

C. A Call to Repent– 2:37-40

2:37 *Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?"*

2:38 *Peter said to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*

Peter's preaching had been effective; the Holy Spirit had used the message of the crucified, resurrected, and exalted Christ to pierce both the minds and the hearts of the listeners. To "pierce" "properly denotes 'to pierce or penetrate with a needle, lancet, or sharp instrument'; and then 'to pierce with grief, or acute pain of any kind . . . It implies also the idea of sudden as well as acute grief. In this case it means that they were suddenly and deeply affected with anguish and alarm at what Peter had said" (Barnes).

"If Jesus was the Messiah, then no guilt could be greater than of treating Him as He had been treated. They had refused Him in whom all their hope of salvation rested: what hope of salvation was left to them now?" (Bruce, 75). "What shall we do?," they cried. Peter's answer must have been wonderful to their ears: repent and God will not abandon them.

Repent: Repentance in Greek has to do with a change of mind; In Hebrew it means to change direction. Thus, it involves a radical change in a person's perception of things or in his view of reality; here it is a "change from thinking Jesus an impostor, and scorning Him as one crucified, to being baptized in His name, and looking to Him for remission of sins, and the gift of the Spirit" (Alford).

Repentance is something that men are incapable of in themselves; it must be given by God. In Acts 11:18 it says, "And when they heard this, they quieted down, and glorified God, saying, 'Well then, *God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life.*'" Likewise, 2 Timothy 2:25 states, "perhaps *God may grant them repentance* leading to the knowledge of the truth." Of course, this doesn't mean that God repents for us. He gives the grace of repentance; He enables us to repent, but we do the actual repenting.

The Scriptures teach that prior to conversion, a man is darkened in his understanding and walks in the futility of his mind. Furthermore, his mind is hostile toward God, suppresses the truth of God, and cannot subject itself to the law of God. Consequently, the unconverted person has a completely distorted view of reality, and it is not an exaggeration to say that he is wrong about everything that truly matters. He knows something of the one true God and his Majesty, but he does not think it necessary to honor him as God or give thanks. He is filled with self and sees the promotion of self as the end of all things. The laws of God are written on his heart, but he does not think it necessary or advantageous to follow their dictates. Instead, he fights against his conscience and seeks to suppress what he knows to be true. He knows that all who commit evil deeds are worthy of death, but he does not think it necessary to fear. He not only does the same things but also gives hearty approval to those who practice them. His own mortality confronts him as death swallows up everyone around him, but he does not think the plague will ever reach his doorstep. To put it simply, the unconverted person is wrong and yet arrogantly continues to do what is right in his own eyes. He is on a way that seems right to him, but its end is the way of death.

However, at the moment of conversion, the Spirit of God regenerates a person's heart, and the

truth enlightens his darkened mind. Then, as a blind man given sight or a sleeper awakened from a dream, he is made aware that his entire life has been governed by his own delusions and that he has been wrong about everything. For the first time in his life, he sees and acknowledges what is true. His wrong and even blasphemous thoughts about God are replaced by a meager yet accurate understanding of the one true God. His vain opinions of his own virtue and merit are replaced by an awareness of the depravity of his nature and the utter wretchedness of his deeds. His arrogance, self-confidence, and independence are replaced by genuine humility, mistrust of self, brokenness over sin, and dependence upon God, to whom he looks for pardon. He then casts himself upon the mercies of God in the person and work of Jesus Christ and sets himself to doing the will of God. Thus, his mind has been changed and his life transformed. He has repented (Washer, *The Gospel Call and True Conversion*, 6, 7).

Such talk seems out of place in a world and evangelical community overrun with the psychology of self-esteem, but sorrow, shame, and self-hatred are biblical truths and an essential part of genuine repentance in both the Old and New Testaments. (9)

The Bible plainly teaches and requires a sincere and deep repentance *before* God pardons a sinner. Repentance is absolutely necessary for salvation. Acts 17:30 says, “having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent.” Jesus said, “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:3). It is impossible to frame language in terms more explicit than that.

Repentance is more than the conviction of sin and the recognition that we are facing judgment. It is more than sorrow for having to face the consequences of our actions. This is evident in the passage before us. Under the conviction of Peter’s message the Jews had come to realize that they had murdered the Prince of life. Even though they were pierced to the heart, when they cried out, “What shall we do?” Peter said, “Repent.” Superficially, this may seem to be unnecessary for they already felt convicted and guilty before God. They felt regret. Repentance isn’t less than these things, but these things aren’t enough. Repentance is a complete about-turn; it is a total reversal of who I am, a change of heart and mind that leads to a different lifestyle. It is not simply an intellectual about-turn; it is an emotional, willful, moral, and psychological turning. We were going one way and suddenly by the grace of God we choose to go another way. The whole man is made into another man.

A careful reading of this passage also corrects modern errors in evangelism. Peter didn’t say, “Believe and your sins will be forgiven.” Rather, his reply amounted to this: “Take all the blame which belongs to you. Own the whole truth unto God. Do not gloss over, but confess your awful wickedness; let your uncircumcised hearts be truly humbled before Him. And then look by faith to the free grace of God through the blood of Christ for pardon, and in token that all your dependence is on His mediation and merits, be baptized in His name, and that shall be to you an external sign of the remission of your sins” (Pink, *Repentance*).

Furthermore, repentance is not only a turning from sin; it is a turning toward God in Jesus Christ. In 1 Thessalonians 1:9 the believers “*turned to God* from idols to serve a living and true God.”

But true repentance is even more than this. True repentance shows itself in a transformed lifestyle.

Where there is no transformed lifestyle there hasn't been true repentance. Paul says it like this in Colossians 3:

5 Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry

...

7 *You used to walk in these ways*, in the life you once lived.

8 But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.

9 Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices (NIV)

10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. (ESV)

In Acts 2 repentance is seen as an initial act of salvation, but Colossians 3:10 shows that repentance is also a daily activity. Believers are "*being renewed* in knowledge after the image of its creator." Believers continue to mature throughout their Christian life as their understanding of sin deepens.

be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ: The baptism administered was in the name of Jesus, for the need was to identify with Him as the Messiah. "The person who turns toward God calls on the name of the Lord by being baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. This phrase reflects the language of the speech in Acts 2:21, "calling on the name of the Lord to be saved;" so Peter's remarks draw upon what he has already proclaimed in Acts 2. The rite does not impart life, but represents and pictures what repentance is asking God to do, to grant forgiveness (Acts 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18; Bock, 143). In the historical context, for these Jews, identification outwardly with Christ marked their point of no return. To be baptized in the name of the One who was publicly crucified would cost them everything; they would then face persecution, ostracism and even death.

The question presents itself, Why is the baptism here, and elsewhere in the Acts (Acts 10:48; Acts 19:5), "in the name of Jesus Christ," while in Matthew 28:19, the Apostles are commanded to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit? Various explanations have been given. It has been said that baptism in the Name of any one of the Persons of the Trinity, involves the Name of the other Two. It has even been assumed that St. Luke meant the fuller formula when he used the shorter one. But a more satisfactory solution is, perhaps, found in seeing in the words of Matthew 28:19 (see Note there) the formula for the baptism of those who, as Gentiles, had been "without God in the world, not knowing the Father;" while for converts from Judaism, or those who had before been proselytes to Judaism, it was enough that there should be the distinctive profession of their faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, added on to their previous belief in the Father and the Holy Spirit. In proportion as the main work of the Church of Christ lay among the Gentiles, it was natural that the fuller form should become dominant, and finally be used exclusively. It is interesting here, also, to compare the speech of St. Peter with the stress laid on baptism in his Epistle (1Peter 3:21) (Ellicott on Acts 2:38)

It was enough for converts from the house of Israel, already of the family of God, to be baptized into the name of Jesus as the Messiah, as the condition of their admission into the Church which He had founded. By that confession they gave a fresh life to doctrines which they had partially received before, and belief in the Father and the Spirit was virtually implied in their belief in Jesus as the incarnate Son. For the heathen the case stood otherwise; they had worshipped

“gods many and lords many” (1Corinthians 8:5), had been “without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12), and so they had not known the Father. (Ellicott on Matthew 28:19)

Repent, and . . . be baptized . . . for the forgiveness of your sins: Verse 38 has created a number of problems among Bible students. The call to repentance is Peter’s primary demand. Surely it was necessary for the Jews to change their attitude toward Jesus and accept Him as Messiah who had come to save them from the wrath of God. But the call to repent is joined with the call to be baptized; one would have expected Peter to tell them to repent and believe. Some have therefore concluded that baptism is essential to salvation.

Baptism was nothing new to a Jew. In Judaism Jewish proselytes were baptized. When John the Baptist preached his message of repentance, he required people to be baptized as a visible sign of the peoples’ profession. This visible demonstration of faith required by Peter made an outward identification of the one baptized with Jesus the Messiah.

The principle difficulty modern Christians have with Peter’s statement, “be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins” is primarily related to how many view baptism. Many see baptism as an optional rite that has nothing to do with salvation. It is true that with reference to what *is essential to salvation*, baptism has no importance whatsoever. However, the early church looked at baptism, rather than mere profession, as the mark of faith. Jesus Himself said that one needs to be baptized to be His disciple (Matt. 28:19-20). A disciple isn’t a more committed believer than others; it is a believer. In John 14:15 Jesus said, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.” In John 14:23-24 He similarly said, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word . . . He who does not love Me does not keep My words. . .” In Jesus’ own words that person neither loves Him nor is His disciple. It is stunning how so many professed believers disregard these words without any concern at all. Although one is not saved by being baptized, refusal to do so demonstrates a serious defect in one’s faith and understanding of what it means when we call Jesus “Lord.” For a person to refuse baptism would be fundamental evidence that the professed “faith” was not genuine.

In the Bible, proof or evidence of salvation through baptism is assumed to be part of every Christian’s experience. “[The early church] could not conceive of a true Christian who was not willing to express commitment to our Lord [through baptism]. That was not one of the options given to the person being evangelized. He either trusted in Christ and was baptized, knowing the implications in terms of commitment and lifestyle, or he rejected the truth”(GTJ Vol. 2/2; 1981, p. 288). In other words, baptism wasn’t what saved people; it was primary evidence of salvation. Salvation demands that people reflect a radical change of heart and life (repentance) and a visible demonstration of dedication (baptism). Baptism testifies in view of others and God that we have given our lives to Christ. As Calvin says, baptism is “a sealing of those good things which we have by Christ that they may be established in our consciences.”

However, to link “for forgiveness of sins” solely to baptism would also be incorrect. Peter doesn’t describe salvation in terms of baptism alone; everywhere the Bible rejects the notion that outward actions generate spiritual life. Furthermore, a similar statement by Peter in Acts 3:19 shows that what brings remission of sins is repentance and conversion. There he says, “repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away.” In Acts 16:31, in response to the Philippian jailer’s question, “What must I do to be saved?” Paul responded, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.” In these verses (and many others elsewhere), baptism is not mentioned at all. Likewise Paul said, “I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house,

solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:20-21). Acts 2:38, 3:19, 16:3, or 20:20-21 aren’t intended to be “salvation formulas;” they simply reflect aspects that accompany salvation – repentance, belief, reception of the word (2:41), calling on the name of the Lord (2:21), and the visible demonstration of one’s profession (baptism) all go hand-in-hand.

you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit: When repentance takes place, God gives them the gift of the Holy Spirit, even to those who had crucified their Messiah. In Acts 1 and 2 the “gift of the Holy Spirit” is the same as the “coming of the Spirit” (2:1-3) and “the baptism in the Spirit” (1:4-5, 8). Therefore, the gift of the Holy Spirit is not the same as the gifts of the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit Himself is the gift (that is, it is an exegetical genitive as is in v. 33; that is, “of the Holy Spirit” explains what the gift is) given by Christ to every believer. Gifts of the Spirit are spiritual abilities given by the Holy Spirit to minister within the body of Christ. There is no implication that the reception of the Spirit happened as a separate act following salvation or that the reception of the gifts of the Spirit necessitated the laying on of hands by the apostles.

2:39 "For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself."

The promise of the Holy Spirit – the grand blessing of the New Covenant - is extended beyond Peter’s contemporaries (the Jews he was addressing) to their descendants. When the Jews heard this they heard mercy. They heard Genesis 17:7: “I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you.” God has not changed. Though they have sinned grievously, the promise of God is still held out to all who will take it.

But the promise is also for those beyond the boundaries of Israel, to those who are in “far off” lands (the gentiles). Ephesians 2:11-13 says, “Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, . . . were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”

"For the promise is for . . . as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself." Salvation is the result of God calling people to Himself. Jesus said in John 6:44, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him.” Of course, we don’t know who these people are so we spread the good news and announce “everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved” (Acts 2:21).

2:40 And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation!"

Luke records that Peter said much more than what is written.

Although Peter believed that God called people to salvation, he was not dispassionate about the message he preached. He continued to exhort (i.e. to plead with) them to be saved. The word translated as exhorting in verse 40 means to plead with someone. The word also appears in 2 Corinthians 5:20 where it is used to speak of how God preaches. It says, “Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, *as though God were pleading through us*: we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God.” The word that characterized Peter’s preaching characterizes God’s heart. God pleads with sinners.

this perverse generation: Jesus Himself had called the generation in which He lived faithless, perverse (Lk. 9:41), and evil for rejecting Israel's anointed Savior (Lk. 11:29; 17:25). Christianity is realistic about human nature; it is perverse. One cannot have the good news without knowing the bad news. But salvation could be enjoyed by those who turned. Those who believed became the remnant of Israel and at the same time became the beginning of the church.