

WATER BAPTISM AND THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS IN ACTS 2:38

by
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Then Peter *said* to them, “Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).¹

Peter’s exhortation delivered at Pentecost has been the source of on-going debate. Virtually all engaged in the debate take the command “be baptized” as referring to water baptism rather than Spirit baptism,² and most understand the phrase “the forgiveness of sins” as a synonym for salvation.³ The question that has stirred the debate is, What is the

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¹Πέτρος δὲ πρὸς αὐτοὺς, Μετανοήσατε, [φησὶν.] καὶ βαπτισθήτω ἕκαστος ὑμῶν ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰς ἄφεσιν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ὑμῶν καὶ λήμψεσθε τὴν δωρεὰν τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος. All translations are the author’s own, unless otherwise noted. There are a few minor textual questions with this verse, none of which impacts significantly the debate on its interpretation. See Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (New York: The United Bible Societies, 1994), pp. 261–62. The textual issues are addressed as necessary in the ensuing discussion of the verse.

²This identification is supported by the fact that v. 38 distinguishes the command, “be baptized,” from the gift of the Spirit, “and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (cf. Acts 8:15–17; 10:45–47 where a similar distinction between water baptism and the gift/activity of the Spirit is found). Furthermore, this “gift of the Spirit” is specifically identified in Acts 11:16–17 as Spirit baptism. For other uses of βαπτίζω in Acts referring to water baptism, see 2:41; 8:12–13, 16, 36, 38; 9:18; 10:47–48; 16:15, 33; 18:8; 19:3–5; 22:16. Also see the discussion in *NIDNTT*, s.v. “Baptism, Wash,” by G. R. Beasley-Murray, 1:145–46.

³By “salvation” it is meant the initial aspects of spiritual redemption and renewal, including regeneration, justification, forgiveness, adoption, etc. Following his exhortation in v. 38 involving the forgiveness of sins, Peter urges his audience in v. 40 to “be saved,” thereby associating the concepts of forgiveness and salvation (cf. vv. 21 and 47). See *TDNT*, s.v. “σῶζω,” by W. Foerster, 7:996–97. Foerster states, “Again and again in Ac. the content of σωτηρία is the forgiveness of sins, 3:19, 26; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 22:16; 26:18.”

relationship between the commands “repent” and “be baptized” and the phrase “for the forgiveness of sins”? Or, more specifically, how are we to understand “be baptized...for the forgiveness of sins”? Is Peter identifying water baptism as a condition for salvation, or should Peter’s statement be interpreted in some other way?

The purpose of this article is to interact with recent discussions of this verse and to arrive at an interpretation that is consistent with the immediate and larger contexts of Peter’s exhortation.⁴ The major views on the meaning of the verse are presented first. These are then examined to identify those views that are both syntactically and theologically viable. Finally, a conclusion to the interpretation of the verse is offered.

MAJOR INTERPRETATIONS

Five interpretations are commonly found in the literature on this verse:⁵ (1) *Baptism as a condition for salvation, normative for the Church*; (2) *Baptism as a condition for salvation, not normative for the Church*; (3) *Baptism as a parenthetical remark, not directly related to salvation*; (4) *Baptism as a sign of conversion-initiation, the evidence of genuine repentance*; (5) *Baptism as a consequence of salvation, not a condition for salvation*.

Baptism as a Condition for Salvation, Normative for the Church

Proponents of this interpretation include both sacramentalists (those who see baptism as the effective means whereby God imparts the grace of salvation)⁶ and baptismal regenerationists (those who see baptism

⁴Recent articles on Acts 2:38, championing diverse understandings of Peter’s exhortation, testify to the continuing interest in the verse and to the vitality of the debate over its interpretation. See, for example, Luther B. McIntyre, Jr., “Baptism and Forgiveness in Acts 2:38,” *BSac* 153 (January–March, 1996): 53–62 and a response by Ashley L. Camp, “Reexamining the Rule of Concord in Acts 2:38,” *ResQ* 39 (1997): 37–42. The use of this verse as a linchpin in support of baptismal regeneration—the belief that water baptism is a prerequisite for salvation—heightens the importance of further examination.

⁵See Lanny Thomas Tanton, “The Gospel and Water Baptism: A Study of Acts 2:38,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 3 (Spring 1990): 27–52. Tanton lists six views, two of which have been combined under a single designation in this article. Tanton’s is a well-researched and reasoned article that provides a helpful survey of the major interpretations of the verse.

⁶Principally in view here are Roman Catholic and Greek or Eastern Orthodox Churches. According to the Council of Trent, session 7, canon 6, “If any one saith, that the sacraments of the New Law do not contain the grace which they signify; or, that they do not confer that grace on those who do not place an obstacle thereunto; as though they were merely outward signs of grace or justice received through faith,...let him be anathema.” Canon 8 is even clearer, “If any one saith, that by the said sacraments of the New

simply as a step of obedience which, together with faith, is necessary for salvation).⁷ The distinction between the two is somewhat artificial in that sacramentalists generally hold to baptismal regeneration.⁸ However, not all who hold to baptismal regeneration define baptism as a sacrament. The distinction may be a matter of semantics, but the designation “baptismal regenerationists” is used in this paper for those who would make this distinction.

The two groups take the phrase “for the forgiveness of sins” in Acts 2:38 as modifying both the commands “repent” and “be baptized,” and understand the preposition “for” (ἐἰς) associated with forgiveness as signifying purpose or goal. The resulting translation would be “repent and...be baptized in order to *receive* the forgiveness of your sins.” Thus, water baptism, along with repentance, represents a necessary condition for salvation, apart from which one cannot be saved. For example, H. Mueller, a Roman Catholic, writes concerning water baptism, “Described in the NT as the sacramental entrance into the people of God...Baptism into Christ, when received in faith, effects forgiveness of sin, bestows the Holy Spirit, and unites the believer to Christ’s Mystical

Law grace is not conferred through the act performed [*ex opere operato*], but that faith alone in the divine promise suffices for the obtaining of grace, let him be anathema” (Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom, with a History and Critical Notes*, rev. David Schaff [reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985] 2:121–22). In a similar way, the Longer Catechism of the Eastern Church, article 10, question 284, states, “What is a Mystery or Sacrament? A Mystery or Sacrament is a holy act, through which grace, or, in other words, the saving power of God, works mysteriously upon man” (Schaff, *Creeds*, 2:490). See also *ISBE*, rev. ed., s.v. “Sacraments,” by R. Wallace and G. Bromiley, 4:256–58 and *NCE*, 3rd ed., s.v. “Sacraments, Theology of,” by J. Quinn, 12:806–13.

⁷The term “baptismal regeneration” comes from an interpretation of passages such as Titus 3:5, “...He saved us by the washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Spirit.” Those who fall under this heading view regeneration here as the result of this “washing” and interpret the washing as a reference to water baptism, hence, a regeneration accomplished through water baptism (cf. also John 3:5 and Eph 5:26). Included in this category are the various denominations within the Restoration Movement, including the Christian Church, the Disciples of Christ, and the Churches of Christ. While many of these disavow the term “baptismal regeneration,” the concept is applicable nevertheless. See the *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, s.v. “Baptism,” by S. Grenz, pp. 105–08; s.v. “Restoration Movement,” by J. North, pp. 1005–08; and the *Encyclopedia of Religion in the South*, s.v. “Disciples of Christ,” by S. Pearson, pp. 201–05.

⁸For example, the Council of Trent, Catechism, part 2, chapter 2, question 5 states, “...it hence follows that baptism may be accurately and appositely defined to be the sacrament of regeneration by water in the word; for by nature we are born from Adam children of wrath, but by baptism we are regenerated in Christ children of mercy” (J. Donovan, ed. *Catechism of the Council of Trent* [Dublin: James Duffey and Company, 1908], p. 144).

Body.”⁹ Similarly, Alexander Campbell, a representative of the baptismal regenerationist group, argues, “To every believer...[water] baptism is a formal and personal remission, or purgation of sins. The believer never has his sins formally washed away or remitted until he is baptized.”¹⁰

It is difficult to know where to place mainline Protestant denominations within this discussion.¹¹ According to the pertinent confessions, certain of these denominations appear to view water baptism as a sacrament which, when combined with faith, is instrumental in the reception of salvation and, therefore, necessary for salvation.¹² The Augsburg Confession, for example, states, “it [water baptism] is necessary to salvation, and that by Baptism the grace of God is offered.”¹³ In his Shorter Catechism, Martin Luther remarks on the efficacy of water baptism, “It worketh forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives everlasting salvation to all who believe, as the Word and promise of God declare.”¹⁴

⁹NCE, 3rd ed., s.v. “Baptism (in the Bible),” by H. Mueller, 2:54. Note along with this the Council of Trent, session 7, canon 5 (On Baptism), “If any one saith, that baptism is free, that is, not necessary unto salvation: let him be anathema” (Schaff, *Creeds*, 2:123). Mueller’s statement is similar to what is found in the Longer Catechism of the Eastern Church, article 10, question 288, “What is Baptism? Baptism is a Sacrament, in which a man who believes, having his body thrice plunged in water...is born again of the Holy Ghost to a life spiritual and holy (Schaff, *Creeds*, 2:491). See also NCE, 3rd ed., s.v. “Baptism (Theology of),” by T. De Ferrari, 2:62–68; and the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, s.v. “Orthodox Church,” pp. 1197–99.

¹⁰Alexander Campbell and W. L. Maccalla, *A Public Debate on Christian Baptism* (Kansas City: Old Paths Book Club, n.d.), p. 116, quoted in John Mark Hicks, “‘God’s Sensible Pledge’: The Witness of the Spirit in the Early Baptismal Theology of Alexander Campbell,” *Stone-Campbell Journal* 1 (Spring 1998): 14.

¹¹In view here are the Lutheran, Anglican, and Reformed Churches, together with those traditions closely associated with these.

¹²See *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, s.v. “Baptism,” pp. 151–52.

¹³Part 1, article 9 (Schaff, *Creeds*, 3:13). The Lutheran position differs from the Roman Catholic position in at least two respects. The Lutheran Church holds to only two sacraments, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, rather than to the seven of the Catholic Church. In addition, the Lutheran confessions reject the traditional Catholic concept that the sacraments confer saving grace merely by the operation of the sacrament itself (*ex opere operato*).

¹⁴Small Catechism, part 4, question 2 (Schaff, *Creeds*, 3:85). In his subsequent discussion, Luther is clear to note that faith must be present for the rite to be efficacious (see question 3, *Creeds*, 3:86). A similar view is expressed by the Anglican Church in their Thirty-nine Articles. The twenty-seventh article defines baptism as “...a sign of regeneration or new birth, whereby, as by an instrument, they that receive Baptism rightly are grafted into the Church; the promises of forgiveness of sin, and of our adoption to be the sons of God by the Holy Ghost, are visibly signed and sealed; Faith is confirmed and Grace increased by virtue of prayer unto God” (Schaff, *Creeds*, 3:504–5).

Others of these denominations, however, demur, preferring to describe baptism as the “ordinary means” that God works in salvation, but allowing that salvation can be received apart from the rite.¹⁵ For example, the Westminster Confession (1647) adds a note of caution against linking too closely the rite with the spiritual transaction with which it is associated, “Although it is a great sin to condemn or neglect this ordinance, yet grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto it, as that no person can be regenerated or saved without it, or that all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated.”¹⁶ Perhaps the best approach is to place these denominations generally within this category, while recognizing that not all involved would hold to this interpretation of Acts 2:38 or hold to it with the same degree of dogmatism.

Baptism as a Condition for Salvation, Not Normative for the Church

Defenders of this interpretation fall into one of two groups. The first group, often referred to as ultra-dispensationalists, takes the verse in the same way as the previous view in the sense that repentance and baptism are the necessary conditions for salvation. They limit the application of the verse, however, to first century Jews living in the period between the ministry of Jesus and the start of the Church. Once the Church began (at some point after Acts 2), salvation was conditioned by faith alone.¹⁷ Charles Baker, a well-known proponent of this position,

¹⁵L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), p. 608. According to the Westminster Confession of Faith, 1647, chapter 27, paragraph 6, “The efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered; yet, notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinance the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost...” (Schaff, *Creeds*, p. 663).

¹⁶The Westminster Confession, chapter 27, paragraph 5 (Schaff, *Creeds*, 3:663). Calvin, in his *Institutes* (book 4, chapter 16, section 26), remarks, “The passage [John 5:24] only serves to show that we must not deem baptism so necessary as to suppose that every one who has lost the opportunity of obtaining it has forthwith perished” (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, 2 vols. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966], 2:547).

¹⁷There is no unanimity among ultra-dispensationalists as to when the Church actually began. The common denominator within this group is that the Church began at some point in Paul’s ministry. Baker lists three options championed by ultra-dispensationalists: (1) The Church began with Paul’s conversion in Acts 9; (2) the Church began with Paul’s call to the ministry in Acts 13; (3) the Church began at the end of Acts with the final rejection of the Kingdom by the Jews (Acts 28:28). Baker himself argues for the second option. See Charles F. Baker, *A Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Grace Bible College Publications, 1971), pp. 496–505. In any case, ultra-dispensationalists generally hold that water baptism, along with faith, was a condition for salvation during the period of transition. But, with the start of the Church, salvation is conditioned by faith alone. (Baker, *Dispensational Theology*, pp. 407–08; see also pp.

describes the role of water baptism in the period before the Church.

No religious ordinance ever had the power in itself to impart grace or forgiveness, but it appears very evident that in God's dealings with Israel He channeled His blessings through the instrumentality of ordinances, but not apart from faith. Therefore it would appear that baptism was an ordinance which was an instrumental means of grace....¹⁸

However, with the dispensation of the Church, Baker avers, "Whereas in other dispensations faith required the exercise of various ordinances and sacrifices, in this present dispensation...it is faith alone apart from such ordinances."¹⁹

The second group, represented by some traditional dispensationalists,²⁰ offers an interpretation that is considerably more complex. This group limits the application of the verse to first century Jews who were familiar with the baptizing ministries of both John the Baptist and Jesus. As Zane Hodges writes,

The situation in Acts 2 is apparently exceptional. It is not repeated in the experience of Gentile converts (Acts 10:43–48).... Neither are such terms presented anywhere in the epistles of the New Testament. They evidently belong to the historic record of God's dealings with that generation of Palestinians who had been exposed to, but had rejected, the ministries of both John the Baptist and Jesus Himself.²¹

Although these Jews were able to obtain justification and eternal life on the basis of faith alone, they had to repent and undergo Christian baptism in order to receive the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. "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 sin and the gift of the Holy Spirit, Peter's audience had to repent and be baptized."²²

The requirements of Acts 2:38 were placed on these Jews,

543–54).

¹⁸Baker, *Dispensational Theology*, pp. 407–08.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 408.

²⁰The principal advocates of this position are those associated with the Grace Evangelical Society, their most prominent representative being Zane Hodges. See Zane C. Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege: A Study of Faith and Works* (Dallas, TX: Redención Viva, 1981), pp. 99–107; Tanton, "The Gospel and Water Baptism," pp. 47–52.

²¹Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege*, pp. 102–03.

²²Tanton, "The Gospel and Water Baptism," p. 47.

proponents argue, because of the heinous nature of their sin. They had rejected the message of both John and Jesus and had crucified the Lord. Thus, for these Jews, forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit were conditioned by repentance and water baptism.²³ All other Jews and all Gentiles, in contrast, receive these and the other benefits of salvation on the single condition of faith alone. As Hodges comments, “Normative Christian experience takes the form set forth in the crucial story of the conversion of Cornelius in Acts 10. There forgiveness and the reception of the Spirit take place at the moment of faith (10:43, 44). Water baptism *follows* and in no way conditions these blessings.”²⁴

Baptism as a Parenthetical Remark, Not Directly Related to Salvation

Advocates of this position come from both Reformed and dispensational traditions.²⁵ As with the preceding interpretations, these too argue that the preposition “for” in the prepositional phrase, “for the forgiveness of sins,” signifies purpose. However, the phrase itself, along with the reference to the reception of the Spirit which follows, is to be taken exclusively with the command to repent. The second command, “and let each one of you be baptized,” is a parenthetical remark and, therefore, does not factor into the equation between repentance and forgiveness.²⁶ The resultant translation is, “Repent (and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ) in order to *receive* the forgiveness of your sins.”

Supporters argue that the command to repent is plural whereas the command to be baptized is singular. The phrase “for the forgiveness of your sins” includes the plural pronoun “your,” making the reference plural and linking it with the plural “repent” rather than the singular “be baptized.” For example, Stanley Toussaint writes,

The verb [verse?] makes a distinction between singular and plural verbs and

²³Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege*, pp. 102–03.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 104.

²⁵The Reformed tradition is represented, for example, by N. B. Stonehouse (“Repentance, Baptism and the Gift of the Holy Spirit,” *WTJ* 13 [1949–51]: 13–15), while the dispensational by Stanley D. Toussaint (“Acts,” *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 2 vols., ed. J. Walvoord and R. Zuck [Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1983], 2:359). Stonehouse does not use the term “parenthesis.” He does link both forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit to repentance, speaking of baptism as “subordinated to repentance” (p. 15).

²⁶Toussaint describes the preferred view in this way, “A third view takes the clause *and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ* as parenthetical” (“Acts,” *BKC*, 2:359).

nouns. The verb 'repent' is plural and so is the pronoun 'your' in the clause *so that your sins may be forgiven*. . . . Therefore the verb 'repent' must go with the purpose of forgiveness of sins. On the other hand the imperative 'be baptized' is singular, setting it off from the rest of the sentence.²⁷

Proponents further argue that tying forgiveness to repentance alone is consistent with what Peter and Luke say elsewhere about how forgiveness is obtained.²⁸ For instance, the Lord's commission to His disciples recorded by Luke simply states, "and *that* repentance for the forgiveness of sins be proclaimed in His name to all the nations."²⁹ Here repentance is the sole condition for forgiveness; nothing is said about baptism.³⁰ Consequently, supporters conclude that Peter's statement in Acts 2:38 should be interpreted in the same way.

Baptism as a Sign of Conversion-Initiation, the Evidence of Genuine Repentance

A variety of interpreters hold to this understanding of the verse.³¹ Proponents assert that Christian conversion-initiation involves the three things mentioned in Acts 2:38: repentance, water baptism, and the gift of the Spirit.³² Of these three items, repentance functions as the efficacious element and the reception of the Spirit as the culminating or concluding element. The significance of water baptism as a factor in conversion-initiation is that, among its other roles, it is the vehicle by which true repentance is expressed. Commenting on forgiveness in Acts 2:38, James Dunn states,

²⁷Ibid..

²⁸Ibid..

²⁹Luke 24:47 (καὶ κηρυχθῆναι ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι αὐτοῦ μετάνοιαν εἰς ἅφεςιν ἁμαρτιῶν εἰς πάντα τὰ ἔθνη).

³⁰See also Acts 5:31; 10:43.

³¹See especially G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), pp. 31, 35, 43, 90, 100–04, 107–08, 120–22, 263–66, 271–79, 303–05, 393–95, and *Baptism Today and Tomorrow* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1966), pp. 13–32; James D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (London: SCM Press, 1970), pp. 4–7, 90–93, 96–102, 227–29; Richard N. Longenecker, "Acts," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 12 vols., ed. F. E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 9:283–85, 287; Richard E. Averbeck, "The Focus of Baptism in the New Testament," *GTJ* 2 (Fall 1981): 265–301.

³²According to this view, repentance and the gift of the Spirit address the inward subjective aspects of conversion, while water baptism designates the external objective rite of initiation. Supporters aver that becoming a Christian embraces both conversion and initiation, hence the designation conversion-initiation. Cf. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, pp. 6–7.

We have already seen...that in Luke where repentance is joined to water-baptism it is the former alone which is really decisive for forgiveness. So in 2:38, Peter's basic and primary demand is for repentance; the forgiveness of sins can be promised to the baptisand [*sic*] only because his baptism is his act and expression of repentance.³³

Furthermore, advocates recognize that the sequence between water baptism and the gift of the Spirit varies in the conversion accounts in Acts. Sometimes, for example, water baptism is mentioned before the gift of the Spirit as in Acts 8:14–17 with the Samaritan converts and in Acts 19:1–6 with John's disciples in Ephesus. At other times, water baptism is mentioned after the gift of the Spirit as in Acts 10:44–48 with the conversion of Cornelius.³⁴ Because Acts 2:38 is in a position of prominence—it is placed early in the conversion accounts in Acts and is associated with the events surrounding Pentecost—supporters argue that the sequence in Acts 2:38 is normative for the Church. The other conversion accounts in Acts are simply *ad hoc* variations of this intended pattern.³⁵ According to Richard Longenecker, “We should understand Peter's preaching at Pentecost as being theologically normative for the relation in Acts between conversion, water baptism, and the...Holy Spirit, with the situations having to do with the Samaritan converts, Cornelius, and the twelve whom Paul met at Ephesus...to be more historically conditioned and circumstantially understood.”³⁶

Applying all of this to the verse itself, adherents argue that the preposition “for” shows purpose and that the prepositional phrase “for the forgiveness of sins” modifies both commands.³⁷ The focus with the second command, “be baptized,” is not on the ordinance itself, however, but on what the ordinance signifies. In other words, water baptism is

³³Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, pp. 97–98. Averbeck adds, “The point is that baptism was not the means of obtaining regeneration. Rather, it was an *instrument* adopted by the apostles and the apostolic church...for the purpose of *implementing* the *expression* of the repentance necessarily associated with regeneration as well as the discipleship commitment that was inherent within that repentance [emphasis original]” (“The Focus of Baptism in the New Testament,” p. 292, n. 66. See also Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, p. 35, 100–02, 120–21, 271–72.

³⁴See Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, p. 90; Longenecker, “Acts,” 9:284.

³⁵Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, pp. 90–91. He states, “Luke probably intends Acts 2.38 to establish the pattern and norm for Christian conversion-initiation in his presentation of Christianity's beginnings. At the close of the first Christian sermon the leading apostle sets the precedent for the instruction of enquirers” (p. 90).

³⁶Longenecker, “Acts,” 9:285. See also Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, pp. 90–91.

³⁷E.g., Averbeck, “The Focus of Baptism in the New Testament,” p. 292.

viewed as an initiatory rite where the believer not only publicly identifies with Christ, but also publicly gives allegiance to Christ.³⁸ Peter's first command was for the hearers to repent of their sins. Those whose repentance was sincere would obey Peter's second command and be baptized, thus identifying with Christ and proclaiming publicly their allegiance to Him. Hence, it is these, the ones who were baptized as an expression of their true repentance, who had their sins forgiven and who received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Technically, then, water baptism is understood here not so much as a condition for forgiveness and the Spirit as it is the mark of those whose repentance is genuine.

As F. F. Bruce comments,

It would indeed be a mistake to link the words "for the forgiveness of sins" with the command "be baptized" to the exclusion of the prior command to repent. It is against the whole genius of biblical religion to suppose that the outward rite could have any value except insofar as it was accompanied by the work of grace within.... So here the reception of the Spirit is conditional not on baptism in itself but on baptism in Jesus' name as the expression of repentance.³⁹

Baptism as a Consequence of Salvation, Not a Condition for Salvation

This view too has a variety of supporters.⁴⁰ These take the phrase "for the forgiveness of sins" as modifying only the second command, the

³⁸Averbeck states, "As part of the new believer's incorporation into the Christian community he or she must be baptized.... In effect, the initiate by his submission to baptism, declared himself a disciple of Christ and committed himself to the kind of life-style pertinent to that declaration" ("The Focus of Baptism in the New Testament," p. 288).

³⁹F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, rev. ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 70. Averbeck concurs, "The Qumran emphasis upon repentance as the key to real efficacy in water informs us concerning the intent of this type of statement. As mentioned previously, even John, in his preaching, made it clear that his baptism was only valid if accompanied by genuine repentance (Matt 3:5-8; Luke 3:7-8). This association of baptism with repentance was carried directly into the church. The rite, as far as the NT canon is concerned, found its formative and ideological base in John the Baptist. Neither John the Baptist nor the apostolic church would have conceived of the rite as being efficacious in the absence of genuine repentance" ("The Focus of Baptism in the New Testament," p. 292). See also Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, p. 100.

⁴⁰Included are A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934), p. 592 and, especially, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 6 vols. (Nashville: Broadman, 1930), 3:35-36; H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1927), pp. 103-05; James A. Brooks and Carlton L. Winbery, *Syntax of New Testament Greek* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1979), p. 60.

command to be baptized. Unlike the previous interpretations, however, forgiveness is viewed here, not as the goal or outcome of baptism, but rather as the basis or motivation for it. In other words, Peter is saying, “repent, and [having done that] let everyone of you be baptized in response to the forgiveness of sins.” The critical difference here is the interpretation of the preposition “for” (ἐἰς). As with the previous views, it can point to the purpose or goal of that which precedes it. However, proponents argue that it can also identify the cause or basis for what precedes it. In the latter case, it would be translated “because of,” “in response to,” or “on the basis of.” Thus, Peter is saying that those who responded to his message and repented are to be baptized because, having repented, their sins are [already] forgiven.

Although the causal use of this preposition is not common in the New Testament, advocates note, neither is it unprecedented. As A. T. Robertson comments,

In themselves the words can express aim or purpose for that use of *eis* does exist as in 1 Cor. 2:7 *eis doxan hemon* (for our glory). But then another usage exists which is just as good Greek as the use of *eis* for aim or purpose. It is seen in Matt. 10:41 in three examples *eis onoma prophetou, dikaion, mathetou* where it cannot be purpose or aim, but rather the basis or ground, on the basis of the name of prophet, righteous man, disciple, because one is, etc. It is seen again in Matt. 12:41 about the preaching of Jonah (*eis to kerugma Iona*). They repented because of (or at) the preaching of Jonah. The illustrations of both usages are numerous in the N.T. and the *Koinē* generally.⁴¹

Furthermore, elsewhere in Luke-Acts, the forgiveness of sins is normally associated with repentance and/or faith and not with baptism at all.⁴² In fact, defenders argue, with the possible exception of Acts 22:16, there is no other passage in Acts where baptism is “presented as bringing about the forgiveness of sins.”⁴³

⁴¹Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 3:35. For others who allow for a limited use of the preposition in this sense, in addition to those already mentioned, see Maximilian Zerwick, *Biblical Greek*, trans. J. Smith (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963), p. 32; Nigel Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark), 3:255 (but note 3:266–67); *TDNT*, s.v. “ἐἰς,” by A. Oepke, 2:427–28. On the issue of extra-biblical examples, see the debate between J. R. Mantey (“The Causal Use of *Etis* in the New Testament,” *JBL* 70 [1951]: 45–48; “On Causal *Etis* Again,” *JBL* 71 [1952]: 309–11) and Ralph Marcus (“On Causal *Etis*,” *JBL* 70 [1951]: 129–30; “The Elusive Causal *Etis*,” *JBL* 71 [1952]: 43–44).

⁴²E.g., Luke 24:47; Acts 3:19; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38–39; 26:18.

⁴³See John B. Pohill, *Acts*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), p. 117.

ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION

Although the meaning of the verse is highly contested, several points can be established that will help in arriving at a proper interpretation. The above views will be critiqued in connection with the discussion of these points. The critique itself focuses on the salient problem(s) identified with each view.

**Baptism as a Condition for Salvation,
Normative for the Church**

Supporters argue that the prepositional phrase “for the forgiveness of sins” modifies both commands “repent” and “be baptized.” The preposition itself signifies purpose or goal and makes water baptism, as well as repentance (and faith), a condition for salvation. The chief problem with this interpretation is that by making water baptism a condition for salvation it appears to violate the gracious nature of the gospel. In other words, salvation is no longer by faith alone, but by faith plus water baptism.

The tension here is that Peter's statement needs to be interpreted in harmony with what Scripture teaches elsewhere regarding salvation. This point expresses a standard principle of interpretation. Namely, we are to interpret the difficult passages in the Bible in light of those passages whose teachings are clear.⁴⁴ Taken in their entirety, the Scriptures describe salvation as an unmerited gift, received by faith and not by works.⁴⁵ Paul states in Romans 3:24, 28, “being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,...we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law.”⁴⁶ The same is found in Ephesians 2:8–9, “for by grace you have been saved through faith; and this not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, so that no one can boast.”⁴⁷

Those defending water baptism as a condition for salvation argue

⁴⁴Cf. Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), pp. 104–07. Ramm identifies two overlapping principles germane to this discussion. The first is that “obscure passages in Scripture must give way to clear passages” (p. 104). The second is the “analogy of faith” by which he means “that the interpretations of specific passages must not contradict the total teaching of Scripture on a point” (p. 107).

⁴⁵Cf. Gen 15:6; Hab 2:4; John 20:31; Rom 3:21–28; 4:1–5; Gal 2:16; 3:8–14; etc.

⁴⁶δικαιοούμενοι δωρεὰν τῇ αὐτοῦ χάριτι διὰ τῆς ἀπολυτρώσεως τῆς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ...λογιζόμεθα γὰρ δικαιοῦσθαι πίστει ἀνθρώπων χωρὶς ἔργων νόμου.

⁴⁷τῇ γὰρ χάριτί ἐστε σεσφωσμένοι διὰ πίστεως· καὶ τοῦτο οὐκ ἐξ ὑμῶν, θεοῦ τὸ δῶρον· οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων, ἵνα μὴ τις καυχῆσθαι.

that the works in view in these passages should be limited either to those associated with the Mosaic regulations or to those done in a legalistic spirit. In other words, passages such as these do not rule out all works as a basis for salvation, only those improperly motivated or those based on the Old Testament Law. However, these interpretations are problematic.⁴⁸ Paul's exclusion in Romans 3:28 and elsewhere is not limited to works of the Law or to works with wrong motivations. His exclusion is open-ended. Paul is using "works of law"⁴⁹ in the sense of anything done in obedience to God's Word and, by extension, anything that a person does. As others have argued,

(1) The closest Paul comes to a definition of "works" is in Romans 9:10–11, where "works" refers to anything that a person does, whether "good or bad." (2) In Romans 4:1ff., the "works" of Abraham, in which he could not boast, clearly refer to good works—hence the potential for Abraham's boasting (cf. Rom 3:27). At the same time, the Abraham illustration in Romans 4 is closely tied to Paul's argument in Romans 3:20–28 where "works of law" is used. (3) What appears to be the case is that Paul uses "works of law" in 3:20–28 to refer to a specific kind of works, those done in obedience to the Mosaic Law, in order to show that even these are excluded. (4) At the same time, from Romans 4 and elsewhere, it may be seen that Paul's purpose in Romans 3:28 "is to exclude *all* works—not just certain works or works done in a certain spirit—as a basis for justification."⁵⁰

Although faith is described in Scripture as an act of obedience and, specifically, as an act of obedience in response to the gospel, yet this does not make faith a work.⁵¹ Faith is not some task that a person performs. Rather, it is the response of the will that trusts in what God has accomplished in providing salvation through the person and work of Christ.⁵²

⁴⁸See R. Bruce Compton, "James 2:21–24 and the Justification of Abraham," *DBSJ* 2 (Fall 1997): 24–26.

⁴⁹ἔργων νόμου. The phrase also occurs in Rom 3:20; 9:32; Gal 2:16; 3:2, 5, 10. The genitive is variously identified as objective, subjective, possessive, etc. Regardless, the meaning appears clear. The expression refers to works required by the Law or done in response to the Law. Cf. Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 209, n. 61; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, AB (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1993), pp. 337–38.

⁵⁰This represents a synopsis of Douglas J. Moo's arguments (*The Letter of James*, TNTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985], pp. 101–02), which was developed in Compton, "James 2:21–24 and the Justification of Abraham," p. 25, n. 24. See also D. J. Moo, "Law," "Works of the Law" and Legalism in Paul," *WTJ* 45 (Spring 1983): 73–100, esp. pp. 90–100; *The Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 209–10.

⁵¹Cf. Rom 10:16; 2 Thess 1:8. For a discussion of the pertinent constructions, see Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 51–53.

⁵²Cf. *ISBE*, s.v. "Faith," by G. W. Bromiley, 2:271–72; Leon Morris, *The Epistle to*

In that sense, faith and works are antithetical.⁵³ Salvation, as Paul and others declare, is based on the principle of faith and not on the principle of works, whether good or otherwise. In fact, in Romans 4 and elsewhere, Paul argues that faith and works are mutually exclusive principles as a basis for salvation (cf. Rom 3:27; 4:4–5, 13–14; Gal 3:18).⁵⁴

This being the case, the view which identifies water baptism as a condition for salvation violates this principle. There is every indication that water baptism falls within the definition of a work and therefore cannot be a condition for salvation. A comparison between circumcision in the Old Testament and water baptism in the New Testament supports this conclusion: Both are religious ceremonies. Both were commanded by God. Both involve an act of obedience. Both are one-time acts. Both are somewhat passive in the sense that the participant is acted upon by another. Paul's argument in Romans 4 regarding the salvation of Abraham requires circumcision to be understood as a work, albeit a good work (cf. Rom 3:27–4:25).⁵⁵ By definition, then, circumcision could not have been a condition for Abraham's salvation, a point Paul establishes in Romans 4:9–11. The same must be said of water baptism.

the Romans (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), pp. 196–99. Morris states, "This is not to regard it [faith] as a meritorious work; it is the very absence of all work.... Paul is speaking of a system that requires him to produce nothing. All he does is to reach out in faith for God's good gift" (p. 99). For a definition of faith, see the discussion below under the subheading "The Command to Repent."

⁵³As Jas 2:14–26 and other passages indicate, faith and works are not ultimately antithetical. They are antithetical only insofar as they are viewed as the basis for salvation. The importance of works in connection with faith may be seen in that works serve as the necessary evidence of genuine faith. As such, though, works are the fruit of salvation, not its condition. See Compton, "James 2:21–24 and the Justification of Abraham," pp. 19–45.

⁵⁴See, especially, John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), pp. 122–23; 132–33; 140–43. Similarly, C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, HNTC (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), pp. 82, 88, 94–95; Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 185–86; 197–99; 205–06; Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 246–50; 263–65; 273–75; Thomas Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), pp. 213–15. Schreiner comments on Paul's argument in Rom 4, "verses 4–5 restate the substance of verses 2–3, so that the polarity between faith and works will be grasped. Paul specifically and emphatically contrasts 'working' and 'believing' in verses 4–5" (pp. 214–15).

⁵⁵Cf. Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 193, 201–02, 205; Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 267, 273; Schreiner, *Romans*, pp. 228–29. Commenting on Paul's argument involving Abraham's circumcision in Rom 4:9–12, Morris notes, "Paul insisted that it is faith (and by implication not any outward ceremony) that brings salvation" (p. 201). A similar argument is put forward by Paul in Gal 5:2–12. See, for example, Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 221.

By definition, it too is a work. Therefore, Acts 2:38 cannot be requiring water baptism as a condition for salvation.

Baptism as a Condition for Salvation, Not Normative for the Church

As with the preceding interpretation, advocates take the prepositional phrase “for the forgiveness of sins” as modifying both commands “repent” and “be baptized.” The preposition indicates purpose and identifies both repentance and water baptism as conditions for salvation. However, supporters limit the application of the verse in one of two ways. Ultra-dispensationalists limit its application by placing it before the start of the church. They argue that for the church salvation is by faith alone. For those saved before the church, salvation was by both faith and water baptism. Certain other dispensationalists limit the application of the verse by restricting it to those Jews who rejected the ministry of the Lord and who were guilty of crucifying Him. These Jews could receive some of the benefits of salvation by faith alone. But, in order to receive forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit, these Jews must repent and be baptized.

The problems with this interpretation are two-fold. For the ultra-dispensationalists, the problem is over the starting point of the church. For the other dispensationalists holding to this interpretation, the problem is over the relationship of faith and repentance.

The Command to Repent

As mentioned above, the issue here is not so much the meaning of the command as it is the relationship between repentance and faith. For the sake of discussion, the New Testament word group representing repentance⁵⁶ is defined in its theological use as a fundamental change of mind,⁵⁷ and, in particular, a change of mind about God, sin, and the need of salvation.⁵⁸ In his message to the Athenians at the Areopagus,

⁵⁶The principal Greek words associated with repentance in the New Testament are ἐπιστρέφω, μεταμέλομαι, μετανοέω, and μετάνοια.

⁵⁷*NIDNTT*, s.v. “Conversion et al.,” by F. Laubach, 1:355; *ISBE*, s.v. “Repent,” by B. H. DeMent and E. W. Smith, 4:136; *ABD*, s.v. “Repentance,” by A. Boyd Luter, Jr., 5:672. For example, DeMent and Smith state, “...the exhortations of the ancient prophets, of Jesus, and of the apostles show that the change of mind is the dominant idea of the words employed....” Luter concurs, “The generally recognized core idea of these words is a ‘change of mind.’”

⁵⁸“Intellectually, human beings must apprehend sin as unutterably heinous, the divine law as perfect and binding, and themselves as falling short of the requirements of a holy God” (*ISBE*, s.v. “Repent,” by B. H. DeMent and E. W. Smith, 4:136).

Paul declares, “since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by man’s skill and thought. God has overlooked these times of ignorance *but* now commands all men everywhere to repent, in that He has set a day wherein He will judge the world in righteousness.”⁵⁹ Here, Paul calls for repentance involving a change of mind because of the Athenians’ misconceptions about God, misconceptions which will certainly bring divine judgment if they are not corrected.⁶⁰ This fundamental change of mind in New Testament repentance includes an emotional dimension involving sorrow over sin.⁶¹ In terms of the emotional aspect, Paul speaks of a “godly [produced] sorrow” bringing about a “repentance *that leads* to salvation.”⁶² True repentance entails a volitional element as well, an element that expresses itself in a decisive turning from sin.⁶³ Paul describes repentance in Acts 26:18–20 as a turning “from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God.”

The word group representing the concept of faith in the New Testament⁶⁴ is defined in its active or subjective sense⁶⁵ as the unreserved

⁵⁹Acts 17:29–31^a (γένος οὖν ὑπάρχοντες τοῦ θεοῦ οὐκ ὀφείλομεν νομίζειν χρυσῷ ἢ ἀργύρῳ ἢ λίθῳ, χαράγματι τέχνης καὶ ἐνθυμήσεως ἀνθρώπου, τὸ θεῖον εἶναι ὅμοιον. τοὺς μὲν οὖν χρόνους τῆς ἀγνοίας ὑπεριδὼν ὁ θεὸς, τὰ νῦν παραγγέλλει τοῖς ἀνθρώποις πάντας πανταχοῦ μετανοεῖν, καθότι ἔστησεν ἡμέραν ἐν ἣ ἔμελλει κρίνειν τὴν οἰκουμένην ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ). See also 2 Tim 2:25.

⁶⁰See, for example, Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, p. 340, “If ignorance of the divine nature was culpable before, it is inexcusable now. Let all people everywhere (the Athenian hearers included) repent therefore of their false conception of God...and embrace the true knowledge of his being now made available in the gospel.”

⁶¹“A change in emotional attitude is necessarily involved in genuine repentance.... Before there can be a hearty turning away from unrighteousness, there must be a consciousness of sin’s effect on humanity and its offensiveness to God.... But the type of grief that issues in repentance must be distinguished from that which simply plunges into remorse. There is a godly sorrow and a worldly sorrow: the former brings life, the latter death (cf. Mt. 27:3–5; Lk. 18:23; 2 Cor. 7:9f.)” (*ISBE*, s.v. “Repent,” 4:136).

⁶²2 Cor 7:10 (ἡ γὰρ κατὰ θεὸν λύπη μετάνοιαν εἰς σωτηρίαν ἀμεταμέλητον ἐργάζεται).

⁶³“Repentance is that change of a sinner’s mind that leads him or her to turn from evil ways and live” (*ISBE*, s.v. “Repent,” 4:136). As may be seen from the definition, genuine repentance involves “the entire personality, including the intellect, the emotions, and the will” (*Ibid.*).

⁶⁴The principal Greek words associated with faith in the New Testament are πιστεύω, πίστις, and πιστός.

⁶⁵This would be in contrast to the passive or objective sense of faith involving a body of truths which together comprise the content of what is to be believed. For example, Jude states in v. 3 “exhorting [you] to contend for the faith that has been once for all

and undivided trust⁶⁶ in God and, specifically, in His provision for salvation through the person and work of Christ.⁶⁷ For example, in John 3:16, John records that God sent His Son into the world so that humanity might not perish but, by believing on His Son, have eternal life. Similar to repentance, genuine faith has both an intellectual and a volitional dimension.⁶⁸ In terms of the intellectual, faith entails a knowledge of the facts contained in the gospel, a comprehension of the truths communicated about God and His provision of salvation in Christ.⁶⁹ As Paul declares in Romans 10:14, 17, “How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?... So then, faith *comes* from hearing and hearing by the word of Christ.”⁷⁰ Accordingly, a person believes based on the message heard, and the message heard specifically includes the revelation about Christ.

The volitional aspect of faith, on the other hand, involves the idea of reliance or trust. As such, faith represents a confidence in the truths of the gospel and a surrender or commitment to them and to their author

delivered to the saints.” Cf. *ISBE*, s.v. “Faith,” 2:270

⁶⁶*TDNT*, s.v. “πιστεύω κτλ.,” by R. Bultmann and A. Weiser, 6:203; *ISBE*, s.v. “Faith,” 2:270; *NBD*², s.v. “Faith,” by L. Morris, pp. 366–67. For example, Bromiley states, “The main sense of the word ‘faith’ in the NT is that of trust or reliance.”

⁶⁷Cf. *NBD*², s.v. “Faith,” pp. 366–67. Morris writes, “The stress on faith is to be seen against the background of the saving work of God in Christ. Central to the NT is the thought that God sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world.... It is the attitude of complete trust in Christ, of reliance on him alone for all that salvation means.”

⁶⁸*ISBE*, s.v. “Faith,” pp. 270–71; L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), pp. 503–06. Berkhof at the outset identifies faith as composed of three elements—knowledge (intellect), assent (emotion), trust (will); he concludes by combining knowledge and assent as constituents within the intellectual element (p. 505). See also Anthony A. Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 140–43.

⁶⁹*ISBE*, s.v. “Faith,” p. 271. Again, Bromiley states, “To have faith in a person is to believe certain things about this person, his nature, word, and work.... One cannot really trust in Jesus Christ without believing that He is the Messiah, the incarnate Son, the crucified and risen Savior. The words and works, the essential being of Jesus, are all part of His person.... True faith is confident attachment to the Jesus of the NT.”

⁷⁰Πῶς οὖν ἐπικαλέσονται εἰς ὃν οὐκ ἐπίστευσαν; πῶς δὲ πιστεύσωσιν οὐ οὐκ ἤκουσαν; πῶς δὲ ἀκούσωσιν χωρὶς κηρύσσοντος; ἄρα ἡ πίστις ἐξ ἀκοῆς, ἡ δὲ ἀκοὴ διὰ ῥήματος Χριστοῦ. Cf. *ISBE*, s.v. “Faith,” p. 271. Bromiley concludes, “The content of faith is given in and by the Word of God. The Word of God is, of course, Jesus Himself. But it is also the word written and the word preached.... It is by receiving and believing the words and works recorded in Holy Scripture and proclaimed by ministers of the gospel that Jesus Himself is received and believed.”

for salvation.⁷¹ Thus, the writer of Hebrews describes the message of salvation as “the elementary teachings about Christ.” In connection with these teachings, the writer contrasts a confidence or trust in works, which must be abandoned (“repentance from dead works”), with a confidence or trust in God, which must be embraced (“faith in God”).⁷² Scripture speaks of both repentance and faith as gifts from God.⁷³

On the level of their respective definitions, repentance and faith are complementary activities. Repentance is the turning from sin, while faith is the corresponding turning to God. As mentioned earlier, Paul describes the purpose or goal of the Lord’s sending him to the Gentiles in Acts 26:18 as “to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, in order that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.”⁷⁴ This “turning to God” Paul defines in the last part of the verse as faith, and the “turning from darkness” he defines in v. 20 as repentance (“...that they should repent and turn to God”).⁷⁵

An examination of how these terms are used in salvation contexts substantiates the inter-relationship between the two concepts. Scripture identifies repentance and faith not only individually, but also collectively as the sole prerequisites for salvation. Thus, in Acts, for example,

⁷¹*TDNT*, s.v. “πιστεύω κτλ.,” 6:210–12. Bultmann notes, “Faith accepts the existence of Christ and its significance for the believer. It rests on the message, but as faith in the message it is faith in the person whom the message mediates” (*TDNT*, one vol. ed., s.v. “πιστεύω κτλ.,” p. 854).

⁷²Heb 6:1 (Διὸ ἀφέντες τὸν τῆς ἀρχῆς τοῦ Χριστοῦ λόγον ἐπὶ τὴν τελειότητα φερώμεθα, μὴ πάλιν θεμέλιον καταβαλλόμενοι μετανοίας ἀπὸ νεκρῶν ἔργων καὶ πίστεως ἐπὶ θεόν.). A number of interpreters define the dead works here in terms of vices or sinful behavior, based on the use of the expression in 9:14 (cf. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, rev. ed., NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990], pp. 139–40). However, the Jewish background and orientation of Hebrews would argue that dead works refers to cultic observances, works of the Law. What is in view with the expression “repentance from dead works” is a turning away from confidence in such observances for salvation. Cf. Homer A. Kent, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), p. 106; William L. Lane, *Hebrews*, 2 vols., WBC (Dallas: Word, 1991), 1:140; and the discussion in Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), pp. 197–98.

⁷³For repentance as a gift, see Acts 5:31 (“This one God exalted...to grant repentance to Israel, and the forgiveness of sins.”) and Acts 11:18 (“Therefore to the Gentiles also God has granted the repentance *that leads to life*.”). For faith, see Phil 1:29 (“For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him...”).

⁷⁴ἀνοίξαι ὀφθαλμοὺς αὐτῶν, τοῦ ἐπιστρέφειν ἀπὸ σκοτῶν εἰς φῶς καὶ τῆς ἐξουσίας τοῦ Σατανᾶ ἐπὶ τὸν θεόν, τοῦ λαβεῖν αὐτοὺς ἀφесιν ἁμαρτιῶν καὶ κλήρον ἐν τοῖς ἡγιασμένοις πίστει τῇ εἰς ἐμὲ.

⁷⁵μετανοεῖν καὶ ἐπιστρέφειν ἐπὶ τὸν θεόν.

forgiveness of sins is linked with repentance in 3:19 and 5:31, with faith in 10:43, and with both repentance and faith in 26:18, 20. What must be concluded from this is that repentance and faith are fundamental corollaries; they are essentially two sides of the same coin.⁷⁶ Both must be exercised in order for someone to be saved.⁷⁷ When one appears without the other in a passage such as Acts 2:38, the other is to be understood as well.⁷⁸ Hence, Peter's command to repent in Acts 2:38 necessarily implies the command to believe the gospel, that is, to exercise saving faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The implications of all of this for the present discussion will be brought out in connection with the following point.

The Church and Acts 2

Taken at face value, the evidence from the New Testament points to Acts 2 as the beginning of the church.⁷⁹ The principal arguments in support of this are threefold. *First*, the church is defined in the New Testament as the body of Christ.⁸⁰ For example, Paul states in Ephesians 1:22–23^a, “And He [God] has placed all things under his [Christ's] feet and appointed him *to be* head over all things for the church, which is his

⁷⁶*IDB*, s.v. “Repentance,” by W. A. Quanbeck, 4:34; *TDNT*, s.v. “μετανοέω κτλ.,” by J. Behm, 4:1004; *NIDNTT*, s.v. “Conversion et al.,” by F. Laubach and J. Goetzmann, 1:355, 358; *ABD*, s.v. “Repentance,” 5:673.

⁷⁷*Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, s.v. “Repentance,” by P. Helm, 2:1837; *ABD*, s.v. “Repentance,” 5:673. Luter states, “Any conception of repenting not wedded to faith in the gospel falls short of the full biblical message.”

⁷⁸*ABD*, s.v. “Repentance,” 5:673. Luter describes the relationship in this way: “Parallel to the phenomena in the gospels, repentance in Acts may be complementary to faith (20:21) or include faith (17:30) and leads to forgiveness of sins (2:38; 5:31) and eternal life (11:18).”

⁷⁹See, for example, Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, pp. 38–54; Earl D. Radmacher, *The Nature of the Church* (Portland, OR: Western Baptist Press, 1972), pp. 193–220; Robert L. Saucy, *The Church in God's Program* (Chicago: Moody, 1972), pp. 57–68; Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1986), pp. 397–402; *Dispensationalism*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1995), pp. 123–44. On the various uses of ἐκκλησία in the NT, see, in addition to the above, *TDNT*, s.v. ἐκκλησία, by K. L. Schmidt, 3:502–13; *NIDNTT*, s.v. “Church, Synagogue,” by L. Coenen, 1:296–305.

⁸⁰Cf. *TDNT*, s.v. “σῶμα κτλ.,” by E. Schweizer, 7:1068–81; *NIDNTT*, s.v. “Body,” by S. Wibbing, 1:236–38; Radmacher, *The Nature of the Church*, pp. 222–40; Saucy, *The Church in God's Program*, pp. 24–32; Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), pp. 744–46. The body imagery is one of several employed in the NT to describe the church. In addition to the above, see Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960).

body.”⁸¹ The same thought is found in Colossians 1:18^a, “And he [Christ] is the head of the body, the church.”⁸² Both the larger and the more immediate contexts of these passages indicate that the term “body” is used metaphorically⁸³ and refers to believers in a collective or corporate sense as those who have responded to the gospel and have experienced salvation.⁸⁴ Thus, Paul says of the Corinthian believers, “Now you are Christ’s body, and individually members *of it*.”⁸⁵

Second, this body is formed or brought into existence in connection with the baptism of the Holy Spirit.⁸⁶ Again, the apostle Paul writes, “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body...” (1 Cor 12:12–13^a).⁸⁷ Paul draws an analogy in verse 12 between the human

⁸¹καὶ πάντα ὑπέταξεν ὑπὸ τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ καὶ αὐτὸν ἔδωκεν κεφαλὴν ὑπὲρ πάντα τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ, ἣτις ἐστὶν τὸ σῶμα αὐτοῦ.

⁸²καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ σώματος τῆς ἐκκλησίας·

⁸³Cf. Edmund P. Clowney, “Interpreting the Biblical Models of the Church: A Hermeneutical Deepening of Ecclesiology,” in *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: Text and Context*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), pp. 64–109; Robert H. Gundry, *Sōma in Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), pp. 223–44;

⁸⁴As with the use of “church” in the NT, interpreters generally recognize that the expression “body of Christ” when referring to believers can be used in both a local sense of a specific congregation (e.g., 1 Cor 12:27) as well as in a universal sense of the sum total of believers in the present era (e.g., Eph 1:22–23). In addition to the resources previously cited above in n. 80, see Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), pp. 1047–49.

⁸⁵1 Cor 12:27 (Ἵμεῖς δέ ἐστε σῶμα Χριστοῦ καὶ μέλη ἐκ μέρους). The term “body” (σῶμα) in this verse is anarthrous and there have been various attempts at capturing the precise nuance of the construction. See Robert L. Thomas, *Understanding Spiritual Gifts: A Verse by Verse Study of 1 Corinthians 12–14*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), pp. 232–33. The issue does not affect the present argument.

⁸⁶Cf. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, pp. 49–52; 127–131; Radmacher, *The Nature of the Church*, pp. 210–11; Saucy, *The Church in God’s Program*, pp. 64–66. On the meaning of Spirit baptism as a metaphor and its comparison and contrast to the literal sense when used of water baptism, see the discussion in Dunn, *Baptism*, pp. 127–31. Dunn defines the metaphor as “the spiritual transformation which puts the believer ‘in Christ,’ and which is the effect of receiving the gift of the Spirit...” (p. 130).

⁸⁷Καθάπερ γὰρ τὸ σῶμα ἓν ἐστὶν καὶ μέλη πολλὰ ἔχει, πάντα δὲ τὰ μέλη τοῦ σώματος πολλὰ ὄντα ἓν ἐστὶν σῶμα, οὕτως καὶ ὁ Χριστός· καὶ γὰρ ἐν ἐνὶ πνεύματι ἡμεῖς πάντες εἰς ἓν σῶμα ἐβαπτίσθημεν. For a discussion of the interpretive issues in these two verses, see D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), pp. 42–48; Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 600–06; Thomas, *Understanding Spiritual Gifts*, pp. 40–46; 224–30. The interpretation of v. 13 is particularly debated. As Carson notes, “Almost every word and

body and the body of Christ to underscore the twin themes of unity and diversity within the body of Christ.⁸⁸ He then supports the idea of unity in verse 13 by stating how the Corinthian believers had all been placed into one body through the baptism of the one Spirit.⁸⁹ Regardless of the precise nuance of the phrase “by one Spirit,”⁹⁰ Spirit baptism is clearly in view.⁹¹ Paul declares that it was through this baptism that the Corinthian believers had been made or formed into one body,⁹² a body Paul specifically identifies as the body of Christ.⁹³ Thus, it is through Spirit

syntactical unit in this verse is disputed” (p. 43).

⁸⁸Technically, the verse draws the analogy between the human body and Christ. However, Christ is used in the verse as a metonymy for the body of Christ, as the following verses make clear. Cf. Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), p. 429; Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 603. For a discussion of the views, see Thomas, *Understanding Spiritual Gifts*, pp. 224–25.

⁸⁹On the development of Paul’s argument in these verses, see Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, pp. 600–01. Paul uses the first person plural in verse 13, which could suggest he has the experience of all believers in view. In this case, the reference to Christ’s body would carry its universal sense. Cf. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 430. However, Paul’s statement in v. 27 describing specifically the Corinthians as the body of Christ suggests that Paul may have had the local sense in mind. Cf. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 617, n 5.

⁹⁰The preposition (ἐν) in this phrase has been translated as instrumental (“with”), agency (“by”), and locative (“in”). For a survey of the syntax, see *TDNT*, s.v. “βαπτίζω κτλ.,” by A. Oepke, 1:539–40; and for a discussion of the various approaches see Thomas, *Understanding Spiritual Gifts*, pp. 43–44; 227–28. The argument here does not rest on the precise sense of the preposition.

⁹¹Several interpreters see both Spirit and water baptism in this verse, based on the use of the word *baptize* and the association of water and Spirit baptism elsewhere. See, for example, Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, pp. 167–71. For a convincing rebuttal in defense of a singular reference to Spirit baptism, see Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, pp. 129–31.

⁹²The prepositional phrase “into/unto (εἰς) one body” could be given a local sense, in which case it would describe the Corinthian believers being placed into something that already existed. This would fit well with the universal sense of the body of Christ. However, the phrase could also identify the goal, in which case it would indicate that through this baptism something was brought into existence. If this were the sense, the local body of Christ would be in view. See the discussion in Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 606. Fee concludes, “In the present case the idea of ‘goal’ seems more prominent. That is, the purpose of our common experience of the Spirit is that we be formed into one body. Hence, ‘we all were immersed in the one Spirit, so as to become one body.’”

⁹³Cf. 1 Cor 12:27. A number of interpreters have attempted to divorce Spirit baptism in this verse from conversion, Spirit baptism being a later experience of some, but not all, believers. However, that position has now been generally abandoned. As Carson notes, “the main point is now largely conceded: that the Spirit baptism in v. 13^a is to be

baptism that the church as the body of Christ is formed.

Third, the baptism of the Holy Spirit had its inception in the events recorded in Acts 2.⁹⁴ Although the expression “baptism of the Spirit” is not found in Acts 2, the evidence nevertheless supports this conclusion. References to the baptism of the Holy Spirit occur on several occasions in the gospels. On each occasion, Spirit baptism is described as a future event. Mark, for example, records the words of John the Baptist, “I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Mark 1:8).⁹⁵ In Acts 1:4–5, the Lord reaffirms John’s promise when He tells his disciples on the eve of his ascension “not to leave Jerusalem but to wait for the promise of the Father which you have heard about from me, for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”⁹⁶ From the Lord’s statement it is evident that the baptism of the Spirit was still future, and, at the same time, something that was soon to take place.⁹⁷

The next reference in Acts to this baptism is found in Acts 11:15–16. Reporting on the conversion of Cornelius, Peter states, “And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as *He had* upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the words of the Lord, how He used to say, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’”⁹⁸ Peter’s words indicate that the baptism of the Spirit had

linked with conversion” (*Showing the Spirit*, p. 45, n. 88).

⁹⁴Cf. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, pp. 38–54; Radmacher, *The Nature of the Church*, pp. 210–12; Saucy, *The Church in God’s Program*, pp. 64–66; Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, pp. 399–402; *Dispensationalism*, pp. 125–27; and the discussions in *TDNT*, s.v. “πνεῦμα κτλ.,” by E. Schweizer, 6:409–13; *NIDNTT*, s.v. “Spirit, Holy Spirit,” by J. D. G. Dunn, 3:698–701.

⁹⁵ἐγὼ ἐβάπτισα ὑμᾶς ὕδατι, αὐτὸς δὲ βαπτίσει ὑμᾶς ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ. The other references in the gospels are Matt 3:11, Luke 3:16, and John 1:33. Although John’s reference does not include the future tense, it parallels the other accounts where the future tense is employed and therefore it may be assumed the sense is the same. Carson, for example, translates the present participial clause, “The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit” (*The Gospel According to John* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991], p. 151).

⁹⁶ἀπὸ Ἱεροσολύμων μὴ χωρίζεσθαι ἀλλὰ περιμένειν τὴν ἐπαγγελίαν τοῦ πατρὸς ἣν ἠκούσατέ μου, ὅτι Ἰωάννης μὲν ἐβάπτισεν ὕδατι, ὑμεῖς δὲ ἐν πνεύματι βαπτισθήσεσθε ἁγίῳ οὐ μετὰ πολλὰς ταύτας ἡμέρας.

⁹⁷See, for example, Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, p. 35, “The time was now drawing very near, said Jesus, when these words of John would be fulfilled: ‘you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit in a few days’ time.”

⁹⁸ἐν δὲ τῷ ἄρξασθαι με λαλεῖν ἐπέπεσεν τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον ἐπ’ αὐτοὺς ὥσπερ καὶ ἐφ’ ἡμᾶς ἐν ἀρχῇ. ἐμνήσθη δὲ τοῦ ῥήματος τοῦ κυρίου ὡς ἔλεγεν, Ἰωάννης μὲν ἐβάπτισεν ὕδατι, ὑμεῖς δὲ βαπτισθήσεσθε ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ.

taken place with the outpouring of the Spirit on Cornelius, and that Peter and the other disciples had experienced this same baptism “at the beginning.”⁹⁹ This expression, “at the beginning,” must be a reference to Acts 2 and the dramatic outpouring of the Spirit recorded there,¹⁰⁰ especially in light of the Lord’s statement in Acts 1:5 about the nearness of Spirit baptism.¹⁰¹ The conclusion from the above arguments is that the church, as the body of Christ, formed by the baptism of the Holy Spirit, began in Acts 2.¹⁰²

The evidence from this and from the previous discussion on the relationship between repentance and faith seriously undermines the second interpretation. Ultra-dispensationalists limit the application of the verse to those living in the period prior to the start of the church. Prior to the start of the church, these argue, both faith and water baptism were required for salvation. Once the church began, salvation was by faith alone. The evidence above has shown that the church did in fact begin in Acts 2. Whatever Acts 2:38 is saying, it is speaking to those who were placed in the body of Christ. That being the case, salvation for those in Acts 2 cannot be conditioned by faith alone and, at the same time, by faith plus water baptism.

Those dispensationalists holding to the second interpretation limit the application of Acts 2:38 to Jews guilty of the crucifixion of the Lord. Advocates argue that these Jews were saved, that is, were justified on the basis of faith alone. Forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Spirit, on the other hand, were conditioned for these Jews by repentance and water baptism. All others, they purport, receive the collective benefits of salvation on the sole condition of faith. However, the discussion above on repentance and faith has shown that these are integrally connected and that both must be exercised for salvation. Any interpretation of Acts 2:38 that endeavors to divide repentance and faith or to make salvation conditioned by something other than repentance and faith is in conflict with the biblical evidence.

Baptism as a Parenthetical Remark, Not Directly Related to Salvation

The third interpretation takes the command “be baptized” as a

⁹⁹ἐν ἀρχῇ. Cf. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, pp. 222–23.

¹⁰⁰Cf. Acts 2:33.

¹⁰¹Cf. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 197–98.

¹⁰²Dunn states, “We can therefore say that Pentecost is the beginning of the Church and the coming into existence of the Church as the Body of Christ. And this is the work of the Spirit” (*Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, p. 51).

parenthesis and links the phrase “for the forgiveness of sins” with the first command “repent.” Support for this, proponents aver, is that the command to repent is plural whereas the command to be baptized is singular. The phrase “for the forgiveness of your sins” contains the plural pronoun “your,”¹⁰³ thus associating the phrase with the plural “repent” and not with the singular “be baptized.” The resultant translation is, “Repent (and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ) for the forgiveness of your sins.” In this case, forgiveness is understood as the goal or outcome of the command “repent.” The chief obstacle with this view is its understanding of the syntax between the command to be baptized and the prepositional phrase “for the forgiveness of sins.”

Without question, the command “repent” is plural, the command “be baptized” is singular, and the personal pronoun in the prepositional phrase “for the forgiveness of your sins” is plural. However, to argue from this that the prepositional phrase itself cannot modify the second command fails to consider the pronoun modifying the subject of the second command. Following the command to repent, Peter says, “and let each one of you be baptized.” Peter switches from the plural “repent” to the singular “let each be baptized” to stress individual participation in the second command.¹⁰⁴ At the same time, Peter modifies the subject of the second command “each” with the plural pronoun “of you.”¹⁰⁵ In other words, although the expressed subject of the second command is singular, Peter still has the plural subjects in view with the second command, as shown by his use of the plural pronominal modifier.¹⁰⁶

In addition, the closest antecedent to the plural pronoun in the prepositional phrase is not the plural subject implied in the first command, but the plural pronoun modifying the subject of the second command. It is “let each of *you* be baptized...for the forgiveness of *your* sins.”¹⁰⁷ None of this necessarily rules out having the prepositional

¹⁰³A few witnesses omit the pronoun ὑμῶν after ἁμαρτιῶν, apparently to harmonize the phrase with the shorter form found elsewhere in the NT (Matt 26:28; Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3; 24:47). The evidence decidedly favors the longer reading. Cf. James H. Ropes, *The Beginnings of Christianity*, Part 1: *The Acts of the Apostles*, 5 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1926), 3:22; Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), pp. 261–62.

¹⁰⁴Cf. Longenecker, “Acts,” p. 283; Carroll D. Osburn, “The Third Person Imperative in Acts 2:38,” *ResQ* 26 (1983): 83–84.

¹⁰⁵καὶ βαπτισθήτω ἕκαστος ὑμῶν.

¹⁰⁶See C. K. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostle*, 2 vols., ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994–), 1:153–54; and the discussion in Ashby L. Camp, “Reexamining the Rule of Concord in Acts 2:38,” *ResQ* 39 (1997): 37–42.

¹⁰⁷It is surprising that proponents who take the second command as a parenthesis, based in large part on the force of the plural pronoun (ὑμῶν) modifying “sins,” fail to

phrase modify both commands. It does appear to rule out excluding the second command as being modified by the prepositional phrase. Having said that, the close connection between the pronouns “each *of you*” and “for the forgiveness of *your* sins” weighs in favor of taking the prepositional phrase specifically with the second command, rather than with both commands.

Baptism as a Sign of Conversion-Initiation, the Evidence of Genuine Repentance

The fourth interpretation, referred to as conversion-initiation, takes the prepositional phrase “for the forgiveness of sins” as indicating purpose and as modifying both commands “repent” and “be baptized.” The focus with the second command, “be baptized,” is not on the rite itself, but on the rite as an expression of genuine repentance. Repentance is the efficacious element, proponents argue; the rite is simply the vehicle wherein true repentance is expressed. By making repentance the effective element in the forgiveness of sins, advocates endeavor to harmonize their interpretation of Acts 2:38 with other passages where forgiveness is addressed and the rite is not mentioned. Dunn, for example, states,

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).¹⁰⁸

The challenge with this approach is in its understanding of the second command and its relationship to the phrase “for the forgiveness of sins.”

While there is much to commend this interpretation of Acts 2:38, adherents are confronted with a dilemma. To begin with, the interpretation appears to link too closely water baptism and the forgiveness of sins. If the prepositional phrase, “for the forgiveness of sins,” indicates the purpose or goal of both commands, and if the second command involves the rite of water baptism, there is a sense in which forgiveness is conditioned by the rite. Again, Dunn argues,

In Acts faith and baptism are normally closely linked (2:38, 41; 8:12f.; 8:37 (D); 16:14f., 31–33; 18:8). In the case of the Ephesians the sequence

note the identical plural pronoun (ὅμῶν) modifying the subject of the second command. See, for example, McIntyre, “Baptism and Forgiveness in Acts 2:38,” pp. 54–59.

¹⁰⁸Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, p. 97.

of Paul's questions indicates the πιστεῦσαι and βαπτισθῆναι are interchangeable ways of describing the act of faith: baptism was the *necessary* expression of commitment, without which they could not be said to have truly 'believed.'¹⁰⁹

The problem with linking repentance and water baptism too closely and, in effect, with making the rite necessary for forgiveness is that this interpretation faces the same liabilities as the first interpretation. Salvation involving the forgiveness of sins is now conditioned by both faith (repentance and faith) and water baptism and is no longer by faith alone.¹¹⁰

Proponents have sensed something of the tension with their understanding of Acts 2:38 and have taken pains to qualify their interpretation to avoid the problem. Dunn is quick to add,

It is false to say that water-baptism conveys, confers or effects forgiveness of sins. It may symbolize cleansing, but it is the faith and repentance which receives the forgiveness, and the Holy Spirit who conveys, confers and effects it.... In other words, water-baptism is neither the sole preliminary nor in itself an essential preliminary to receiving forgiveness.¹¹¹

By stating that water baptism is not "in itself an essential preliminary to receiving forgiveness," Dunn appears to have driven a wedge between the two, between water baptism and forgiveness.¹¹² In other words, Dunn is saying that forgiveness can be and, in fact, has been received by faith apart from the rite. Earlier in this same discussion, Dunn acknowledges, "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."¹¹³

But once Dunn makes that concession, then in what sense can he

¹⁰⁹Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, p. 96 (emphasis added). Dunn is using faith here as the corollary to repentance.

¹¹⁰Tanton, for example, states "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?" (Tanton, "The Gospel and Water Baptism," pp. 44–45).

¹¹¹Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, p. 97.

¹¹²By the expression "in itself," Dunn means "apart from faith." However, the point still stands. To say that water-baptism "in itself" is not an essential preliminary to forgiveness implies that forgiveness could be gained apart from the rite, a point Dunn has already acknowledged in his discussion of conversion-initiation in Acts (*Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, p. 97).

¹¹³Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, p. 97.

say that Peter's two commands are conditions for the forgiveness of sins? Either water baptism is the necessary expression of saving faith, apart from which forgiveness is not received, or water baptism is not necessary. But if it is not essential, as Dunn's quote above indicates, then how does the expression "for the forgiveness of sins" represent the purpose or goal of both "repent" and "be baptized?" Although Acts 2:38 is reportedly the norm for conversion-initiation in Acts, supporters like Dunn have recognized the numerous exceptions to the norm.¹¹⁴ Once exceptions are allowed, then this interpretation of Peter's exhortation appears to be countermanded.

Baptism as a Consequence of Salvation, Not a Condition for Salvation

The fifth and final interpretation restricts the prepositional phrase "for the forgiveness of sins" to the second command "be baptized" and interprets the prepositional phrase as identifying the cause or basis for the second command. The resultant translation is "repent, and [following that] let each one of you be baptized...on the basis of the forgiveness of your sins." In other words, Peter says that those who have responded to his message and have repented are to be baptized because, having repented, their sins are [already] forgiven. Basically two objections have been levied against this interpretation. The first is that there is limited support for the causal use of this preposition, and the support that has been offered has been strongly contested.¹¹⁵ The second is that in the other four uses of the prepositional phrase "for the forgiveness of sins" in the New Testament, the preposition appears to have a telic force.¹¹⁶ Undoubtedly, the critical issue with this interpretation is the use of the preposition.

While recognizing that a number of interpreters discount the causal use of the preposition altogether, there are at least two passages in the

¹¹⁴It seems somewhat strange that Dunn and others holding to this interpretation identify Acts 2:38 as the norm for conversion-initiation when, as Dunn notes, "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 Spirit—repentance and faith being the opposite sides of the same coin" (*Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, p. 91). The fact that this is the only verse that relates these three items and that there are a number of passages where one of the items—water baptism—is not a factor in the equation seems to raise questions as to the normative nature of this verse.

¹¹⁵See, for example, J. W. Roberts, "Baptism for Remission of Sins—A Critique," *ResQ* 1(1957): 226–34; and J. C. Davis, "Another Look at the Relationship Between Baptism and Forgiveness," *ResQ* 24 (1984): 80–88.

¹¹⁶Cf. Davis, "Another Look at the Relationship Between Baptism and Forgiveness," pp. 80–81. The other four uses are Matt 26:28; Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3; 24:47.

New Testament that appear to support it. The first is Matthew 12:41. In this verse, Matthew writes, “The men of Nineveh will stand up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at (ἐἰς) the preaching of Jonah, and behold, one greater than Jonah is here.”¹¹⁷ The key to the interpretation of the preposition in this verse is to identify the precise relationship between the two expressions the preposition connects, that is, between repentance and the preaching of Jonah. In order to make this identification, two questions need to be asked and answered.

The first question is, Is there a temporal sequence between the preaching of Jonah and the repentance of the Ninevites? The answer to the first question is clearly yes. According to the historical record, Jonah preached, and, following this, the Ninevites repented.¹¹⁸ The second question is, Is there, in addition, a logical relationship between these two activities? Again, the answer to this question is also clearly yes. The repentance of the Ninevites was in response to or based on Jonah’s preaching. According to Jonah 3:9, the king’s call for national repentance was in the hope that God would relent of the impending judgment that Jonah had proclaimed. Thus, the nation’s repentance was in direct response to Jonah’s message.

The issue ultimately is not whether there are other ways this prepositional phrase in Matthew 12:41 could be rendered. Undoubtedly there are. The issue centers on what is the most probable relationship suggested by the immediate and larger contexts of the phrase. If the meaning of a word is based on its use in a given context, the evidence strongly supports that the relationship between Jonah’s preaching and the Ninevites’ repentance is that they repented “in response to” the preaching of Jonah.¹¹⁹ By any other name, this is what is meant by the causal use of the preposition.

The second verse in the New Testament supporting the causal use of the preposition is Matthew 3:11. In this verse, Matthew records a statement by John the Baptist where John contrasts his baptism with that of the Lord’s. Describing his own baptism, John declares, “I indeed baptize

¹¹⁷ἄνδρες Νινευῖται ἀναστήσονται ἐν τῇ κρίσει μετὰ τῆς γενεᾶς ταύτης καὶ κατακρινοῦσιν αὐτήν, ὅτι μετενόησαν εἰς τὸ κήρυγμα Ἰωνᾶ, καὶ ἰδοὺ πλεῖον Ἰωνᾶ ὧδε. Translating the prepositional phrase as “at the preaching of Noah” follows the rendering of several modern translations. Cf. AMPLIFIED, NASB, NAS⁹⁵, NEB, REB, NIV, NKJV, NLB, RSV, NRSV.

¹¹⁸See the sequence of *waw consecutives* in Jonah 3:4–5: “And Jonah cried out and proclaimed...and the men of Nineveh believed....”

¹¹⁹See, for example, D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 12 vols., ed. F. E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 8:297.

you with water for (εἰς) repentance....”¹²⁰ John’s declaration is significant for the present discussion in that both here and in Acts 2:38 the verb “baptize” is used and, in both, the verb is modified by the same preposition (εἰς). As with Matthew 12:41, the question that needs to be considered is What is the relationship between the two activities connected by the preposition, between John’s baptism and repentance? From Matthew 3:7–8, it is apparent that John demanded repentance as a prerequisite for his baptism. When the Pharisees and Sadducees came to John to be baptized by him, he rebuked their hypocrisy and demanded that they “bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance.”¹²¹ It may be concluded from this that one could not undergo John’s baptism without first showing evidence of repentance. Thus, a baptism “for repentance” meant a baptism that was based on repentance.¹²² Again, by any other name, this is what is meant by the causal use of the preposition.

Having addressed the major objection to this interpretation, the second objection needs to be discussed. The second objection is that in the four other New Testament uses of the prepositional phrase “for the forgiveness of sins,” the preposition appears to have a telic force, indicating purpose or goal. In response, it should be noted that in two of the uses, Matthew 28:26 and Luke 24:47, water baptism is not mentioned. While a telic force of the preposition may be granted in these two verses, the lack of correspondence with the construction in Acts 2:38 lessens the significance of these verses for the interpretation of Acts 2:38. Of the remaining two uses, Mark 1:4 and Luke 3:3, water baptism is mentioned. In these, the text reads “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”¹²³ As such, there is correspondence between these verses and the construction in Acts 2:38.

Having said that, the interpreter is faced with the same options for the prepositional phrase in these verses as in Acts 2:38. Is the preposition in these two verses telic or causal? From the discussion above on

¹²⁰ἐγὼ μὲν ὑμᾶς βαπτίζω ἐν ὕδατι εἰς μετάνοιαν.

¹²¹πολιήσατε οὖν καρπὸν ἄξιον τῆς μετανοίας.

¹²²See, for example, Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 326. Interestingly enough, there is extra-biblical corroboration for this interpretation of Matt 3:11. Josephus writes concerning those coming to John for baptism, “They must not employ it [baptism] to gain pardon for whatever sins they committed, but as a consecration of the body implying that the soul was already thoroughly cleansed by right behaviour” (*Antiquities*, XVIII, 117). Cf. Louis H. Feldman, trans., *Josephus*, 10 vols., in The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 9:80–83.

¹²³βάπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν. The construction is identical in both passages.

Matthew 3:11, it could be argued that the preposition in these two passages has a causal force, not a telic force. In fact, the construction in Mark 1:4 and Luke 3:3 is somewhat parallel with the construction in Matthew 3:11. All three are describing John's baptism. In Mark 1:4 and Luke 3:3, it is called a baptism "for the forgiveness of sins."¹²⁴ In Matthew 3:11, it is referred to as a baptism "for repentance." The conclusion drawn above with Matthew 3:11 was that a baptism "for repentance" meant a baptism based on repentance. The same could be argued for these other two passages. In other words, a baptism "for the forgiveness of sins" could mean a baptism based on the forgiveness of sins.

CONCLUSION

Scripture unequivocally presents salvation as an unmerited gift, received by faith alone, apart from works. This being true, any of the last three views on the interpretation of Acts 2:38 are viable candidates. Viewing the command for baptism as a parenthesis, taking the verse as describing Christian conversion-initiation, or interpreting the preposition as causal all roughly support the gracious nature of salvation. Having said that, the last view is preferred. The causal use of the preposition, although certainly not common in the New Testament, is supported from Matthew 12:41 and Matthew 3:11. The latter of these two verses places the causal use of the preposition within the context of water baptism, the same construction as found in Acts 2:38. In addition, the same plural pronoun found with both the command to be baptized and the prepositional phrase "for the forgiveness of sins" in Acts 2:38 closely links this command with the prepositional phrase. In fact, with the repetition of the identical pronoun, the prepositional phrase is best taken specifically with the second command. The last interpretation, involving the causal use of the preposition, alone holds to this relationship of the prepositional phrase.

While none of the interpretations is free of questions, the last poses the least number of problems and is deemed the superior alternative. Peter's first command is to repent; implied in the command is the exercise of faith. His second command, the command to be baptized, is best taken as the response of those whose sins are forgiven rather than as a condition for forgiveness. While water baptism is important as a step of obedience and as a public affirmation of saving faith, faith alone saves. Peter's words, when properly interpreted, do not argue to the contrary.

¹²⁴The prepositional phrase "for the forgiveness of sins" modifies "baptism" and not the intervening genitive "of repentance." See, for example, the discussion in Robert A. Guelich, *Mark*, 2 vols. (in progress), WBC (Dallas: Word Books, 1989–), 1:18–20.