BAPTISM AND FORGIVENESS
IN ACTS 2:38

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Those who insist on the necessity of water baptism for salvation rely heavily on Acts 2:38, "Repent, and let each of you be baptized, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins."[1] Das says of this verse, "This has been a pivotal verse for the Lutheran, sacramental position."[2] The exegetical arguments almost without exception have focused on the interpretation of the word εἰς (rendered "for" in the New American Standard Bible). Those favoring the doctrine of baptismal regeneration understand εἰς as purposive or causative. The usual evangelical position is stated by Robertson, who pointed out that another valid interpretation is that εἰς may mean the basis or ground on which baptism is performed.[3] Both positions find support in the New Testament. Discussing Luke's usage of εἰς, Davis has shown that the evidence favors purpose rather than "basis or ground."[4] His arguments are persuasive, and will not be repeated here.[5] Instead, conceding that εἰς is purposive in Acts 2:38, a more funda-

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[1] Acts 2:38 is, of course, only one of several proof texts used by those who advocate baptismal regeneration. For a survey of other related passages with an excellent and balanced treatment of their respective merits and deficiencies see 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.

[2] A. Andrew Das, "Acts 8: Water, Baptism, and the Spirit," *Concordia Journal* 19 (April 1993): 108.

[3] A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 6 vols. (Nashville: Broadman, 1930-33), 3:35.

[4] J. C. Davis, "Another Look at the Relationship between Baptism and Forgiveness of Sins in Acts 2:38," *Restoration Quarterly* 24 (1981): 80-88.

[5] One should be careful not to press the point too much, for John said that he baptized in water εἰς repentance (Matt. 3:11). Yet surely no one would argue that water baptism results in repentance.

mental question must be addressed: To which verb—μετανοήσατε ("repent") or βαπτισθήτω ("be baptized"—the only occurrence of this third person imperative in the New Testament)—does the prepositional phrase "for the remission of your sins" refer?

The natural inclination for the reader of an English version of the Bible is to impose English rules of syntax on the text. In Acts 2:38 this would mean associating the phrase "for the remission of your sins" with the command to "be baptized" because of word proximity. However, Greek is not constrained with rules of word order in the same ways as English. "The freedom of the Greek from artificial rules and its response to the play of the mind is never seen better than in the order of words in the sentence."[6] Turner has shown that in Greek oratory the effect of unnatural word order may be even more pronounced: "Interruption of the normal order to give oratorical effect may result in ambiguity."[7] This article therefore addresses not word order but the question of which verb is associated with the phrase "for the forgiveness of your sins," based on syntax and grammar and a New Testament canonical analysis.

THE ANTECEDENT OF ὑμῶν ("YOUR")

Acts 2:38 has two imperatives, "repent" and "be baptized." The first is second person plural, and the second is third person singular. The New Testament has many sentences with multiple verbs not all in the same person and/or number. Osburn has demonstrated that the two function in concert in the Septuagint as well as the New Testaments Acts 2:38 also has two occurrences of the word ὑμῶν; both are second person plural in the genitive case. The first occurs in the phrase "each of you," in which ὑμῶν functions as a partitive genitive, indicating the group from which each person derives.[9] The second occurrence is in the phrase "for the remission of your sins," in which ὑμῶν is a subjective genitive indicating whose sins are involved in the remission.[10] The basic rule of concord stipulates that a personal pronoun (in this case

[6] A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934), 417.

[7] James H. Moulton and Nigel Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: Clark, 1906-76), 3:350.

[8] Carroll D. Osburn, "The Third Person Imperative in Acts 2:38," *Restoration Quarterly* 26 (1983): 81-84.

[9] Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 502.

[10] Ibid., 499.

ὑμῶν) agrees with its antecedent in gender and number." In direct discourse, as in Acts 2:38, concord should be extended to include person. Robertson describes concord as existing between subject and predicate, where "predicate" is broadly defined to include pronouns.[12] The pronoun points back to some other substantive to which it refers (its antecedent). Clyde describes the word endings in the Greek as "marking by outward signs inward relations, i.e. in Greek of marking by word-endings the relations which exist among ideas in the mind."[13] Concerning concord with respect to person, "only ignorance would allow one to mix his persons in the use of the verb."[14] While Robertson does note some exceptions, none of them apply to Acts 2:38. Polhill hints at the basic issue involved when he says, "The usual connection of the forgiveness of sins in Luke-Acts is with repentance and not with baptism at all."[15] The concord between verb and pronoun requires that the remission of sins be connected with repentance, not with baptism.[16] However, if one associates forgiveness with baptism, the verse translated into English with due accord to person and number, would read, "let him [third singular] be baptized for the remission of your [second plural] sins." The folly of ignoring concord then is obvious.

　　　Osburn attempts to demonstrate that the second and third person imperatives can be used together. Unfortunately he fails to address the problem of concord between verb and pronoun. Nevertheless the examples he cites demonstrate exactly the agreement in both person and number called for by the rule of concord.[17] One

[11] James A. Hewett, *New Testament Greek* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986), 36.

[12] Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 401-3.

[13] James Clyde, *Greek Syntax with a Rationale of the Constructions* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1876), 126.

[14] Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 402.

[15] John B. Polhill, *Acts*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 117.

[16] For purposes of this paper the word "concord" is used to describe agreement in endings with respect to person and number between subject and substantive. A subject may appear explicitly in the sentence or may be determined by the verb ending. In general, concord also extends to gender. The concept of concord is referred to variously as agreement, congruence, or government. Clyde distinguishes between concord and government, depending on which part of the sentence is the controlling element (*Greek Syntax with a Rationale of the Constructions*, 126). Substantive here means any noun, pronoun, or adjective, or any unit functioning as one of these. See H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1927), 32.

[17] The word "rule" here is not used to mean some artificially imposed mechanism, but rather the observed syntactical conventions of the Greek writers.

passage he refers to is Exodus 16:29, "You [second plural] shall stay each in your [second plural] houses, no one shall go out [third singular] of his [third singular] place." While this verse does indeed contain both a second and third person imperative, it also demonstrates concord between verb and pronoun. One clearly sees the "observed rule of concord" as to person and number: The second person plural imperative "you shall stay" is associated with a second person plural pronoun (ὑμῶν, "your"), and the third person singular imperative ("no one shall go out") has an associated third person singular pronoun (αὐτοῦ, "his").

Osburn also appeals to Zechariah 7:10. "Do not oppress [second person plural imperative] the widow, fatherless, sojourner, or poor, and let no one of you devise evil [third person singular imperative] against his brother!"[18] Associated with the third person singular imperative is the pronoun "his" (αὐτός). Again, the verb and pronoun maintain agreement in person and number. In comparing the above passage to Acts 2:38 the syntactical difference is apparent. The third person singular clause in Zechariah 7:10 is associated with a third person singular pronoun in the genitive, whereas the third person singular clause in Acts 2:38 has no personal pronoun in concord. Instead, the pronoun in Acts 2:38 is second person plural; therefore that pronoun must refer back to the verb "repent."

Osburn does not include "your" in the phrase "remission of sins." This is because, admittedly, ὑμῶν does not appear in all manuscripts. This absence in those manuscripts may be because of a tendency to follow the shorter rendering "forgiveness of sins" (ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν), not "forgiveness of your sins," in Matthew 26:28; Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3; and 24:47.[19]

In these four occurrences in the Gospels the word "sins" occurs without the article and without a pronoun. In Acts 2:38, however, "sins" has the definite article and is followed by the pronoun ὑμῶν. Ἁμαρτιῶν occurs in the New Testament 12 times with the definite article. In 9 of those 12 a personal pronoun in the genitive is associated with it. In Romans 7:5 ἁμαρτιῶν is used adjectivally, in which case a pronoun is not indicated. In Acts 3:19 and 22:16 the articular τὰς ἁμαρτίας occurs with a personal pronoun in the genitive. In every case in Luke-Acts the articular "sins" also has a personal pronoun in the genitive. The evidence supporting the inclusion of ὑμῶν in the phrase "for the forgiveness of your sins" in Acts 2:38 is thus quite strong.

[18] Osburn, "The Third Person Imperative in Acts 2:38," 84.

[19] James H. Ropes, *The Beginnings of Christianity*, vol. 1: *The Acts of the Apostles* (London: Macmillan, 1926), 22.

Davis includes "your" in the "remission of sins" phrase, but he does not discuss the incongruity of associating a second person plural pronoun with a third person singular verb.[20] This is an odd omission in view of the emphasis he places on grammatical and syntactical rigor. Das equates repentance and baptism when he says, "The people should repent, that is, be baptized in order to receive the forgiveness of sins and the promise of the Spirit."[21] Das also writes that "Beasley-Murray concludes elsewhere that the Spirit is given through baptism."[22] Unfortunately Das has misrepresented Beasley-Murray, for Das should have continued by stating that Beasley-Murray wrote, "The new life of the Spirit is given in baptism according to Tit. 3.5, Jn. 3.5, but to faith in Jn. 1.12-13."[23] Beasley-Murray's position is better understood in his own words: "Naturally, God does not bind the impartation of the Spirit to the rite of baptism, any more than He binds His other gifts to it or to any other rite."[24]

Acts 2:38 in fact demonstrates perfect concord between pronoun and verb in the case of both "repent" and "be baptized." The passage can be diagrammed as follows.

- Repent [second person plural]
  - be baptized [third person singular]
  - each [third person singular] of you
- for the remission of your [second person plural] sins.

This structure illustrates that the command to be baptized is parenthetical and is not syntactically connected to remission of sins. When Peter commanded the people to repent, he was speaking to the crowd. Then the command to be baptized was directed to each individual. In the "remission of your sins" phrase, Peter again directed his words to the crowd collectively. Toussaint advocates this interpretation as well.[25]

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[20] Davis, "Another Look at the Relationship between Baptism and Forgiveness of Sins in Acts 2:38," 85.

[21] He seems to be following Bruner's assertion that "repentance is [equal to] being baptized" (Frederick Dale Bruner, *A Theology of the Holy Spirit* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970], 166; cited in Das, "Acts 8: Water, Baptism, and the Spirit," 166).

[22] Ibid.

[23] G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (New York: St. Martin's, 1962), 273.

[24] Ibid., 107.

[25] Stanley D. Toussaint, "Acts," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary,* New Testament, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1983), 359.

Tanton, however, criticizes the parenthetical insert position on four points.[26] First, he says that no comparable structure exists in Luke's writings or other Greek writings. While this may be true, it is nonetheless a weak argument. The absence of a similar structure neither strengthens nor weakens a particular interpretation of that structure. Furthermore a New Testament structural parallel is evident in Ephesians 4:26-27.

• Be angry [second person plural imperative]
• and do not sin [second person plural imperative]
      do not let the sun set [third person singular imperative,
            "sun" being the subject] on your [second person
            plural] anger
• a do not give place [second person plural imperative] to the
  devil.

"Anger" belongs to the subjects of the second person plural imperatives ("be angry" and "do not sin") because "your" (ὑμῶν) is a second person plural pronoun. Similarly in Acts 2:38 the sins being forgiven refer back to the subject of the second person plural imperative, "repent."[27]

Second, Tanton says that connecting forgiveness with repentance leaves the purpose of baptism "unexpressed." However, the purpose of repentance becomes "unexpressed" if one associates the forgiveness of sins with baptism. Third, Tanton states that the "more natural" reading connects forgiveness with baptism based on word proximity. This point about word proximity has already been addressed. Tanton's fourth argument against the parenthetical reading of baptism is grammatical. He says,

> This position rests upon a difference in number between the two
> verbs and the prepositional phrase. This is something which the
> standard Greek grammars do not address. While the grammars do
> discuss the agreement of subject and verb, they do not discuss the
> idea of agreement between verb and prepositional phrases.[28]

Tanton has confused the issue here. Agreement, or concord, exists between verbs and subject, not between verbs and phrases. Greek also demonstrates agreement between subject (or even ob-

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[26] Tanton, "The Gospel and Water Baptism: A Study of Acts 2:38," 40.
[27] Another example where the personal pronoun refers back to a subject other than that of the most immediate verb is in Luke 22:42: "not My will but Yours [second singular] be done [third singular imperative]." The word "yours" (σόν) refers back to the subject of the first clause.
[28] Ibid.

ject) and other substantives, such as pronouns and adjectives. The issue in Acts 2:38 is that of agreement between the personal pronoun ὑμῶν and its antecedent.

It is important to distinguish between the personal pronoun in the genitive case and the possessive pronoun. The pronoun in the genitive is by far the more prevalent means of indicating possession or attribution in the New Testament. Concord demands that the personal pronoun agree with its antecedent in gender, number, and person. The ending of a possessive pronoun, on the other hand, agrees in number with the object possessed.[29] The possessive pronoun agrees with its antecedent in person. The plural aspect of ὑμῶν does not therefore refer to sins (plural). If one wanted to emphasize "your sins'" (plural sins), the possessive pronoun (ὑμετέρων) would be used instead of the personal pronoun. Standard Greek grammars give little attention to this distinction.

CANONICAL ANALYSIS

The solution to the problem of Acts 2:38 can also proceed by canonical analysis. As discussed, one must not impose English word order rules on the Greek text. In English the phrase "for the forgiveness of your sins" may be connected to either "repent," "be baptized," or both. However, a study of the relationship between repentance, baptism, and forgiveness elsewhere in the New Testament helps resolve this issue.

JOHN THE BAPTIST AND BAPTISM

The first mention of baptism in the New Testament is that of John the Baptist (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3). Both verses have the phrase βαπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν ("a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins"). Davis attempts to use these passages to suggest that even John's baptism resulted in forgiveness.[30] However, he should have asked whether forgiveness is connected with repentance or with baptism. Both passages may be understood in one of two ways. First, John may have proclaimed a baptism following repentance for forgiveness of sins. Or John may have proclaimed a baptism of repentance resulting in forgiveness. If the latter is assumed, then one is obliged to address the question, "What is a baptism of repentance"?

There are two revealing clues as to how this is to be understood. The first clue is Luke 3:7-8. John said to the crowds coming

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[29] William G. MacDonald, *Greek Enchiridion* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986), 98.

[30] Davis, "Another Look at the Relationship between Baptism and Forgiveness of Sins in Acts 2:38," 86.

to be baptized, "'You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bring forth fruits in keeping with repentance.'" Clearly John expected repentance to precede baptism. A second clue is that Josephus reported that John expected spiritual cleansing to take place before baptism. "They must not employ it 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 behavior."[31]

LUKE 24:47

After His resurrection Jesus said that repentance and forgiveness are to be preached among all nations. Some manuscripts use εἰς to connect repentance and forgiveness, while others use καί. The two have essentially equal external attestation, but the reading preferred by the United Bible Societies Committee is εἰς.[32] If one takes εἰς as the reading, then the meaning is "repentance results in forgiveness." However, if one takes καί as the connective, the meaning is identical by understanding the καί as epexegetical. While baptismal regeneration is at best an inferred doctrine, the New Testament directly connects repentance with forgiveness (John 3:16; Acts 3:19; 10:43; 13:38-39; 16:30-31).[33]

ACTS 3:19

Davis uses this passage in a convoluted way to equate repentance with baptism.[34] He argues that the sequence in this verse is repentance, turning to God, and forgiveness, whereas in Acts 2:38 the sequence is repentance, baptism, and forgiveness. By seeing the verses as parallel, he equates baptism with turning to God. This argument may be challenged in several ways, but perhaps the easiest is to note Paul's words in Acts 26:18. Paul stated that a part of his mission is the "turning" (the same word used in 3:19) of the Gentiles. Yet Paul declared in 1 Corinthians 1:17 that Christ did not send him to baptize. Since Paul's mission did include turning but did not include baptizing, it can hardly be inferred that the two are equivalent. Again this seems to be a case of Davis's theology driving his interpretation.

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[31] Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 18.5.2.

[32] Bruce Metzger, ed., *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, corrected ed. (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1971), 188.

[33] While some passages place faith or believing in the place of repentance, that does not present a problem, for repentance and faith are two sides of the same coin. To paraphrase Peter in Acts 3:19, repentance is turning to and believing in Jesus.

[34] Davis, "Another Look at the Relationship between Baptism and Forgiveness of Sins in Acts 2:38," 85.

ACTS 16:30-31

Paul's words to the Philippian jailer are a classic declaration of the gospel. Yet these verses are rarely cited by those who advocate baptismal regeneration. The jailer's question was simple: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Paul and Silas gave an equally simple answer: "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved." Of course, the jailer was baptized, but Paul did not say it was a prerequisite to being saved. Nor did the baptism occur immediately; it was preceded by the jailer's washing of Paul's and Silas's wounds.

ACTS 22:16

This passage is usually translated as "arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling upon his name." The Greek sentence has two participles and two imperatives: "Arising, be baptized and wash away your sins, calling upon his name." Many English translations include two conjunctive "and's," but the Greek text has only one καί. The construction is participle-verb-καί-verb-participle. MacDonald suggests that the best approach to this verse is to associate each participle with its nearest verb.[35] This is entirely consistent with what Robertson calls the adverbial use of the participle.[36] Based on the Greek construction the washing away of sins is connected with "calling upon his name," not with being baptized. This agrees with Peter's own appeal to the prophet Joel in Acts 2:21 that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." As Polhill says, "The overarching term, however, is 'calling upon the name of the Lord,' the profession of faith in Christ that is the basis for the act of baptism."[37]

There is reason, however, to suppose that in Acts 22:16 Ananias was speaking of a symbolic washing, having recognized that Paul was already converted. When Jesus told Ananias to go to Paul, Ananias referred disparagingly to Paul as "this man" (Acts 9:13). Yet later Ananias addressed Paul as "brother" (9:17). Though ἀδελφός ("brother") is not limited to fellow Christians, the word is frequently used to refer to fellow believers. Brother "is a term adopted by the early disciples and Christians to express their fraternal love for each other in Christ. . . . Christ and the apostles

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[35] William MacDonald, "The Acts of the Apostles," in *Believer's Bible Commentary: New Testament* (Nashville: Nelson, 1990), 469.

[36] Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research.* 1109.

[37] Polhill, *Acts*, 461.

gave the name 'brother' to all Christians."[38] The significance in Ananias's words is in his shift from "this man" (Acts 9:13) to "brother" (v. 17).

THE GOSPEL JESUS PREACHED

Paul said that the "gospel is the power of God for salvation" (Rom. 1:16). Exactly what constitutes the gospel is nowhere explicitly stated, except perhaps in 1 Corinthians 15:1-11. Paul made no mention of baptism there as a part of the gospel. Moreover, Jesus preached that people should "repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). This was at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and there is no evidence that baptism in the name of Jesus was instituted before the resurrection. If it is indeed the gospel that saves, then according to Mark 1:15 and Paul's own testimony in 1 Corinthians 15 there is no justification for adding a requirement of water baptism as a condition for attaining salvation.

CONCLUSION

The best textual evidence supports the presence of ὑμῶν as a modifier of "sins" in Acts 2:38. New Testament syntax supports this position as well. Concerning the antecedent of ὑμῶν, there is no evidence to support the contention that "forgiveness of sins" modifies the command to be baptized. In other New Testament passages on forgiveness, repentance, and water baptism, it becomes increasingly difficult to find support for the doctrine of baptismal regeneration. Of course this does not dilute the significance of Christian water baptism, for as Bruce says, "the idea of an unbaptized Christian is simply not entertained in the New Testament."[39] Today, as then, baptism remains a unique testimony of the life-transforming change brought about by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in the believer. In water baptism a believer identifies with Jesus Christ in an action that symbolizes the shared experience of death and resurrection with and in Him.

[38] D. M. Pratt, "Brother," in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 1 (1979): 550.
[39] F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 77.