

“Repent and Be Baptized...”- An Exegesis of Acts 2:38 (with Reference to the Arminian Teaching of Believer Baptism)

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Fifty days had passed since the Passover Sabbath. Jerusalem was buzzing with pilgrims from all over the Mediterranean world. The day broke calm as these God-fearing Jews gathered to celebrate the Harvest Festival of Weeks. But the calm of that Pentecost morning was shattered by the sound of a violent wind and the sight of tongues of fire resting on the apostles. But as unusual as those sights and sounds were, it was the sounds of foreign languages coming from the mouths of the apostles which threw the crowd into confusion.

*What does this mean?*¹

*They have had too much wine.*²

“Wrong!” was the gist of Peter’s response. This was God pouring out his Holy Spirit, kindling in cold, unbelieving hearts the fire of his love, just as Joel had prophesied. So Peter, empowered by the Holy Spirit, preached Spirit-breathed words to all those present. It was a powerful law-gospel sermon.

*You put (Jesus) to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death...Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.*³

Peter’s words fulfilled their desired purpose.

*When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”*⁴

*Peter replied, “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.”*⁵

What does this mean?

As confessional Lutherans, we consider baptism to be a sacrament, that is, a sacred rite, commanded by Christ, using earthly elements connected with the Word of God, through which God gives to a sinner forgiveness of sins and life and therefore assures him of his salvation.⁶

A significant segment of Christian churches in America today does not adopt this same understanding of baptism. For Baptists, Methodists, Pentecostals, and others whose theological roots reach down into Arminian soil, baptism holds a much different meaning. Wayne Grudem, one of today’s prominent Armenian⁷ theologians, sums up the Arminian viewpoint: “Baptism...is a *symbol of beginning the Christian life*.”⁸ Millard Erickson, another prominent Armenian theologian, expands on this understanding of baptism:

Christ commanded the act of baptism (Matt. 28:19-20). Since it was ordained by him, it is properly understood as an ordinance rather than a sacrament. It does not produce any spiritual change in the one baptized. We continue to practice baptism simply because Christ commanded it and because it serves as a form of proclamation. It confirms the fact of one’s salvation to

¹ Acts 2:12. All Scripture references are from the New International Version, unless denoted otherwise.

² Acts 2:13

³ Acts 2:23-24,36

⁴ Acts 2:37

⁵ Acts 2:38

⁶ Lyle W. Lange, *God So Loved the World: A Study of Christian Doctrine*, p.477.

⁷ From this point forward, I will refer to the proponents of “believer baptism” as Arminians. Certainly there are other groups besides those mentioned above which would qualify for inclusion in this group. For the purposes of this treatment of Acts 2:38 and the concepts of repentance and baptism, the “term” Arminian seems appropriate.

⁸ Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith*, p.378

oneself and affirms it to others. The act of baptism conveys no direct spiritual benefit or blessing. In particular, we are not regenerated through baptism, for baptism presupposes faith and the salvation to which faith leads. It is, then, a testimony that one has already been regenerated. If there is a spiritual benefit, it is the fact that baptism brings us into membership or participation in the local church.⁹

Since baptism “presupposes faith” and therefore is merely a “symbol” and “testimony that one has already been regenerated,” it follows that Arminians would insist that *only believers* should be baptized. Millard Erickson comments, “All these considerations lead to the conclusion that responsible believers are the only people who are to be baptized.”¹⁰ Wayne Grudem holds the same viewpoint. “Baptism is appropriately administered only to those who give a believable profession of faith in Jesus Christ.”¹¹

One of the arguments which these theologians use to advance their teaching of “believer baptism” is the descriptions of the baptisms which took place in the early Christian church in the book of Acts. They insist that only believers should be baptized because the book of Acts describes only the baptisms of those who already had repented and had come to saving faith. Wayne Grudem asserts, “The pattern revealed at several places in the New Testament is that only those who give a believable profession of faith should be baptized.”¹² Arminians see the words of Peter from Acts 2:38 as strong support of this practice.

I have been asked to give an exegetical study of Acts 2:38. By this study I intend to demonstrate that Acts 2:38 strongly supports what other portions of Scripture also affirm: that Lutherans correctly understand baptism as a life-giving sacrament. I will refute the Arminian teaching of believer baptism by an exegetical study of Acts 2:38 and by referencing the other clear Bible passages which speak about baptism. In doing so, I hope to expose some of the dangerous, faith-threatening misunderstandings which Arminians have regarding the nature of regeneration and repentance so that we might be better equipped to present God’s truths to them.¹³

Acts 2:38:

Πέτρος δὲ πρὸς αὐτούς· μετανοήσατε, [φησίν,] καὶ βαπτισθήτω ἕκαστος ὑμῶν ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰς ἄφεσιν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ὑμῶν καὶ λήμψεσθε τὴν δωρεὰν τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος.

Peter replied, “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.

Πέτρος δὲ πρὸς αὐτούς...[φησίν,]- *And Peter said to them...*

Peter’s words in Acts 2:38 follow on the heels of the crowd’s reaction to Peter’s Pentecost sermon. “*The people were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’*” The editors of the UBS New Testament question whether the verb φησίν was really a part of the original text (and therefore place it in brackets). There is no textual evidence which would cause us to doubt its place in the text. Finally, the meaning is clear whether the verb is present or not.

Μετανοήσατε- (You all) repent... (a 2nd person plural aorist active imperative verb)

⁹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*. p.1105

¹⁰ Erickson, p.1106

¹¹ Grudem, p.377

¹² Grudem, p.378

¹³ It is the Armenians’ incorrect understanding of these key Biblical concepts which skews their understanding of baptism.

There are two main issues with which we need to grapple when considering this extremely significant word. In the first place, what exactly is Peter calling on his hearers to do when he tells them to repent? Secondly, who is the one who brings about this repentance? How we answer these questions significantly influences one's understanding of the next half of Peter's command, "Be baptized."

So what does it mean to repent? R.C.H. Lenski comments: "In μετανοειν and μετανοια we have one of the great concepts of the Bible. The word originally signified to perceive or understand afterward (μετα), i.e., too late; then it advanced to the idea of a later change of mind and thus came to mean 'repent.'"¹⁴

In the New Testament, μετανοειν was used in both a narrow sense and a wide sense. In its narrow sense, to repent meant to have a change of heart *about sin*. A person recognized that his thoughts, words, and actions were contradicting the will of God. Subsequently, he had feelings of guilt and remorse about his sinfulness. He had a contrite heart—a heart broken over his sin.

In the wider sense of the word, μετανοειν meant to have a change of heart *about sin and* to have a change of heart *about Christ*. It means to be sorrowful over one's sins and to put faith in Jesus as one's Savior from sin. The Augsburg Confession speaks of this broader usage of repentance in Article XII:

Now properly speaking, true repentance is nothing else than to have contrition and sorrow, or terror about sin, and yet at the same time to believe in the gospel and absolution that sin is forgiven and grace is obtained through Christ. Such faith, in turn, comforts the heart and puts it at peace.¹⁵

It is this broader concept of repentance (contrition over sin and faith in Christ) which Luke employs in Acts 2:38. Lenski comments on μετανοειν in this passage:

When it is used without modifiers as here, 'to repent' includes the entire inner change or contrition and faith (like επιστρεφειν, 'to turn,' 'to be converted')... So 'repent' here = turn wholly to Jesus as your Savior ('Lord and Christ,' v.36) and accept him as such. In order to effect this change of heart Peter had placed so fully before them just who and what Jesus is. It is this Jesus who is thus to draw them to repentance.¹⁶

The last portion of Lenski's statement answers the question, "Who brings about the attitude of repentance in a person's heart?" This is the work of God the Son, Jesus Christ, who won salvation for all people. This is the work of God the Holy Spirit, who changes hearts through the Word of Christ. It was the Holy Spirit-inspired Word which Peter preached to the crowds on Pentecost. Through Peter's preaching of the law, the Holy Spirit was shattering unrepentant hearts, convicting them of their sin and unbelief: "You...put (Jesus) to death by nailing him to the cross." In turn, Peter healed human hearts with the truths of salvation. "God raised him from the dead...God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified both Lord and Christ."

I believe we are safe in assuming that many of Peter's hearers already had saving faith in their hearts when they cried out, "Brothers, what shall we do?" It was a cry which stemmed from hearts broken over their previous rejection of who Christ was. It was a cry which expressed that they were beginning to grasp exactly what Jesus meant for their eternal salvation. When Peter responded to their question by saying, "Repent," he was reiterating the very same law-gospel message which he had proclaimed just previous. "Repent" is a word which summarizes the effect which the Holy Spirit was bringing about through the Word.¹⁷ This biblical

¹⁴ R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, p.105

¹⁵ *The Book of Concord*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, p.44

¹⁶ Lenski, p.105

¹⁷ The active voice of the verb Μετανοήσατε could lead someone to a grave misunderstanding of who is responsible for repentance in a person's heart. The active voice could lead someone to believe that repentance is something which a person must *do*. *He must*

definition of repentance will be discussed in greater depth later when we examine how the Arminians falsely define the nature of repentance.

At this point an expected objection should be addressed. Those from an Arminian church may exclaim, “Ha! You admit it. You do think those who were baptized on Pentecost were already believers when they were baptized. You just said Peter’s sermon worked faith in their hearts. This proves that believer baptism is the right way! It proves that baptism is merely a symbol of existing faith.” That would be a faulty conclusion. It is true that Luke goes on to report that “those who accepted the message were baptized” on the day of Pentecost.¹⁸ But it would be illegitimate to deduce that baptism is only for those who already believe simply because believers were baptized on Pentecost.¹⁹ Receiving baptism would be the Spirit-borne desire for anyone who comes to know what God offers in baptism—the offer and assurance of forgiveness and eternal life. It’s important to keep in mind that this account is simply a *description* of what occurred on Pentecost. The descriptive events of Pentecost should not be treated as a *prescription* which dictates to us who should be baptized. The *prescriptive* command of Christ dictates to us for whom baptism is intended. In the same way, we formulate our baptismal practices by using the many Scripture references which explain what baptism accomplishes. The very words which Peter goes on to speak in this verse reveal to us baptism’s purpose and power.

καὶ βαπτισθήτω ἕκαστος ὑμῶν- and let each one of you be baptized...

Whereas Μετανοήσατε was a 2nd person *plural* aorist active imperative, the verb βαπτισθήτω is a 3rd person *singular* aorist passive imperative. The plural “Repent” stresses that all those present collectively heard Peter’s sermon, and it drove many of them to repentance. The singular “let each of you be baptized” stresses that baptism is given to each person individually (ἕκαστος ὑμῶν), applying the gifts of salvation in a personalized way.

Millard Erickson argues that the phrase “Repent and be baptized” demands a temporal interpretation. “Scripture makes it clear that personal, conscious faith in Christ is prerequisite to baptism...In the conclusion of his Pentecost sermon, Peter called for repentance, then baptism (Acts 2:38-41).”²⁰ This is a clear case of letting doctrinal leanings influence exegesis, rather than allowing the words of Scripture to speak for themselves. It cannot be proposed that καὶ has to have a temporal understanding, that event A happened *and then* event B followed *after* the event A.

I will grant that Peter’s hearers had repented (felt sorrow over sin and put their faith in Christ for salvation) *before* they were baptized on Pentecost. But in no way can Peter’s words or Luke’s description of the events of Pentecost be understood as a command from God that repentance must precede baptism. Repentance and baptism are a unit. For unbaptized adults, a *Spirit-borne* repentance will always accompany any desire they have for baptism. This was the case on the day of Pentecost.²¹

decide to repent. Wrong! The testimony of the Scriptures compels us to say otherwise. “No one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:3).

¹⁸ Acts 2:41

¹⁹ This, in itself, is an argument from silence. Acts 2:41 says, “Those who accepted the message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.” It never says that *only* those who heard Peter’s sermon and believed it were baptized. There is room here to make the case that children and infants were brought by Peter’s Pentecost hearers and baptized. This, too, would be an argument from silence. But I present it simply because the Bible’s description of the events of Pentecost cannot be used as a prescription for baptismal practice.

²⁰ Erickson, p.1106

²¹ This was also the case during the ministry of John the Baptist. John preached repentance by condemning the people of their sin and unbelief, and by pointing the people to Jesus, their Savior from sin. He also baptized the people who came to him, which also brought about repentance in their hearts. Commenting on John’s words, “I baptize you with water for repentance” (Matthew 3:11) Jeffrey Gibbs makes the following observation: “The most natural way to understand the grammar of John’s words, ‘I myself am baptizing you with water *for* repentance,” is that the goal of John’s baptism was to produce repentance, and that the baptism itself,

ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ- ...in the name of Jesus Christ...

The Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (BDAG) labels this use of the preposition ἐπὶ with the dative object τῷ ὀνόματι as a “marker in idiom of authorization.” The one named in the genitive is the one who has the authorizing function.²² This phrase, then, very nicely complements what the rest of Scripture says about Jesus’ role in baptism. Jesus is the one who authorized baptism for use in the Christian Church when he gave the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20). He is the one who gives baptism its power. It is his sin-atoning death and his justifying resurrection with which we are united in baptism (Romans 6:4-6; 1 Peter 3:21). Through baptism Jesus wills that his saving deeds be applied to someone in a most personal way. Lenski comments:

ὄνομα, ‘name,’ designates the revelation by which Jesus Christ is known so that we rely on him. To be baptized ‘in his name’ means to be baptized ‘in connection with the revelation he has made of himself,’ the application of water (as instituted by him) placing us into union with him by means of his name or revelation. Baptism seals us with this name and revelation and gives us all his name and this revelation contain.²³

Someone might suppose that with these words Peter was authorizing a new baptismal formula, different from the one Jesus gave when he instituted baptism- “*I baptize you in the name of Jesus.*” In response, I would point out that Jesus used a different preposition when he instituted baptism in Matthew 28:19, βαπτίζοντες αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος. This seems proof enough that Peter was not deviating from the baptismal formula which Jesus commanded when he instituted baptism.

εἰς ἄφεσιν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ὑμῶν- ...for the forgiveness of sins...

The preposition εἰς presents one of the most important issues of interpretation in this passage. How is this preposition to be understood?

In its most basic, spatial sense, the preposition εἰς indicates motion toward something. It eventually came to indicate movement toward a goal.²⁴ Therefore, when it was used with an accusative object, εἰς commonly was used as a marker of *purpose*. A number of the lexicons and grammars denote that this is the way εἰς is used in Acts 2:38.²⁵ Therefore, we could very well translate the passage, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ *for the purpose of* the forgiveness of your sins.” This interpretation supports the teaching that baptism is a sacrament- an act by which a person receives the forgiveness of sins and eternal life by creating faith in Jesus as Savior.

So what do the Armenians interpret this phrase to mean? John B. Polhill asserts:

The disputed word is the preposition εἰς, which could indicate purpose and thus be taken to mean that baptism is the prerequisite for the forgiveness of sins. There is ample evidence in the New Testament, however, that εἰς can also mean *on the ground of, on the basis of*, which would

by God’s power, in fact did produce repentance. Thus the effect of the baptism was in harmony with John’s preaching, which was a call to ‘Repent!’ (3:2). Those who were being baptized ‘were confessing their sins’ because of their repentance, which was produced both by John’s preaching and by the baptism he administered. (Jeffrey Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1-11:1*, p.157).

²² *The Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature. Third Edition (BDAG)*, s.v. ἐπὶ definition 17, p.366

²³ Lenski, p.106

²⁴ BDAG, s.v. εἰς, p.288-290

²⁵ BDAG εἰς, definition 4f, p.290; James Hope Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek, volume III*, p.266.

indicate the opposite relationship –that the forgiveness of sins is the basis, the grounds for being baptized.²⁶

If Polhill’s assertion is correct, then Acts 2:38 would support the notion that baptism should be administered to professing believers and them alone. Polhill, however, does not refer his readers to any passages using εἰς with the meaning “*on the basis of*” or “*on the ground of*.” This would have been especially helpful in order to prove this translation. After checking all the lexicons and grammars to which I had access,²⁷ I could find no entries indicating that this interpretation is a common usage of εἰς, let alone any references to passages using εἰς in this way. Nevertheless, even if passages could be cited showing that εἰς can be translated “*on the basis of*,” that would not indicate that it must be understood with that definition in Acts 2:38. To determine whether we are baptized *for the purpose of the forgiveness of sins* or if we are baptized *on the basis of the forgiveness of sins*, we must look to the other passages which speak about what baptism does. We must let those passages teach us the meaning of εἰς in this passage. In short, we must let Scripture interpret Scripture.

So what does the Bible say about the nature of baptism?

- Mark 16:16 *Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved.*
- Acts 22:16 *Be baptized and wash your sins away.*
- 1 Peter 3:20,21 *And this water (of the flood) symbolizes baptism that now saves you also-not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.*
- Titus 3:5-7 *He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.*

If these passages do not speak to the *purpose* of baptism, I don’t know what passages would. The whole of God’s inspired Scriptures compel us to understand εἰς ἄφεσιν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ὑμῶν as a purpose statement.

And what wonderful comfort we receive from this truth! Through our baptisms Jesus takes away our sins! They are removed. That is the picture behind the word ἄφεσιν. The verb ἀφίημι means “to send away.” The use of this word in the context of forgiveness calls to mind the Old Testament Day of Atonement. On that day, the sins of the people were confessed and symbolically conferred upon the head of the scapegoat. The scapegoat was then sent away into the desert to be released and to die.²⁸ The sins of the people were removed! What a picture of what Christ has done for us through his sacrificial death on the cross! “As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.”²⁹ What an awesome assurance which is ours through our baptisms! All the times we missed the mark with God (ἁμαρτιῶν) have been removed from his sight. They are no longer there. They are gone, dead and buried. “Don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”³⁰

καὶ λήμψεσθε τὴν δωρεὰν τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος. ...and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

²⁶ John B. Polhill, *The New American Commentary, Volume 26: Acts*, p.117.

²⁷ BDAG, pp.288-290; Moulton, pp.253-257; Blass-Debrunner-Funk’s *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament*, pp.110-112; A.T. Robertson’s *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in Light of Historical Research*, pp.591-596; *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT)*, electronic edition, article on εἰς.

²⁸ Leviticus 16:20-22

²⁹ Psalm 103:12

³⁰ Romans 6:2b-4

It is unfortunate that the NIV divides this phrase from the previous portion of the verse. It gives the impression that the gift of the Holy Spirit is something that would be received at a later time. Some Armenians understand the passage in this way and interpret *the gift of the Holy Spirit* as referring to charismatic gifts of some sort.

The future tense verb λήμψεσθε need not be understood in this way. The gifts of the Spirit do not occur at some time *after* baptism. They are received *at the time of* baptism. Rather, the future tense highlights the promised blessings of God which he confers in baptism. When baptism is received, the gifts of the Spirit are also received. Lenski comments:

Here again we must not separate repentance, baptism, the Spirit. Not at some later time were these people to receive the Spirit; not in some later sudden, mysterious seizure; not as a later ‘second blessing’ that would produce a total sanctification or sinlessness by a sudden transformation.³¹

Theodore Beck’s translation of the verse as one continuous sentence brings out the instantaneous nature of the Spirit’s baptismal gifts: “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins will be forgiven, and you will be given the Holy Spirit.” (Also noteworthy is the fact that his translation also reflects the “purpose” understanding of the phrase εἰς ἄφεσιν.)

The object τὴν δωρεάν, “gift,” reminds us that forgiveness and faith in Christ are not things which we are able to seek out actively. The total depravity of our sinful nature renders us completely incapable of such an act. The gifts of forgiveness and salvation, indeed the Spirit’s gifts in baptism, are just that: gifts. We receive them passively. God is the actor. We are the beneficiaries of his grace and mercy.

Acts 2:38 and the fatal flaws of Arminianism

From this exegetical study of Acts 2:38, I have become even more convinced that Peter was urging his Pentecost hearers to receive something far greater than a symbol. This was a sacrament. The grammar of the verse supports this understanding of Acts 2:38. The rest of Scripture supports what Acts 2:38 says. Peter’s words demonstrate that baptism offers and confers the forgiveness of sins and salvation. Baptism makes what Jesus did on the cross and at the empty tomb the personal possession of the one baptized. It creates nothing less than saving faith in a person’s heart by the powerful gift of the Holy Spirit. This promised faith and salvation was for the hearers of Peter’s Pentecost sermon. It was for their children. It was for us and our children, who were still far off.³² Indeed, Peter’s words on Pentecost from Acts 2 also support what the rest of the Scriptures reveal. Infants are in need of baptism and receive Christ’s saving benefits in baptism.

The Arminian rejects this understanding of Acts 2:38. The Arminian calls baptism a symbol of faith already present. He considers only Christians who have given a believable profession of their faith to be fitting candidates for baptism. Only those who have demonstrated that they have repented should be baptized. Therefore, the Arminian considers infant baptism to be an abuse of what Christ committed to his church.

This exegetical study of Acts 2:38 brought me into close contact with some of the fatal flaws of Arminianism. I want to share with you some of these fatal flaws which I discovered in my research so that, Lord willing, we better understand the Arminian mindset. In this way I pray that we might be better prepared to witness to those from an Arminian background, and also be better prepared to help our parishioners do the same.

Here’s my theory: it seems to me that we can argue with an Arminian until we’re blue in the face about what *making disciples of all nations* means in Matthew 28:20. The command of Christ is clear, but an Arminian probably won’t be convinced by this passage alone. There’s too many other false teachings clouding

³¹ Lenski, p.109

³² Acts 2:39

their view of what that passage means. We can argue with the Arminian until we're blue in the face about the probability of infants being a part of the 3000 baptized converts at Pentecost³³ or being among the baptized households of Cornelius³⁴ and the jailor at Philippi.³⁵ Finally, Scripture neither confirms nor denies that an infant was baptized. There is no explicit reference. It is an argument from silence for both sides. An Arminian probably won't even be convinced of baptism's true nature if we look at all the passages which speak of baptism's blessings. (The commentators and dogmaticians whom I read certainly weren't convinced by them!)

However, an Arminian may start to read in a different light the passages about baptism's power and baptism's nature if we begin our conversation by exposing the Arminian misconceptions about regeneration and repentance. It is only when these concepts are truly understood—yes, when they are defined on the Bible's terms, that an Arminian will embrace the true power and nature of baptism. Here's a quick sampling of some of these fatal flaws.

Baptism's Relationship to Regeneration

One of the most vivid descriptions of our total spiritual depravity and of God's grace to us comes in the Bible's description of regeneration. We are spiritually dead by nature. "You were dead in your transgressions and sins."³⁶ But, just as God gives us physical life through our physical conception and birth, so also God gives us spiritual life through spiritual birth. The Scriptures clearly demonstrate how God works this rebirth (regeneration) in our hearts.

- John 3:5-6 *I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born again of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.*
- Titus 3:5-7 *He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.*

It is the Holy Spirit who gives us spiritual birth. One of the ways he does so is through the waters of Holy Baptism. The connection of the Holy Spirit's regenerating work to baptism is unmistakable in these passages.

Arminians fail to make this connection. To their credit, Armenians perceive that the God is involved in our regeneration. Wayne Grudem states: "Regeneration is a secret act of God in which he imparts new spiritual life to us. This is sometimes called 'being born again.'"³⁷ The troubling thing about his definition of regeneration is that he calls it a "secret" act. Grudem goes on to explain what he means:

Exactly what happens in regeneration is mysterious to us. We know that somehow we who were spiritually dead (Eph 2:1) have been made alive to God and in a very real sense we have been "born again." (John 3:3,7; Eph. 2:5; Col.2:13). *But we don't understand how this happens or what exactly God does to us to give us this new spiritual life.*³⁸ (emphasis mine)

There is no secret to how God breathes spiritual life into those who were previously dead. Regeneration is not mysterious. God's Word always connects regeneration to the vital work of the Spirit in the means of

³³ Acts 2:41

³⁴ Acts 10:47-48

³⁵ Acts 16:33

³⁶ Ephesians 2:1

³⁷ Grudem, p.300

³⁸ Grudem, p.301

grace. But Arminians simply refuse to see that the Holy Spirit creates and strengthens faith through the gospel in Word and sacrament.

We may wonder, “How can the Arminians miss the clear references to baptism as the Holy Spirit’s regenerating tool?” This question really gets at the root of the problem. Arminians fail to acknowledge the importance of the means of grace because they fail to grasp the depths of the depravity of natural man. It is my observation that Arminians speak about the natural depravity of man. However, they pay only lip service to the concept. They do not realize how our corrupted nature completely prohibits our participation in any part of our salvation. This fatal flaw is seen most prominently in their understanding of what repentance is.

The Arminian Understanding of Repentance

It is not surprising to hear Arminians talk about baptism as a sign of a person’s commitment to God since they also consider repentance to be a person’s decision to commit their lives to God. The Arminian concept of repentance is at the forefront of decision theology. Wayne Grudem defines repentance and relates it to faith in the following way:

*Repentance is a heartfelt sorrow for sin, a renouncing of it, and a sincere commitment to forsake it and walk in obedience to Christ... Repentance, like faith, is an intellectual understanding (that sin is wrong), approval of the teachings of Scripture regarding sin (a sorrow for sin and a hatred of it), and a personal decision to turn from it (a renouncing of sin and a decision of the will to forsake it and lead a life of obedience to Christ instead.)... Scripture puts repentance and faith together as different aspects of the one act of coming to Christ for salvation. It is not that a person first turns from sin and next trusts in Christ, or first trusts in Christ and then turns from sin, but rather that both occur at the same time. When we turn to Christ for salvation from our sins, we are simultaneously turning away from the sins that we are asking Christ to save us from. If that were not true, our turning to Christ for salvation from sin could hardly be a genuine turning to him or trusting in him.*³⁹

What is alarming through the entirety of this definition of repentance is the emphasis on what *we need to do* to bring about repentance. For the Arminian, repentance is something a person actively desires and in which a person actively participates. For the Arminian, repentance is a conscious act of the will. The Arminian’s understanding of the nature of repentance thoroughly confuses justification and sanctification. Millard Erickson comments:

It is not enough simply to believe in Jesus and accept the offer of grace; there must be a real alteration of the inner person. If belief in God’s grace were all that is necessary, who would not wish to become a Christian?... If there is no conscious repentance, there may be a corresponding lack of depth and commitment... Any attempt to increase the number of disciples by making discipleship as easy as possible ends up diluting the quality of discipleship instead.⁴⁰

The Scriptures speak differently about the source of repentance. Both elements of repentance—sorrow over sin and faith in Christ—are brought about by the working of the Holy Spirit through the Word. David’s words in Psalm 51 acknowledge the Holy Spirit’s role in our repentance:

³⁹ Grudem, pp.309-310

⁴⁰ Erickson, pp.950-951

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.⁴¹

If we are going to “convince” an Arminian about the true nature of baptism, I believe we need to start that conversation by discussing the true nature of regeneration and repentance. This is the place to begin if we are going to discuss infant versus believer baptism. Unless we lay forth our total sinful depravity and our complete inability to participate in *any* part of our conversion from spiritual death to spiritual life, then a discussion about the nature of baptism will be fruitless.

But if we wield the hammer of God’s law, the Spirit will work to break proud hearts who feel capable of making their decision for Christ. Then true, Spirit-borne repentance can happen. Then the Holy Spirit will mend broken hearts and heal them with the soothing truths of the gospel-Christ crucified and Christ arisen. Then, and only then, the Arminian can come to an appreciation of the gifts of Christ being offered in the waters of Holy Baptism. Then he will see the amazing grace which the Lord bestows on infants, children, *and* adults through this sacramental washing of rebirth and renewal.

⁴¹ Psalm 51:10-12

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