

Acts 2:38; Baptismal Remission; and Campbellism

The History:

The idea of regeneration through baptism can be traced back to about AD 370 when infants were baptised with the intent of salvation, partly due to a reaction to the high mortality rate. The practise became compulsory in the Roman Empire in AD 416.

The teaching of Baptismal Remission of sins also stems largely from the Roman Catholic teaching of Justification by (sacramental) infusion, instead of imputation, (Rom.4). (1) This 'infusion' teaches that the righteousness of God is infused into the believer through the use of 'sacraments', including water baptism. Ultimately this becomes a salvation by works and opposes the righteousness of God being *imputed* (credited) to us by His grace alone through faith, (Eph.2:8,9; Rom.4)

Apart from this Roman Catholic history, in the Nineteenth Century a movement which called itself the '*Restoration Movement*', and largely developed by Alexander Campbell, made an alleged 'discovery' of what many now call 'Baptismal Remission'. They developed the doctrine of Baptismal Remission of sins and their key reference was the Scripture Acts 2:38: '***Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost***'. Various leaders in the movement began to state that no one had the promise of the Holy Spirit until water Baptism.

It was Walter Scott who in 1827, '*arranged the several items of faith, repentance, baptism, remission of sins, the Holy Spirit, and eternal life; restored them to the church under the title of the ancient gospel, and preached it successfully to the world...*' (2) These were later used as 'steps' in the plan of salvation. However, it was Alexander Campbell who after meeting with Scott, is widely recognised as the one who publicly and fully 'restored' this teaching of water baptism for the remission of sins.

In 1820 Campbell debated a Presbyterian, John Walker, on the question of infant Baptism. During this debate Campbell stated: '*Baptism is connected with the promise of the remission of sins, and the gift of the Holy Spirit*' (3) This was Campbell's first known public statement of such a doctrine. The doctrine of Baptismal Remission was further developed by Campbell in another debate with McCalla in 1823 in which he stated: '*The preposition 'eis' here [Acts 2:38] means in order to - in order to the remission of sins*'. (4) In another debate with a Presbyterian, N.L. Rice, he stated: '*Christian baptism is for the remission of past sins...*' (5) '*When Paul was immersed, it was declared and understood by all parties, that all his previous sins were washed away in the act of immersion*'. (6)

Later Campbell stated: '*...immersion and regeneration are two Bible names for the same act...*' (7) '*That in and by the act of immersion, or soon as our bodies are put under water, at that very instant our former or old sins are all washed away, provided only that we are true believers...Who will not concur with me in saying that, Christian Immersion is the Gospel in Water?*' (8) '*If immersion be equivalent to regeneration and regeneration be of the same import with being born again, then being born again and being immersed are the same thing, for this plain reason that things which are equal to the same thing are equal to one another*'. (9) '*I am bold therefore, to affirm, that every one of them who, in*

the belief of what the Apostle spoke, was immersed and did in the very instant he was put under the water, receive the forgiveness of his sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit'. (10)

An interesting sideline to this history is found when one considers that the Campbellite doctrine actually contradicted the early salvation experience of the very men who founded 'Campbellism'. The Campbell brothers, Alexander and Thomas, had themselves in the beginning claimed salvation *before* they were water baptised by a Baptist pastor.

The 'restoration movement' later developed into two major branches - *The Disciples of Christ* and *The Church of Christ*. These spread to other countries such as Australia where, although there are different affiliations, many *Churches of Christ* still teach Baptismal Remission.

The Doctrine:

Campbellism holds strongly to the idea of the 'possibility of the believers apostasy'. Baptismal Remission for sins thus implies strongly that the security of the believer is not eternal. At its core it denies the preservation of the saints and that God has Justified and Glorified his people (Rom.8:29,30) and sealed them unto the day of redemption, (Eph.4:30).

The fact that faith is not enough but must have Baptism after it and therefore *added* to it, denies the doctrine of faith alone through the imputed righteousness of God, (Rom.4).

We are cleansed only by the blood of Jesus, (1Pet.1:18-19). We are justified by Gods grace (Tit.3:7) and the blood of Christ (Rom.5:9). If water Baptism were to remit sins then the work of the cross is not finished, since *man would be able to do something towards this*. We are simply not saved by any 'works of righteousness', (Tit.3:5-7; Eph.2:8,9).

Baptism to the Jews signified an *identification with a name*. They were baptised '***in the name of Jesus Christ***', (Acts 2:38). To Christians today it signifies something that has already happened - death to the old way of life and resurrection to a new life, (Rom.6:1-4). Baptism is called a 'likeness' (Rom.6:4-6) and a 'figure' (1Pet.3:21).

The Lord also says: '***...but he that believeth not shall be damned***', (Mk.16:16). It should be noted that this negative statement does not include a reference to baptism, making it clear that what saves a person is true living faith in Jesus Christ. This is made clear in Ephesians 2:8, '***For by grace are ye saved through faith...***' The word '*saved*' is translated from a Greek word which is a perfect passive participle - it means that this salvation took place at some point in the past and is continuing on in the present (perfect tense), being accomplished by Jesus Christ Himself with no action on our part (ie. 'passive voice'). If water baptism is necessary for salvation, then Ephesians 2:8 and many others verses should read: '*ye are saved through faith and baptism*'!

In 1Corinthians 15:14 Paul makes no mention of water baptism and elsewhere Paul said he did not come to baptise. This arguably shows that the Gospel and faith were the important issues to him rather than any water baptism.

Baptismal Remission proponents are apt to take Scriptures out of context, such as Acts 2:38. However, if we read elsewhere in Peter's teaching we soon see that he teaches our only cleansing is by the blood of Christ, (1Pet.1:18,19).

As for Acts 2:38: '***Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the***

Holy Ghost. Many do not read the next verse - *'For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.'* The *'promise'* was not water baptism but the *Holy Spirit Himself!*

The preposition *'for'* in the phrase *'for the remission of sins'* is the Greek *'eis'*. Literally here in context it means *'for the purpose of identifying you with the remission of sins'*. This same preposition is used in 1 Corinthians 10:2 in the phrase *'and were all baptized unto ['eis'] Moses'*. Here these people *identified themselves with* the work and ministry of *Moses*.

The context is important. The Cambellite interpretation of *'for'* in Acts 2:38 disregards some important interpretation principles: the wide usage of this word; the context; and the interpretation of other Scriptures on this topic.

The *'eis'* here simply does not mean *'in order to'* as the Baptismal Remission exponents teach and the Campbellites taught. The preposition *'eis'* has no such one strict meaning in Scripture. An example of this is in Matthew 12:41: *'they repented at ['eis'] the preaching of Jonah'*. If one were to insert the meaning *'in order to'* or *'for'* in the place of *'eis'* here (and in numerous other Scriptures), the reader might see the error of such a restricted interpretation of *'eis'*. In Matthew 12:41 the *'eis'* is rather the basis or ground - ie. on the basis of the name of the prophet Jonah.

The word *'for'* in English obviously has a wide context of usages. So too, an examination of the more than 1,700 times the Greek word *'eis'* is used will show various categories of meanings which can be grouped as follows: *'into'*, *'unto'* (direction); *'in'*, *'among'*, *'upon'* (position); *'as'*, *'for'*, *'against'* (relationship to); *'because of'* (causative); *'for the purpose of'* (purpose).

Matthew 3:11 is arguably a key passage in understanding the use of *'eis'* and could be seen as the closest parallel to Acts 2:38. It is the *first* New Testament use of the verb, *'baptizo'* followed by the preposition *'eis'*: *'I indeed baptize you with water unto ['eis'] repentance...'* If we were to insert the meaning *'in order to'* or *'for'* here we would have baptism *'in order to'* get repentance! Similarly, with many other Scriptures: eg. Matt.28:19 - *'baptize in [eis] the name of the Father, Son...'* - If we were to insert the meaning *'in order to'* or *'for'* here we would baptize to get the Trinity, (see more examples in Mark.1:9; Acts 8:16; Acts 19:3; Acts 19:5; Rom.6:3,4; 1Cor.1:13; 1Cor.10:2, etc).

The context is important.

A second important interpretation principle to consider is *Scripture interprets Scripture*.

There are numerous verses that never mention baptism, but only faith, (Acts 16:31; Jn.1:12; 3:14-18; 3:36; 6:47; 20:31...). Acts 10:43: *'To him give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins'*. From the bulk of Scripture it should be obvious that water baptism is not essential for salvation, (1Cor.1:13-24; 15:1-5; Rom.1:16; 10:9-14; Eph.2:8,9; Acts 10:43; 13:38,39; 16:31; Jn.3:14-18,36; 5:24; 1Jn.5:1). It is also a fact that many were saved or forgiven without water baptism, (Matt.9:1-7,22; Mk.5:34; 10:52; Lk.7:48; 17:19; 18:9-14, etc).

The Old Testament sacrifices did not in themselves take away sins. *'For the law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually*

make the comers thereunto perfect. For then would they not have ceased to be offered? because that the worshipers once purged should have had no more conscience of sins. But in those sacrifices there is a remembrance again made of sins every year. For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins', (Heb.10:1-4; see also Heb.9:9-12). So too, Baptism is a type, a *'figure'* of something real, (1Pet.3:21; Rom.6:4-6). It can never in itself take away sins.

The Bible clearly states that the water has no significance without a sincere belief in God. In the Book of Acts, the eunuch said to Philip, *'See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?'* Philip made it clear to the eunuch the message of the Gospel and that he must believe first and then be baptised, (Acts 8:35-37, see also Acts 2:41).

Throughout Our Lord's teaching, there is the insistence of a conversion of the heart as a necessary condition for admission to His kingdom. Jesus simply said, *'Except a man be born again He cannot see the kingdom of God'*, (Jn.3:3).

Interestingly, both the Roman Catholic religion and many of the Campbellites, when pressed traditionally or theoretically, make exceptions to their belief that one must be water baptised to be saved. For the Roman Catholic religion these exceptions are *'Martyrdom'* and *'Charity'* (or *'desire'*), and they are allowed because of the *belief* or *faith* in the persons concerned. Yet these very exceptions only prove that just *believing* is the key to baptism!

A difficult passage for the exponents of Baptismal Remission is the passage referring to the penitent thief, (Lk.23:32-43). The penitent thief who died on the cross next to Jesus was not baptised with water and yet was saved by faith. This penitent thief simply *believed*, was saved and was promised eternal life!

Baptismal Remission is in fact a dangerous heresy because it strikes at the heart of Justification by faith alone through the imputed righteousness of God alone. It sets up a standard for salvation that is the work of man instead of God. It introduces exceptions and controversies that oppose the spirit of grace; for *'if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work'*, (Rom.11:6).

Terry Arnold

Source and Recommended reading: *'Acts 2:38 and Baptismal Remission'* by Bob L. Ross (Pilgrim Publications, PO Box 66, Pasedena, Texas, 77501).

(1) See various articles by search in *Diakrisis (Australia)* on the subject of Justification.

(2) *'The Gospel Restored'* by Walter Scott, P.6

(3) *'Campbell/Walker Debate'*, P.13; HollyWood, Old Paths Book Club.

(4) *'Campbell/McCalla Debate'*, P.124; Kansas, Old Paths Book Club.

(5) *'Campbell/Rice Debate'*, P.472; Indianapolis, Old Paths Book Club.

(6) *'Campbell/Rice Debate'*, P.524.

(7) *'Millenial Harbinger'*, Vol.1, 'Extra', P.27,28,42

(8) *'Campbell/Rice Debate'*, P.443; Indianapolis, Old Paths Book Club.

(9) *'Millenial Harbinger'*, Vol.1, 'Extra', P.28

(10) *'Campbell/Rice Debate'*, P.443 Indianapolis, Old Paths Book Club.