

REPENT AND BE BAPTIZED
ACTS 2:37-41

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

I grew up in a Methodist church, and my parents tended to be critical of the Baptists in the small town in which I was raised. So in my formative years the term “Baptist” had a somewhat negative connotation for me. Perhaps it was partly due to the Lord’s sense of humor that I ended up as a pastor in a Baptist church.

The understanding of what it means to be a Baptist has expanded over the years to the point today that we can find a considerable diversity of theological viewpoints among churches that call themselves “Baptist.” One viewpoint that has remained consistent among Baptist churches is the practice of baptism by immersion for believers who have made a profession of faith.

This practice in church history is traced back to a group called “the Anabaptists.” In the early 1500s Martin Luther in Germany began to notice in his study of the Bible that the Scriptures teach that what makes a person a Christian is faith in Christ alone. That conviction was one of the factors that led to his break from the church.

Others who accepted Luther’s ideas about faith and grace and the priority of the Scriptures studied the Bible some more and came to the conviction that Christians should be baptized only after they have individually placed their trust in Christ. The practice of the church generally before that time had been to baptize infants. So these Christians, who had been baptized in the church as infants, were baptized again as adults. This time they were immersed in water. The three letters a-n-a, ana, mean “again” in Greek. Thus these Christians acquired the label “Anabaptists,” or “the baptized-again Christians.”

This view of baptism did not go over well with the established Catholic Church and even with many of the followers of Martin Luther and the other Reformers. In the 1500s it is estimated that about four or five thousand people were executed for the crime of being baptized again. (PROJECTOR ON--- HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE) What we know today as the Netherlands and Belgium were part of the Holy Roman Empire. Persecution of Anabaptists was especially severe in this area.

In 1573 a young couple in Antwerp was arrested and thrown into jail after being baptized again. The husband was quickly executed. The wife, whose name was Maeyken Wens, was pregnant. She was allowed to live long enough to give birth to a baby girl. A few days later she was also executed. Before she was killed, the mother wrote this brief note for her daughter to read when she was old enough to understand:

“My dearest child, the true love of God strengthen you in virtue, you are yet so young, and whom I must leave in this wicked, evil, perverse world. Oh, that it had pleased the world that I might have brought you up, but, it seems that it is not the Lord’s will. Be not ashamed of us; it is the way which the prophets and the apostles went. Your dear father demonstrated with his blood that it is the genuine faith, and I also hope to attest the same with my blood, though flesh and blood must remain on the posts and on the stake, well knowing that we shall meet hereafter.” (PROJECTOR OFF)

I am glad that we live in a time and place where there is religious tolerance. The good thing about that earlier time is that people took spiritual doctrines seriously. Some were willing to die for their spiritual convictions. The Christians of the first century also took their doctrines seriously. Today we are going to look at the first Christian baptism and consider what the New Testament tells us about water baptism.

In our study of the Book of Acts thus far we have seen that Luke, who also wrote the gospel that bears his name, wrote a first century account of the early history of the church. He sought to show how Jesus Christ continued His work through the Holy Spirit, who empowered the first disciples to bring the gospel to the ends of the Roman Empire. We have seen how Jesus fulfilled his promise by sending His Holy Spirit to the disciples who were gathered in Jerusalem.

On the Day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit came upon them in a visible and audible way. Other Jews came to see what had happened, and they witnessed these uneducated fishermen from Galilee speaking in the various languages of the Roman Empire. They demanded an explanation. Peter stepped forward and argued from the Hebrew Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah, and that He was the One who had sent the Holy Spirit. In v. 36 of #2 he finished his sermon by declaring, **“Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”**

I.

So in our passage today we find the response to Peter’s sermon. In v. 37 our passage deals with THE RECOGNITION OF A SPIRITUAL NEED. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE RECOGNITION OF A SPIRITUAL NEED) Verse 37 says, **“Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart...”** That is a good, literal translation. Many of these Jews accepted Peter’s personal testimony and his argument from the Bible that Jesus was the Messiah and that they bore responsibility for His death.

Some of these listeners may have been part of the crowd that stood in front of Pilate’s residence on Good Friday morning and that shouted for the governor to release Barabbas and crucify Jesus. Others of these Jews bore responsibility for the death of Jesus in that they had seen His miracles and/or they had heard Him preach in the temple, but they had rejected Him as the Messiah.

Why would they believe Peter now when they would not believe Jesus Himself? They had just witnessed this language miracle, but Jesus had also performed miracles. Was Peter a better speaker than Jesus? I doubt that very much.

The difference was the Holy Spirit. (JOHN 16:7) In John #16 v. 7 Jesus told His disciples, **“Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. (JOHN 16:8) And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment...”** The Helper is the Holy Spirit. He has shown up in dramatic fashion. He is evidently at work in convicting people of their sin.

According to v. 37 someone in the crowd shouts, **“Brothers, what shall we do?”** One of the interesting things about this response is that Luke recorded a similar response from a Jewish audience in his gospel. Luke #3 tells about how John the Baptist was preaching a baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins. Crowds showed up to hear and see him. In v. 7 he calls them a “brood of vipers.” Some of them were apparently convicted of their sinful ways. (LUKE 3:10) In v. 10 we read, **“And the crowds asked him, ‘What then shall we do?’”**

In our story the Holy Spirit is at work in a mighty way. When that is the case, people do not have to be manipulated. You don’t need to play ten verses of “Just As I Am.” If the message of the gospel has been presented and the Holy Spirit is at work, people will be convicted that they are sinners. They will want to know what they should do. They will ask questions. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The challenge which we face in our world is that people do not buy the notion that they are sinners in desperate need of a Savior. A Barna survey released just this week found that a representative survey of American adults found that 69% of people believe that they are basically good. If people are basically good, they don’t need a radical transformation. They don’t need a Savior.

Shortly before his death Roman Catholic archbishop Fulton Sheen was interviewed by *Christianity Today* magazine. (6/3/1977) He argued, **“The modern world does not believe in sin.... The ministers and priests [have] stopped talking about sin. The lawyers picked it up and it became a ‘crime.’ The psychiatrists reached for it and it became a ‘complex.’ It used to be that we Catholics were the only ones in the world who believed in the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary. Today every American believes he is immaculately conceived. [If he does something wrong] he is not a sinner; he is [just] sick.”**

The Bible says that we human beings are sinners by nature and by choice. It says that we are accountable to the holy God who created us. Our greatest sin is to reject Jesus, who was God who became human to pay the penalty for our sins.

II.

(PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE SOLUTION TO A ...) In vv. 38-40 we come to THE SOLUTION TO A SPIRITUAL NEED. Peter calls upon his audience to do a couple of things. In v. 38 he says, **“Repent and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins...”**

A.

So the first thing needed is REPENTANCE. (II. THE SOLUTION... A. REPENTANCE) Forgiveness of sins and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, whose power the Jewish audience has just witnessed, requires repentance.

Our English word “repent” comes from a Latin word that means “to be sorry.” That meaning does not adequately describe the Greek word that is used in the original text of Acts. The word here is *metanoieo*, which literally means “a change of mind.” Here Peter is talking about a change of mind in regard to Jesus.

Both John the Baptist and Jesus had preached a message to the Jews that they should repent, for the kingdom of God was at hand. The repentance there meant a turning from sin to God. In our passage Peter is talking about a change of mind about Jesus. He is talking about a need to turn from rejection of Jesus as the Messiah to faith in Jesus as the Messiah. Peter is calling for his listeners to accept his message about the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. He has accused his audience of bearing responsibility for His death. So what is needed is a spiritual about-face, a change of mind. They need to turn in faith to Jesus. That is the responsibility that each of us has as well. The result of this faith commitment is forgiveness of sins and reception of the Holy Spirit.

B.

The second command that Peter gives the audience in v. 38 has to do with BAPTISM. (II. THE SOLUTION... A. B. BAPTISM) He says, **“Be baptized.”** The Greek word that Peter used means literally “to dip, or immerse.” So there is in the meaning of the word itself an indication that the method of baptism in the early church was immersion. There were other Greek words available that would have been used to describe pouring or sprinkling if either of these methods had been the mode of baptism intended by Peter and Jesus and John.

Baptism was not a strange concept to the Jews. (MIKVAH) When a Gentile in the first century decided to convert to Judaism, one of the things that he or she had to do was to be baptized by immersion in a ritual bath called a mikvah. These mikvahs were used for other kinds of ritual cleansings.

The Old Testament law required these cleansings in a variety of situations. For example (LEVITICUS 22:4B), in Leviticus #22 beginning in v. 4 Jews were told this: **“... Whoever touches anything that is unclean through contact with the dead or a man who has had an emission of semen, (LEVITICUS 22:5) and whoever touches a swarming thing by which he may be made unclean or a person from whom he may take uncleanness, whatever his uncleanness may be— (LEVITICUS 22:6) the person**

who touches such a thing shall be unclean until the evening and shall not eat of the holy things unless he has bathed his body in water.”

Archaeologists have discovered these mikvahs used for cleansings throughout the Holy Land and in Europe where Jewish people lived. Usually they have been found near synagogues. Scores of them have been found near the site of the temple in Jerusalem. More modern tubs are used by Orthodox Jews today for these required cleansings.

John the Baptist also baptized his followers. (PROJECTOR OFF) He performed his baptisms in the Jordan River or its tributaries. His baptism was associated with repentance for sins. The baptism that Jesus and His disciples practiced before the crucifixion had a similar association.

So the command to be baptized issued by Peter was not strange or totally foreign to his Jewish audience. The new thing was that this baptism was to be done in the name of Jesus. This act was to be a public identification with Jesus. It was to indicate a belief in the message of the gospel. It was to indicate a belief in the Messiahship of Jesus. It would also have the effect of signifying a break with traditional Judaism, and it would mean a rejection by the current Jewish leadership.

C.

We need to consider next THE RELATIONSHIP OF BAPTISM TO SALVATION. (II. A. B. C. THE RELATIONSHIP OF BAPTISM...) If v. 38 was the only verse that we had which explained how one becomes a Christian, we might conclude that both repentance and water baptism are necessary to make one a true believer. But there are many other verses in the Bible that describe what is necessary for one to become a Christian. It is necessary in good Bible study to compare Scripture with Scripture to get a complete picture of what the Bible is saying. That is what we need to do here. For there are many Biblical passages that describe repentance, or the related concept of faith, as the only requirement for salvation.

In the next chapter Peter is speaking to another Jewish audience. In v. 19 he says, **“Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out...”** There is no reference to baptism. Acts #10 describes the addition of the first Gentiles to the church. At the end of the chapter the Gentiles believe the gospel message that Peter preaches to them, and the Holy Spirit comes upon them as He did upon the disciples on the Day of Pentecost. It is only after that when Peter speaks of baptizing these converts in water. But clearly they have already been accepted by God and made part of His family.

(1 CORINTHIANS 1:17) In 1 Corinthians #1 v. 17 the Apostle Paul writes, **“For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel...”** The message of the gospel is apparently distinct from water baptism. If water baptism was a requirement for making one a Christian, it would be difficult to understand how Paul could say what he did here. There are many other passages which describe the necessity of faith for believing in Jesus which make no reference to baptism. The point is that faith alone, or repentance, makes one a Christian. (PROJECTOR OFF)

If this is indeed true, how do we explain v. 38 that seems to include baptism as a prerequisite for forgiveness of sins? I have read a number of technical grammatical arguments that try to explain this. My Greek professor in seminary argued that there are three basic ways in which we can interpret the passage. It could mean that both repentance and baptism are necessary for forgiveness of sins and reception of the Holy Spirit. It could mean that baptism is the essential requirement and repentance is not essential. It could mean that repentance is the essential requirement and baptism is not the key thing. He argues for this third option, saying that we often speak in this way. For example, we might tell our kids to put their coats on and go outside to play in order to get some exercise. It is the playing that will give them the exercise, not the putting on of coats. We expect them to put their coats on because it is cold outside. But it is the playing that gives them the exercise. So it is that it is the repentance which is the essential spiritual requirement. We want people to be baptized to show their allegiance to Jesus, but it is not the baptism which saves them.

The tendency which we human beings have displayed in the history of Biblical faith is to take the signs of genuine faith and to idolize them. We are prone to take the signs themselves and make them the reality rather than the spiritual truth that they were intended to symbolize.

For example, in Numbers #21 the Israelites spoke against God and Moses. The Lord sent serpents among the people to bite them. Some died. The people confessed their sin. So God had Moses make a bronze serpent and put it on a pole. When people after that were bitten, they could look at that bronze serpent and not die. It was the act of faith that saved them from death. But the people eventually came to regard that bronze serpent as having magical, or supernatural, powers, in and of itself.

Hundreds of years later in the reign of good King Hezekiah of Judah reference is made to this bronze serpent. (PROJECTOR ON--- 2 KINGS 18:4) Second Kings #18 v. 4 says, **“He removed the high places and broke the pillars and cut down the Asherah. And he broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it (it was called Nehushtan)...”** The problem is that people were idolizing something that was intended by God merely as a symbol of faith.

(PROJECTOR OFF) Consider another example. God commanded the descendants of Abraham to circumcise their infant sons as a sign of obedience to the covenant that God made with Abraham. That mark was intended as a sign of identification with the God of Abraham. But down through the centuries the Jewish people came to regard that mark as the reality itself. If you were circumcised, you automatically had a certain acceptance before God. You were in. Yet one day circumcised Jews would kill Jesus. One of His circumcised disciples would betray Him. Do you think that the mark of circumcision was of any help to Judas before God? Jesus said that it would have been better for him if he had never been born.

Paul touched on this issue of symbols and faith in Romans #4. (PROJECTOR ON--- ROMANS 4:3) In v. 3 of #4 he asked, **“For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.’”** It is faith which is the essential issue. In v. 11 of the same chapter (ROMANS 4:11) Paul adds, **“He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well...”** Circumcision was intended as a sign. But for most Jews it came to be treated as the reality itself. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Unfortunately in Christendom we have often done the same thing with baptism. The symbol has come to be treated as the reality itself. If you have been baptized as an infant or as a child, you are in with God. You can go out and rob and steal and lie and belong to the Mafia, but if you have been baptized, you still have an “in” with God. It is a lie.

Several years ago one of our major Protestant denominations moved in this direction. According to the newspaper report, **“The church’s General Board of Discipleship is proposing no longer referring to people who have been baptized but have not made a personal confession of faith as preparatory members, but considering all baptized person down to the youngest infant full members of the church.”** You see, if you have the symbol, you are as much a church member and a Christian before God as anyone else. That is just wrong.

The truth is that baptism was intended by God as a sign. It is an important sign. It is a sign that was commanded by Jesus. But it is only a symbol. It is intended to be a testimony to a spiritual change that has already taken place within us. The key is personal faith in Jesus Christ. If someone has the sign without the personal faith, that water baptism is worthless.

D.

In vv. 39 & 40 we come to THE OPEN INVITATION. (PROJECTOR ON--- A. B. C. D. THE OPEN INVITATION) Peter says, **“For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.’ 40 And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, ‘Save yourselves from this crooked generation.’”**

The promise is for forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Peter is making a reference to the Old Testament Book of Joel, which he had quoted earlier in his sermon, to explain the miraculous experience which the people had just witnessed. He is using that Old Testament passage to describe the opportunity that is available to his listeners.

By “all who are far off” Peter is probably referring to the Jews who live in other parts of the world. But Luke, who is recording these words, may have seen in them a greater significance than Peter realized at the time. For later on in the Book of Acts the apostles

would see that the people far off included more than the Jews who lived a long ways from Jerusalem. Even Gentiles would come to be included in this family of God.

So in v. 40 Peter made a final appeal to his audience to be saved from that crooked generation. Jesus Himself had called this generation wicked and evil. Their greatest evil was the rejection of Him as the Messiah and putting Him to death on the cross. Their judgment would come not only in the life to come but also in the present life in a couple of decades. For in 70 AD the Romans would come in and level the city of Jerusalem. Thousands upon thousands of Jews would be killed. The roads would be lined with crosses of Jews who were being crucified. It was an ironic fate for some of those still alive who had crucified the real Messiah a few decades earlier.

Peter's invitation still applies today. Be saved from this crooked generation! Repent! If you are trusting in water baptism or good works or church membership or adherence to a list of dos and don'ts, turn instead to faith in Christ. It is trust in Him alone, that will result in forgiveness of our sins. If we accept Him as our Savior, we, too, will have the Holy Spirit come to live within us.

III.

Finally, in v. 41 we come to THE RESPONSE. (III. THE RESPONSE) **“So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.”** Not bad for someone's first Christian sermon, right? God was clearly at work. A miracle had occurred which got the attention of the Jerusalem Jews. Peter preached a Biblical message that clearly presented the truth about Jesus. The Holy Spirit convicted people about their sin. Many responded. They believed the message. They turned in faith to Jesus as the Messiah. They then were baptized as a sign of their new allegiance.

Where was there water to baptize this many people? There were all of these mikvahs around. But also there was the Pool of Siloam (POOL OF SILOAM) just south of the temple. In John #9 Jesus healed a blind man. He told him to go wash in the Pool of Siloam. So that may well have been used for cleansings. That may have been where these baptisms took place.

We started this message with a story of a touching baptism that occurred five hundred years ago. We will conclude with a baptism that happened just a few weeks ago. (DENZEL WASHINGTON) This is the picture of a baptism that happened in late December. Anybody want to take a guess about who this is? It is Denzel Washington. He has attended churches for many years. But he finally just got baptized. He told a reporter, **“In one week I turn 70. It took a while but I'm here. If God can do this for me, there's nothing He can't do for you. The sky is literally the limit.”** (*People*, 12/22/2024) If you have never been baptized since becoming a believer and would like to be, let me know. We would be happy to set it up. (PROJECTOR OFF)