

ACTS 2:37-41
BAPTISM COMMANDED

“When [those listening] heard [Peter’s command] they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’ And Peter said to them, ‘Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 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.’ And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, ‘Save yourselves from this crooked generation.’ So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.”¹

Ask at random a dozen people what Baptists believe and it is almost guaranteed that each will tell you that Baptists believe in baptism. This is not quite accurate. Baptists are biblicists; Baptists believe all that the Bible teaches, beginning with the revelation of Christ as Saviour and Lord of life. Baptists are convinced of the fallen condition of mankind, the grace of God revealed through Jesus our Master, and salvation through faith in Him who gave His life as a ransom and rose from the dead. Consequently, Baptists believe that each one who believes in Him should openly confess his or her faith through identification with Him in His death and resurrection. Baptists do not believe that a ceremony can suffice to coerce God into accepting a person.

The biblical model for the initial confession of faith for any believer is baptism. Though one should be cautious about developing a doctrine based solely on the historical account of the apostolic churches, certain elements of the ancient practise are seen to have been commonly and universally practised among the early churches. If we desire to be identified as a New Testament church, we will make every effort to bring our own practise into line with the standard observed among those first churches.

One such practise that has been substantially altered among contemporary religious societies is baptism. What should be evident from even a casual reading of the New Testament is that baptism was never meant to be slavific—it was intended as a means of identification and not as a means of redemption. What should also be immediately evident is that only those who were saved were called to baptism, and baptism was administered immediately for those who did believe. I invite you to explore the purpose for this ordinance through considering the response of those who listened to the Apostles’ salvation message on that momentous Day of Pentecost.

THE QUESTION — “Brothers, what shall we do?” The modern pulpit is dysfunctional. Doctrine is seldom preached, and consequently, few people can define Christianity accurately. A little boy asked his father, “Daddy, what is a Christian?” The father carefully explained the biblical teachings of mankind’s sin and of Christ’s sacrifice for sin. He spoke of the transformation that occurs in the life of one who is born from above. When the little guy heard what a Christian should be, he asked, “Do we know one?”

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Consider what Peter said to prompt his listeners' response. "Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know ... you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it...

"This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing...

"Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified" [ACTS 2:22-24, 32, 33, 36].

Let me put Peter's sermon into concise, contemporary terms. We are sinners. We are responsible for the death of Christ. As surely as though we drove the nails into His hands ourselves, we are the cause of His death, which was a sacrifice because of sinful people. However, He did not remain dead, but He was raised from the dead. And now, God has poured out His Spirit on all who willingly accept this Jesus as Master of life.

Peter charged those listening to his message with deicide—God-murder, murder of the long-anticipated Messiah. I question whether we can actually grasp the horror generated in the hearts of those hearing his words. The Jewish people had awaited the advent of Messiah for centuries. That hope had sustained them through exile, oppression and occupation by foreign troops of the land they loved. Yet, when He appeared, the people rejected Him and murdered Him. Peter was charging those listening with exalting their own distorted religious values above God's offer of a Saviour and Lord.

Something like that has happened in our modern world. We have adopted in the place of the Christian Faith that once prevailed a new religion (though it is as old as sin), a religion identified as **Moralistic Therapeutic Deism**. Two sociologists at the University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill) wrote a book entitled "The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers," (Oxford University Press).² After interviewing 3000 teenagers, they summed up their beliefs as consisting of:

- A god who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth;
- God wants people to be good, nice and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions;
- The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself;
- God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem;
- Good people go to heaven when they die.

What these researchers describe is a reflection of the prevailing religious views of contemporary society as a whole. This modern faith is simply a synthesis of the teaching of essentially all major religions—Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim, and Christian. Perhaps "Chicken Soup for the Soul" theology makes the adherent feel good about himself or herself, but it really has no basis in truth other than a vague feeling that it is right. In the absence of sound teaching, such belief feels right, but it is dreadfully wrong.

² Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford University Press, New York, NY 2005) 162-3

The message Peter delivered is the message that is still required today, and it is the message that is still rejected by those who are convinced that they can somehow justify themselves. The Word of God is quite clear that,

“None is righteous, no, not one;
no one understands;
no one seeks for God.
All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;
no one does good,
not even one.”

[ROMANS 3:10b-12]

This truth is related to another dark truth: “the wages of sin is death” [ROMANS 6:23a]. Because we face death, we know that there is an inherent flaw in our existence. As one trained in the medical sciences, I know that body is so designed that it should never wear out, being constantly renewed; and yet, we die. Despite feedback mechanisms and repair systems built into the biochemical structure of each cell, the human body and all its associated systems grinds inexorably toward self-destruction and ultimately death.

What shall we do? How shall we address our sinful situation? What shall we do to honour God? What shall we do because we are sinners? What shall we do because we must give an answer to God who gave us our being? What shall we do?

THE ANSWER — When Peter’s listeners became his interlocutors, he responded to their query with one word—*repent!* Turn around. We have been thinking one way; we need to think another way. We have attempted to be religious, tried to be good, struggled to please God through doing things in our own way; now, we need to be saved. What we cannot do through our own efforts—make ourselves acceptable to God—we must permit God Himself to do for us.

When Peter declared that those listening were to repent, he was but repeating the message he had heard from Jesus Himself. Jesus was preceded in this declaration by John. Mark’s Gospel begins by stating, “John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” [MARK 1:4]. As Jesus began His ministry, His message was identical to that of John. “After John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel’” [MARK 1:14, 15].

The word “repent” is a military term that meant, “About face.” Originally, the word meant an “afterthought.” In time, the word came to signify a change of heart and a subsequent change of actions. Often the second thought leads to rejection of the first thought; but simply thinking right is not enough, one must also do right. Repentance must involve both a change of mind and a change of action.

A man may change his mind and come to see that his actions were wrong but be so much in love with his old ways that he will not change them. A man may change his ways but his mind remains the same, changing his ways only because of fear or prudence. True repentance involves a change of mind *and* a change of action. However, doing right is impossible until we are empowered to do so; that is what God does for us when we “turn around.” When we repent, God empowers us to do right.

We cannot go to church enough to make ourselves righteous. We cannot do enough “good deeds” to make ourselves acceptable to God. Though we may try ever so hard, we cannot be good. We need someone who will set us free from all condemnation. That “someone” has already been provided in the Person of Jesus who is the Christ. God informs us, “While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” [ROMANS 5:6-8]. What we cannot do, God has already done for us.

Paul identified those who are saved as a “new creation” [2 CORINTHIANS 5:17-6:2]. He testified, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

“Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For he says,

‘In a favourable time I listened to you,
and in a day of salvation I have helped you.’

“Behold, now is the favourable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.”

How may one have peace with God? The answer is that an individual must be born from above and into the Family of God. At the heart of any discussion concerning baptism is the question of whether one is baptised in order to make her into a “new creation,” whether one is baptised as a promise of being made a “new creation,” or whether one is baptised because she has already been made into a “new creation.”

Paul and Silas, imprisoned in Philippi because of preaching the Good News of Christ, saw God intervene through shaking the prison doors off their hinges. The jailer, seeing what was happening, was terrified. Fearing that the prisoners were about to flee and knowing that he would be held responsible for any escape; he was prepared to take his own life. Witnessing this desperate act, the missionaries dissuaded the man by yelling out, “Do not harm yourself.” That man, obviously relieved and deeply moved by the kind actions of the Christians despite the wicked treatment they had received, fell down before them and asked, “What must I do to be saved” [ACTS 16:30]. That is the question each of us should ask; and the answer remains, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” [ACTS 16:31].

Jesus the Master presented His own life as a sacrifice for sin, but that sacrifice has no value to you until you accept it as your own. His sacrifice was offered up to the Father for you. Under the Old Testament Law, those seeking peace with God brought an animal as a sacrifice. Before the altar of God, the one seeking peace with God—seeking forgiveness of sin—would place his and on the head of the sheep or the ox, and confessing his sin, he would slit the animal’s throat. In doing this, the worshipper was acknowledging that his own sin caused the death of the innocent animal.

When we accept God's assessment of our condition, we are confessing that our sin caused the death of the Son of God. Though innocent of all sin, Jesus has nevertheless provided atonement for all mankind. This is the reason Paul identifies the Master as "the Saviour of all people, *especially* of those who believe" [1 TIMOTHY 4:10]. Though salvation is offered to everyone, it has value only to those who receive God's sacrifice of His Son and the gracious offer of life in Christ. Salvation is offered to all; but each individual must accept the Saviour Whom God offers on His terms.

When you have been brought to the point of asking, "What should I do," and I pray that you are now at that point if you have not previously arrived there, I trust that you understand that you must believe. You must believe that Jesus is the Christ—very God in human flesh. You must believe that He died because of your sin, and that He was raised from the dead so that you might be declared free of all condemnation. This is the biblical answer that I cite week-by-week in anticipation that some will be saved. "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved... For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved'" [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13].

THE EXPRESSION OF FAITH — "Repent and be baptised," was Peter's response to the plea of stricken listeners. God has no "secret service." Christians are called to live openly rather than attempting to be secret believers. Despite a pronounced reticence within modern society to identify openly as a Christian, the New Testament calls for open demonstration of love from those who would claim a relationship with the Master. Among the Proverbs is one that speaks precisely of this distinction.

"Better is open rebuke
than hidden love.
Faithful are the wounds of a friend;
profuse are the kisses of an enemy."

[PROVERBS 27:5, 6]

Faith in the Risen Son of God results in the desire to identify openly with Him. Bold affection is the Spirit's mark upon the life of a believer.

Older translations rendered this account of Peter's response in a manner that engendered more heat than light. Those translations lead some readers, who fail to consider Scripture in its entirety instead of isolating one portion, to think that one must be baptised in order to be saved. The Greek term [eis] that is used by Peter means "on account of" or "on the basis of." Translating literally, Peter said, "Repent, and let each of you be baptised in the Name of Jesus Christ on the basis of the forgiveness of your sins."

Let me show you that particular use of the preposition in the Word of God. In LUKE 5:12-14, Doctor Luke gives an account of a leper Jesus healed. In VERSE FOURTEEN, Jesus is recorded as saying; "make an offering for your cleansing ... **for** a proof to them." The leper was not to make an offering in order to be healed; but because he was already healed, he was commanded to make an offering. A similar account, with similar language is given in MATTHEW 8:1-4.

In MATTHEW 12:41, Jesus says that the men of Nineveh “repented at the preaching of Jonah,” using this same preposition. Clearly, the men of Nineveh repented because of Jonah’s preaching. Similar language is used in MATTHEW 10:41, where those who receive a prophet because he is a prophet are promised a prophet’s reward.

The forgiveness of sin calls for a response, and the response commanded of one who is forgiven is to identify with Him who forgives. Repentance precedes forgiveness of sin; repentance secures the forgiveness of sin. Those individuals who heard Peter’s message were “cut to the heart” *before* they asked what should be done, and their stricken consciences were evident *well before* they were baptised. The Spirit of God brought conviction just as Jesus had promised He would; repenting, the stricken people received forgiveness of sin. Just so, when you repent, we receive forgiveness of our sin. In repentance, we turn to Christ in faith and cease depending on your own efforts. Repenting, we believe the Good News that He died because of our sin and that He was raised for our justification, and we therefore immediately receive the forgiveness of sin.

In LUKE 24:47, Jesus is commissioning His disciples; and in that charge, He asserts that the forgiveness of sin is conditioned upon repentance—baptism is not in view. In a sermon following the healing of a lame man, Peter made it quite clear that forgiveness of sin is based upon repentance [ACTS 3:19]; there is no mention of baptism. Throughout all the accounts of apostolic preaching, the forgiveness of sin is the result of repentance and/or faith, which are two sides of the same coin [see ACTS 10:43; 13:38 ff.; 26:18]. Repentance *leads to* the forgiveness of sin, baptism, and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

I do not mean to imply that baptism is unimportant—it is the appropriate initial response after one is born from above. Nevertheless, I must ensure that the order of faith and the proper response to faith meets the standard set forth in the Word. Those who are saved are called to be baptised as an expression of faith and not in order to secure faith. Baptism pictures the faith of the one baptised, according to the Word of God.

In ROMANS 6, Paul looks back to the baptism of the Romans believers as he urges them to live godly lives. Listen, as he reminds them of their baptism. “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

“For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him” [ROMANS 6:3-8].

In baptism, the child of God confesses his or her faith that Jesus died, that He was buried and that He raised from the dead. At the same time, the believer identifies fully with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection, confessing that he or she was dead in trespasses and sins, and that the old nature has been buried with Christ through faith in Him as God’s perfect sacrifice. Then, just as Christ was raised up out of the grave, so the confessing child of God asserts faith that he or she now walks in newness of life.

This is Paul’s argument against living without regard to one’s manner of life. In baptism, the Christian openly confessed that she was the cause of Christ’s death; and she confessed confidence that she was raised to new life with Him. How could a believer, therefore, live as though all that she confessed when she was baptised is a lie?

I read the Book of Acts, and I observe that every individual who comes to faith is baptised. There is no delay; there are neither baptismal classes nor a probationary period. Those who receive forgiveness of sin are baptised immediately. Follow the account of those first Christians. Those who received Peter's word were baptised [ACTS 2:41]. Later in Acts, we read an account detailing Philip's ministry in Samaria. When the Samaritans "believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ [they] were baptized, both men and women" [ACTS 8:12]. The Ethiopian official was baptised only after he believed and confessed Jesus as Lord [ACTS 8:36-38]. The rabid rabbi, Saul of Tarsus, was baptised after he believed [ACTS 9:18].

Cornelius and those gathered with him in his house were baptised when they believed [ACTS 10:47, 48]. Lydia, the first convert in Europe, was baptised after the Lord opened her heart [ACTS 16:15]. The jailer in Philippi was baptised when he believed the message Paul and Silas preached [ACTS 16:33]. Crispus, the synagogue ruler, believed, as did many others in Corinth, and when they believed, they were baptised [ACTS 18:8]. When the disciples of John the Baptist whom Paul met in Ephesus heard the call to repentance and faith in Christ Jesus, they believed and were baptised [ACTS 19:5].

Without exception, throughout the historical account of the nascent churches believers are baptised immediately. Only believers are baptised, and they are baptised because they are believers instead of being baptised in order to make them believers. Let me stress the truths that should be obvious to each listener.

- *All believers were baptised.*
- *Only believers were baptised.*
- *Only those able to believe were baptised.*
- *Baptism was a decisive declaration of identity with the Risen Son of God.*

I do not want anyone to miss the point of Peter's call to faith in the Son of God. We are born in sin, and nothing we might do will change that fact. The evidence for this dark truth is witnessed in death, even of those who have not sinned egregiously and who yet die in innocence. Sin marks our lives because it has contaminated the universe. The Son of God has been offered as a sacrifice for sin, and all who are willing to believe that He died because of their sin and that He was raised from the dead to declare them free of condemnation, receive forgiveness of sin and are welcomed into the Family of God.

Those who are saved are commanded by the One who saves them to identify with Him, and the means of identification He commands is baptism. This baptism is not a condition to receive the gift of life, for then it would not be a gift; rather, this baptism is an expression that the one baptised has received the gift of life. It would have been unthinkable in the early days of apostolic faith that one who professed to have been saved would refuse baptism. In fact, that willingness for identification was so strong that one who was not baptised would have been considered a pretender to the Faith.

There are religious societies that claim through this act to wash sin away. Christians know that this cannot be true. A glorious old hymn asks, and answers,

What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.
What can make me whole again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

O, precious is the flow, that makes me white as snow.
No other fount I know, nothing but the blood of Jesus.

The Word of God is clear, salvation is found only in Christ the Lord, and not in baptism. Yet, those who are saved are called to baptism.

The initial ordinance is not a means of grace; it is the expression of grace already received. Baptism is not a way to heaven; it pictures the grace of God expressed through the sacrifice of Christ the Lord. We cannot boast of what we have done; instead, we humbly confess that God has shown us great mercy. This is the testimony of Scripture. “By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” [EPHESIANS 2:8-10].

When we get to heaven, it will be by the mercies of Christ our Saviour. None of us will lift our hands and say, “Glory to God, I made it through my own efforts; see what I did!” No, a thousand times no! When we, together with all the redeemed of the Lord surround His glorious throne, we will confess to Christ our Lord and Saviour:

“Worthy are you to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood you
ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation,
and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on the earth.”

[REVELATION 5:9b, 10]

This is what we picture in our baptism. We picture His mercy and His grace toward us. We picture what He has accomplished, and we identify as belonging to Him. In our baptism, we picture for all who witness that testimony the Faith that He established—the Faith that will continue until the Day He returns. Why would anyone delay this glorious testimony? Why would any child of the Living God accept anything less than this that the Master commanded? Why would any believer argue against God’s best and most glorious statement of redemption?

Are you a child of the Living God? Have you been born from above? Our invitation is ever and always an invitation to life in the Beloved Son of God. The Word of God invites all who are willing to come to life. I cited the words earlier in this message and I now remind you of those wonderful words of life. “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved... ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’” [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13].

Have you openly confessed Him since you believed? Our invitation is for you who name His Name to identify openly with Him as He has commanded. Come, confessing Him, follow Him in baptism. Come, openly taking your stand with Christ and with His people in the waters of baptism. Come boldly; come now. Amen.