

How Baptism Works  
Acts 2:37-42  
by Grover Gunn  
pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church  
Jackson, Tennessee

Busy intersections can be dangerous, especially for pedestrians. The higher the volume of traffic, the greater the risk you take when you cross the street. Today we will be crossing a very busy intersection where two highly traveled roads cross, so we do need to be careful. Of course, I am not talking about two literal roads. I am talking metaphorically about two vital doctrines, the doctrine of salvation and the doctrine of the church. These are two major thoroughfares in theology, and our study today will take us to their intersection. This intersection is quite congested, so we need to proceed with care as we consider the topic, "How Baptism Works."

I have chosen for our scripture reading a passage of Scripture that includes a key verse on this issue. Before sharing with you my understanding of this verse, I want to show you how easy it is to have an accident at this busy intersection and damage your theology. Some churches underemphasize the importance of baptism with water. In fact, a few churches have gone so far as to abandon baptism altogether. Many others have reduced water baptism to a bare sign, teaching that baptism is a picture of salvation and no more. They require baptism for church membership, but they do not view it as something God uses to work grace in the hearts of His people.

Some churches underemphasize the importance of water baptism, but others overemphasize its importance. It is interesting how people can read the same verses and come to opposite conclusions. Some believe that water baptism is so important that it is absolutely necessary for salvation. Let's say a Moslem in some fanatical Islamic state listens to the gospel on his radio and believes. He wants to be baptized, but before he can find a church, his neighbors learn about his new faith and have him arrested. He refuses to deny Christ even under torture, and so the Islamic government executes him in accordance with strict Islamic law. Again, according to some, this martyr for the faith has to go to hell because he was never baptized. Some people believe that salvation is never under any circumstances possible apart from baptism.

Others overemphasize water baptism by teaching that it works as a means of grace somewhat automatically. They teach that baptism with water saves the same way that a hot iron burns and ice cools and water wets. If you have been baptized with water, then your sins have been washed away just as surely as your body has gotten wet. They teach that the church has the power to distribute saving grace through administering baptism. Baptism works through its mere working.

As you may have guessed, I disagree with all of these views. What I want to do today is to look at Acts 2:38 and see if we can't come to an understanding of how baptism works. We will examine this passage, and we will look first at the role of belief in salvation, and secondly at the role of baptism.

Let's begin with the role of belief in our salvation. The word "faith" is not found in this passage, but the concept is there. Peter commanded these people to repent, and the word there translated "repent" means to change one's mind. What Peter was commanding these people to do was to change their mind about Jesus, to change their attitude toward Jesus. Peter in his sermon reminded these people of what their attitude had been toward Jesus previously. Look at verse 22:

Acts 2:22

22 "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know --

Yet in spite of this, the Jewish people had delivered Jesus over to the Romans to be crucified. The Jewish people as a group bore this responsibility. Even though many of the people Peter was preaching to on Pentecost may not have been in Jerusalem on the Passover when Jesus was crucified, still Peter said Jesus' crucifixion was in a sense their responsibility because they were members of the Jewish nation.

Now look at verse 36:

Acts 2:36

36 "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."

What a shocking statement! Peter tells his audience that they as members of the house of Israel had crucified Jesus, but God has made Jesus the ruling Messianic Lord with all authority in heaven and on earth. Peter assured the people this was true because Peter and others had witnessed Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Also, these Jews who had come to Jerusalem from various nations had seen and heard for themselves the miracle of these uneducated Galileans speaking in the languages of various Gentile nations. Peter told them that what they had that very day seen and heard was the miraculous result of Jesus' pouring out His Holy Spirit in fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel. In addition to that, Peter warned that God was going to make all the enemies of Jesus into the footstool of Jesus. A footstool is what a person puts his feet on, and putting one's feet on one's enemies is a symbol of their conquest. In Joshua 10, after Joshua had defeated the forces of the five kings of the Amorites, Joshua told his captains to put their feet on the necks of the five kings to symbolize their victory over them. That is the thought behind the imagery of making one's enemies into one's footstool. And that is what the glorified Jesus is going to do to them if they remain His enemies. Look at Acts 2:33-35:

Acts 2:33-35

- 33 "Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear."  
34 "For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he says himself: 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at My right hand,  
35 Till I make Your enemies Your footstool.'"

The people knew what this meant, and this is when they cried out to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" And Peter said, "Repent!" That is, you must change your attitude toward Jesus of Nazareth. You must accept Him as the Christ and you must cry out to Him for salvation.

Previously these people had thought about Jesus of Nazareth as someone who had deserved to die on the cross. They had despised Him and rejected Him and had hidden, as it were, their faces from Him. Now they needed to cry out, in the words of Isaiah 53:5,

5 ... He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed.

Such a change in attitude involves both faith and repentance. Faith is adopting the new attitude, and repentance is abandoning the old attitude. Because you can't adopt this new attitude without abandoning the old one, repentance is the inevitable and immediate fruit of faith. Also, remember that when you turn to Christ for salvation, you are turning to Him not only for forgiveness for your sins but also for deliverance from your sins. So you can't really turn to Jesus for salvation without in principle turning your back on your old sinful way of living. In faith, you turn to Jesus for salvation. In repentance, you turn away from your sins as a way of life and you turn to Jesus to enable you to live a life of new obedience to God.

Faith and repentance always occur together, but they are not the same, and they play different roles in salvation. Faith is what God works in your heart to enable you to partake of the benefits of salvation in Christ. Repentance is the immediate fruit of this faith. Repentance is the beginning of the life transformation which results from the faith relationship with Jesus. You are saved by grace and through faith alone. Repentance and new obedience are the beginnings of that new life you are saved unto. They are evidence that your faith is real and genuine. As James says, "Faith without works is dead."

So when Peter in Acts 2:38 said, "Repent," that was a call to faith, repentance and new obedience, which are all necessary elements of salvation. Yet faith alone is what God uses to put us into a saving relationship with Jesus.

Now let's say that someone who heard Peter's sermon believed in Jesus, but he had a heart attack and fell down dead before Peter could baptize him with water. Would that person be saved? Is there remission of sins apart from baptism? Yes, of course. Here is what Peter would later tell Cornelius, the Roman centurion:

Acts 10:43

43 "To [Jesus] all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins."

Peter there says that whoever believes in Jesus receives remission of sins. Before Peter baptized Cornelius with water, Jesus baptized Cornelius with the Holy Spirit, confirming that

Cornelius had already been saved before he was baptized with water. Jesus first baptized Cornelius with the Holy Spirit and then afterward Peter baptized Cornelius with water.

Still later in the book of Acts, when the Philippian jailer cried out, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Paul and Silas responded, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved." Believe, and you will be saved. There are other verses in the New Testament that teach that the person who believes in Jesus has at that moment salvation and eternal life. He doesn't have to wait until his baptism to obtain these.

Now both Cornelius and the Philippian jailer not only believed but were also baptized with water, so let's now look at our second point: the role of baptism. What was the purpose of the baptism? And what was its relationship to forgiveness?

Let's prepare to answer these questions by looking at what Peter said about baptism and forgiveness in Acts chapter two. Peter said, "Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus for remission of sins." Let's first consider the meaning of the prepositional phrase "in the name of Jesus." A more literal translation of the Greek is "upon the name of Jesus." A similar Greek phrase is used elsewhere in Acts to refer to speaking or teaching about Jesus upon the basis of Jesus' authority (Acts 4:17,18; 5:28,40). In the context of Acts 2:38, I believe this prepositional phrase refers to baptism administered to those who repent and their children upon the basis of Jesus' authority.

Let's secondly consider the preposition phrase "for remission of sins." A more literal translation of the Greek is "into remission of sins." The same basic language is used elsewhere to speak of baptism into Christ (Galatians 3:27) and baptism into Christ's atoning work (Romans 6:3). Note that this is permanent immersion and not temporary dipping, and this is immersion into a state of forgiveness and not into water.

What then is the relationship of baptism with water to baptism into Christ and His saving work? The basic relationship is that of the sign and the thing signified. Baptism with water and the Lord's Supper are the signs, and the saving work of Christ is the thing signified. Because of this close relationship between the sign and the thing signified, salvation is sometimes described using the imagery of the sign. For example, Paul referred to regeneration as a washing (Titus 3:5), and Jesus said, "Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." (John 6:54). This works the other way also: the sign is sometimes spoken of in terms of the salvation which it signifies. Thus Ananias said to the newly converted Paul, "Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16). And Jesus said regarding the Lord's Supper cup, "... this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Matthew 26:28).

The Westminster Confession of Faith refers to this close relationship between the sacramental sign and the salvation signified. Here is what the Confession says:

There is, in every sacrament, a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified: whence it comes to pass, that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other. (WCF 27.2)

Let's now look at some of the relationships between baptism with water and the salvation which it signifies. To begin with, baptism with water is a picture of our salvation and a visual preaching of the gospel. The New Testament says that Jesus pours out His Holy Spirit upon us (Titus 3:5-6). Through this outpouring of the Holy Spirit, Jesus baptizes or immerses us into a covenant union with Himself and His saving work and the saving benefits of that saving work. That is what is being pictured when an ordained minister as a representative of Jesus pours out water onto a person from above. The Greek word translated "baptize" often means to put something into something permanently. This word often refers to shipwrecks and drownings. It is even used to speak of the soul as baptized in the body. This is the sense in which Jesus uses the Holy Spirit poured out from above to baptize us into Himself and into His saving work. It is a permanent immersion. So Peter is saying, "Repent and sacramentally portray what Jesus has done for you. Visually proclaim that Jesus has poured out His Holy Spirit upon you and has put you permanently into a state of forgiveness."

Second, baptism with water is the formal and public admission of a person into the visible church. In a general and provisional sense, the visible church is the earthly locus of salvation, the

realm of remission. This is true in a general sense because there are exceptions. For example, there is the case of the newly converted martyr who never had an opportunity to be baptized with water. This is true in a provisional sense because those members of the visible church who have the intellectual power of discretion actually receive remission of sins only if they have met the obligations of the covenant, which are saving faith and its necessary fruits. In this spirit, Paul in his epistles made general statements about the salvation of the recipients and also made qualifying statements that only those who savingly believe are actually saved. So Peter is saying, "Repent and be publicly and formally admitted into the visible church, whose members' sins we regard as forgiven in a general and provisional sense."

Third, baptism is the God appointed way to publicly identify with Jesus. Jesus said, "Confess Me before men, and I will confess you before My Father in heaven." If we are not willing to be baptized in obedience to Jesus, then this casts doubts on the genuineness of our faith. A fruit of faith is a desire to obey Jesus and to do what He says pleases Him. So Peter is saying, "Repent and sacramentally identify with Jesus, who forgives all your sins." Submitting to baptism is an act of obedience that gives evidence that our faith is genuine.

Fourth, God uses water baptism to strengthen and confirm the faith that is already there. You hear the gospel and you believe. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God. Then you come for baptism, and the gospel is symbolically applied to you as an individual. Baptism is not only a sign but also a seal, not only a picture but also a pledge. It is God's way of assuring

us that just as surely as water cleanses away dirt, just as surely as water gives life to the dry desert, so surely God saves all those who put their trust in Jesus for salvation. God worked faith in our heart when the gospel came to us verbally, and now God confirms and strengthens that faith by sending the same message to us visually. Peter is saying, "Repent, and then through baptism confirm and strengthen that faith in Jesus through which you have received forgiveness of sins."

This fourth point about strengthening and confirming faith is the way in which baptism is a means of grace and more than a bare sign. God uses baptism as a means of grace the same way He uses the preached gospel. The preached gospel is true regardless of our response to it, but the preached gospel is effectual as a means of grace only when God uses it to work faith in our hearts. It is the much the same way with baptism. Baptism is always a true visual representation of the gospel, but it is effectual as a means of grace only when God uses it to confirm and strengthen faith in our hearts. Baptism is an effectual means of grace only by the blessing of Christ and the working of His Spirit. We can schedule a baptism, but we can't schedule and control the working of God's Holy Spirit, no more than we can control the wind.

Outside of the context of faith, neither the preached word nor baptism is a means of grace. Neither preaching nor baptism just works through the working the way a hot iron burns.

I believe Peter in his second letter gives us a strong message that baptism does not save apart from faith. There are two

sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper. Baptism is through a washing with water, and the Lord's Super is through a partaking of bread and wine. So the two sacraments are forms of washing and eating. I think this is the thought behind the rather graphic description Peter gives of apostates in 2 Peter 2:21-22:

21 For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them.

22 But it has happened to them according to the true proverb: "A dog returns to his own vomit," and, "a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire."

Peter gives these two graphic illustrations of the apostate who abandons the church and thereby shows that in the truest sense he was never really a part of the church. The first illustration has to do with eating and the second has to do with washing. The sacraments have no real spiritual benefits for those who never believe, no more than a pig can appreciate being washed or a dog can appreciate gourmet food.

I have mentioned four reasons why baptism is important, but let me mention a fifth which applies not to us but did apply to Peter's audience. Look at Acts 2:40:

40 And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation."

Peter was warning them about the special historical judgment that would come upon that generation of Jews because of the

role of the nation of Israel in the crucifixion of Jesus. Jesus saved the Jewish church from that judgment. The judgment occurred in 70 A.D. when the Roman army surrounded and destroyed Jerusalem, but Jesus delivered the Jewish church from the Roman siege of Jerusalem. So here is a situation specific and time bound application of Peter's words. Peter was saying to the Jews on Pentecost, "Repent and be baptized into the new Israel after the Spirit which will escape God's 70 AD judgment upon old Israel after the flesh."

Beloved, baptism is a beautiful picture of God's salvation. And it doesn't matter if you were baptized as a baby based on God's covenant promise, or if you were baptized as an adult upon profession of faith. What matters is that you respond to the message of your baptism in faith. What matters is that you recognize your own need of the spiritual cleansing and spiritual life which only Jesus can give. What matters is that you receive Christ and rest upon Him alone for salvation. Pray that God will use the gospel message that is visually portrayed in baptism with water as a means of grace in your life. Pray that God will work faith in your heart and enable you to look to Jesus alone for salvation. Do so, and all that baptism pictures will be realized in your life.