

Clarity Trumpet
a publication of
CLARITY MINISTRIES INTERNATIONAL
Post Office Box 10 • LaGrange, WY 82221

For if the trumpet makes an uncertain sound, who will prepare himself for battle? So likewise you, unless you utter by the tongue words easy to understand, how will it known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air.
I Corinthians 14:8, 9

Acts 2:38

THEN Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

THIS passage is often quoted by members of churches that teach what is commonly called *baptismal regeneration*. Usually the interpretation goes something like this: in order to be saved you must repent (turn from your sins) and be baptized in water. When you meet these conditions (and usually a few others as well) you will receive "remission of sins."

ON the surface this may seem to be a reasonable interpretation -- *until* you begin doing some *biblically* guided thinking. For instance, it is most striking that nothing is said in the verse about *believing* in Christ, and *belief* in Him is the key Gospel word throughout the New Testament (over 160 times). Would Peter, particularly after emphasizing the person of Christ, His death and resurrection, now tell these concerned Jews to quit sinning and be baptized in water to be saved, and not even mention the absolute need to believe in Him? Not hardly, especially in light of the fact that the record of his message is divinely inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Some Key Observations

IF the interpretation described above is correct then we have a major problem of the Bible contradicting itself because elsewhere Scripture is clear that salvation is not by man's works or merit, it is the gift of God, and it is received by faith alone in Christ. What then must we conclude? Either the Bible is contradictory or those who see baptismal regeneration in Acts 2:38 are mistaken as to its meaning. I, of course, take the latter approach. Let's examine a few things in the passage.

WHAT had Peter been telling them? He reminded these men that they *knew* that God had confirmed Jesus' true identity by "miracles, wonders, and signs" (v. 22); he made it plain that though God had predetermined that His Son would die as prophesied, *they* had "taken by lawless hands, [and had]

crucified" Him and put Him to death (v. 23); but *God* had raised Him up (v. 23). Peter's powerful conclusion was: *Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ, or Messiah* (v.36).

NOTE carefully the reaction to these now convicted Jewish men: *Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?"* (v. 37). Peter's answer to their question is the verse we are considering.

Understanding Repentance

THE first thing Peter tells his listeners to do in response to their question of desperation is that they must *repent*. Is he telling them to turn from the sin of crucifying the Messiah? What good would that do? He's already been put to death. Was he urging them to quit their other sins? That's not the issue, either here in this setting or in other New Testament salvation passages.

THE literal meaning of the Greek words translated repent or repentance is *to reconsider, to change the mind or attitude*, and that is exactly what Peter is telling these distraught men to do. His preaching had convincingly demonstrated that this Jesus is both Lord and Messiah -- something they had not previously known (see I Corinthians 2:7, 8). So now he urges them to *change their minds about Christ, the One whom they had a hand in crucifying*. He's telling them to see Him for who and what He really is, their promised Messiah, the LORD Himself. The Jewish *leaders* as a whole had rejected Jesus as their Messiah, but now Peter is inviting these *individual* Jews to receive Him.

Later, the apostle Paul described the message he preached in these telling words: . . . *I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ* (Acts 20:20, 21). Repentance *may* involve changing one's mind concerning sin or even concerning something good, but in salvation the change of mind (true repentance) that is absolutely *necessary* is a change of attitude toward God Himself.

Understanding Baptism

As with repentance, we have read into baptism what essentially is not there. For instance, there are at least eleven* baptisms in Scripture and water was by no means the element employed in many of these instances. The word *baptize* is not really a translation of the Greek word *baptizo*. It is a transliteration. If it had been translated consistently throughout the New Testament it

would have been translated (depending upon the context in which it was used) as *to dip, to immerse, to submerge, to cleanse, to wash, to make clean, to wash one's self, bathe, or to overwhelm* (Thayer, and Arndt & Gingrich).

I understand the primary meaning of the phrase "let everyone of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins" to mean, "let everyone of you be **cleansed** in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins." Here's why I take this position.

First, a legitimate meaning of *baptized* is *to be cleansed*. Consider one example as an illustration: Mark 7:4 states, *When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash (baptizo). And there are many other things which they have received and hold, like the washing (baptismos) of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches.*

Secondly, is the consideration that they were told to be baptized "in the name of Jesus Christ." This is not the baptismal formula given by Christ in the Great Commission. There He commanded the eleven to *make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name (singular) of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit* (Matthew 28:19).

In Acts 2:38 the admonition is to be cleansed in Jesus' name -- not in a pool of water. This is consistent with all other New Testament passages on this subject: John 3:18. *He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.* Acts 4:12: *Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.*

Thirdly, the apostles and the multitude were in the Temple area. If these Jews were being told to be *water* baptized (which would have been by immersion) where could a minimum of 3,000 new converts have been immersed? Certainly not in the area of the Temple (check any map of that area -- you probably have one in the back of your Bible).

A parallel situation was brought to light when Paul shared his testimony in Acts 22. It is commonly taught that he was saved on the Road to Damascus, but what of his own testimony? He was blinded by the bright light and the Lord told him to go to Damascus where Ananias came and explained how God had revealed to him things which Paul would have to suffer. Then Ananias said, *And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized (cleansed), and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord* (v. 16). Ananias and Paul were in a house. Paul was to arise and be cleansed of his sins right then and there. How? By calling on the name of the Lord, not by water from a pool which wasn't even present.

A fourth reason to question that the baptism in Acts 2:38 is water baptism: A two-fold promise was given: (1) these men would have their sins forgiven, and (2) they would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Neither forgiveness nor the Holy Spirit is ever given on the basis of one being baptized in water. Rather, forgiveness comes to us as Peter preached in Acts 10:43: *To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins.* Paul preached the same message in Antioch when he said, *Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached the forgiveness of sins; and by Him every one who believes is justified (declared righteous) from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses* (13:38, 39).

As for the Holy Spirit, he is also received by believing in Christ: *In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise* (Ephesians 1:13).

There is no Scripture anywhere that offers forgiveness, the Holy Spirit, or eternal life through water baptism, but there are abundant Scriptures which promise God's salvation through faith in Christ alone. • *Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness* (Romans 4:4, 5). • *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast* (Ephesians 2:8, 9).

It is an unalterable rule to never interpret clear, literal statements of Scripture by the vague or unclear; instead *always* interpret the ambiguous or unclear by what is crystal clear. This is especially true when an interpretation seems contradictory to *many* other verses. It's not the Bible that is wrong in such instances, but one's understanding.

Baptisms in Scripture:

1. John's, Luke 7:29; Acts 19:3,4.
2. Christ's, Matthew 3:13.
3. of fire, Matthew 3:11.
4. with the Holy Spirit, Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:8.
5. of death, Luke 12:50.
6. for the dead, I Corinthians 15:29.
7. of water, Mark 1:8.
8. of repentance, Mark 1:4.
9. traditional Jewish, Hebrews 6:2; 9:10.
10. by Moses in the cloud, I Corinthians 10:2.
11. of household items and utensils, Mark 7:4, 8.