearest antecedent, repentance. Thus John’s baptism was the expression of the repentance that brought about the forgiveness of sins. This phrase, even by itself, helps us to see how Acts 2:38 is to be understood. Baptism is the commanded manner to express the repentance that brings forgiveness.

The second reference is 24:47. Here, in Luke’s version of the Great Commission, we have “repentance and⁶⁴ the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” Here repentance is linked directly to forgiveness of sins without any mention of baptism, implying, I think, baptism’s subordinate role.

In Acts 3:19, Peter gives his second evangelistic sermon saying, “Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out...” While some Churches of Christ writers have attempted to make this passage a parallel to Acts 2:38,⁶⁵ making “turn again” a synonym for “be baptized,” it is best to understand “turn again” as emphasizing the command to repent. This would be consistent with our proposed interpretation of 2:38.

Acts 5:31 also emphasizes repentance: “God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.” Again, baptism is absent, leaving repentance in relationship to the forgiveness of sins.

Finally, in Acts 10:43, faith, instead of repentance, is stated as the condition of forgiveness: “To him all the prophets bear

⁶³ The shift in number from the plural “repent” to the singular “be baptized” emphasizes the specific demand for baptism. It seems odd to emphasize baptism and then put it into a parenthetical phrase.

⁶⁴ Some Gk texts had “and” (*kai*) and others “for” (*eis*, as in Acts 2:38).

⁶⁵ Cf. Campbell, *The Christian System*, p. 169

witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

In all of these passages, repentance (or faith) is emphasized and is the only condition mentioned. This should indicate the correct way in interpret 2:38, that while both repentance and baptism are commanded, the emphasis is on repentance.

While one is not saved because of baptism, or at the moment of baptism, it is still a crucial part in the conversion experience of the believer. It is the Biblically commanded mode of expressing one's saving faith in the Savior. We should not ignore baptism (to do this is sin, as it is commanded), or minimize it, as is sometimes done to the Lord's Supper (the only aspect of public worship that is treated at length in the New Testament and, with baptism, is a symbolic and tactile expression of the gospel).

Fourthly, and briefly, I believe that the conversion experience of a believer should be understood somewhat along these lines:

First, the *sine qua non* of a Christian is having the Holy Spirit. Romans 8:9 especially, and Acts 19:2 by inference, makes this clear. The possession of the Holy Spirit, not baptism, is the point of demarcation between saved and unsaved in this dispensation. A person can be baptized and yet remain an unbeliever; one cannot receive the Holy Spirit and remain in unbelief.

Second, the Holy Spirit moves one to repentance/faith. Of course, this touches the subject of whether regeneration precedes faith or happens at faith (a discussion of which need not detain us here as either work well in this model, even if I personally prefer the former).

Third, repentance/faith is expressed in baptism. This is the import of Luke 3:3 and Acts 2:38. As in the Old Testament, circumcision was a sign and seal of “the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised” (Rom 4:11), so is the role of baptism in the New Testament.

Fourth, baptism is a symbol of union with Christ (Rom 6:3-6) and public commitment (1 Pet 3:21 where I prefer “pledge” over “appeal” as the translation of the hapologomena).

Alexander Campbell, and those who followed him, reacted strongly to the excesses of the revivalism of the early 1800's which replaced the command to be baptized. But as usually is the case, one extreme produces another. The Churches of Christ are correct in seeing that baptism was the commanded

expression of repentance, but went into error in making it essential for salvation.

XI. APPENDIX

There are a number of attempts to answer the objection that baptism is a work. One approach is to deny that the Bible teaches the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Dr. Thomas B. Warren, in his debate with L. S. Ballard, states, as one of his arguments that a salvation by faith without works is a salvation by a dead faith, according to James 2. Also, he points out that the only time the Scriptures use the phrase “justification by faith alone” is in James 2 where it is plainly stated that one is not justified by faith alone (*Warren-Ballard Debate*).

A second approach is to argue that faith, when cited alone, is often used as a figure of speech (metonymy) which puts a part for the whole. In this view, the Bible teaches that repentance (Acts 11:18), confession (1 John 2:23), and baptism (1 Pet 3:21) are also necessary. It is useless to point to a passage and say “It does not mention baptism here, therefore, it isn’t necessary,” since passages can be found that do not mention faith. All of the conditions are necessary, but not all are found in a single verse. (This is a second argument that Warren used in his debate with Ballard; cf. *Warren-Ballard Debate*.)

A third approach is to admit that baptism is a work, but an allowable type of work, i.e., one which is not forbidden by Paul in Eph 2:9. Tom Montgomery attempts to support this position as follows: “The New Testament mentions at least four kinds of works. There are (1) works of the flesh (Gal 5:19-21), (2) works of the law (Gal 2:16; Rom 3:20), (3) works of merit (Titus 3:5; Eph 2:8-9), and (4) works resulting from faith (Ja 2:14-26).

Baptism does not merit our salvation. Please note that (1) Naaman did not merit his cleansing from leprosy by dipping in the water of the Jordan seven times (2 Kings 5:1-14), (2) Saul did not merit his cleansing from sin by being baptized (Acts 22:16), and (3) we are not attempting to merit our salvation by being baptized in response to our Lord’s statement in Mark 16:16. But it

is clearly inconsistent to call Jesus 'Lord' and refuse to do what he said (Luke 6:46).

Baptism is a work. However, it is a work (or deed) that God requires as an outgrowth of our faith... A faith that will not produce these deeds (works) required by our Lord is a dead faith (James 2:26) and a dead faith cannot save any one (James 2:14)."⁶⁶

A fourth approach is based upon an effort to define the concept of "works." Alexander Campbell argues: "We do not, however, place baptism among good works. Good works have our brethren, and neither God nor ourselves, for their object. They directly and immediately terminate upon man; while, in the reflex influence, they glorify God and beautify ourselves." (Alexander Campbell, *Gospel Advocate* [April 7, 1983]: 198.)

A fifth and (for our purposes) final counter-objection pressed by a writer for the Churches of Christ is that used by Bales: Baptism is not a work because it is performed only once. He writes:

If baptism is an act of obedience performed by the Christian, a good work which the Christian does, why is not the act repeated from time to time? What good works are there which are bound on the Christian which should not be performed more than once if the individual has the opportunity and ability to do good work? Why, among all the works that a Christian is to do, is baptism the only one that is done once for all? Observance of the Lord's Supper is a privilege and a responsibility of the Christian. Does anyone maintain that it should be done *once for all*? That we should not partake of it but once in a lifetime, even though we have opportunity to partake of it more than once?

Does not the fact that baptism is once for all—when it is done scripturally—indicate that it is not in the category of works which a Christian should perform?"⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Tom Montgomery, "Is Baptism a Work?" *Gospel Advocate* [May 18, 1982]: 243.

⁶⁷ James D. Bales, *The Case of Cornelius* (Delight, AR: Gospel Light Publishing Co., 1964), 50.