

The Baptism of Believers and their Children

Acts 2:37-40

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In some churches it is not uncommon to hear the phrase, “the age of accountability”, which claims there is an age at which a child becomes accountable before God for his sin. However, God makes it exceedingly clear that we all become personally accountable before God for our sin at the moment of conception: Psalm 51:5; Psalm 58:3.

God’s testimony in Scripture is more than sufficient to establish the sinfulness of us and our children at conception, but I also appeal to the universal testimony of experience which is observable by all; namely, that it is not only adults and older children who experience death, but also infants, yea children who are yet in their mother’s womb who fall under the sentence of death. God explains to us in Romans 6:23 that “the wages of sin is” what? Death! Universal death among all human beings (including infants) is the result of universal sin among all human beings (including infants): Romans 5:12-14 (Paul draws a comparison in particular respects between the headship of Adam who represented all his seed descending from him by ordinary generation and the headship of Christ who represented all His chosen seed, and between the effects of Adam’s disobedience and the effects of Christ’s obedience). Thus, because the age of accountability for us and our children begins at conception, ours and our children’s need for Jesus Christ and His salvation also begins from the moment of conception.

There are two ways people will seek to be saved from God’s just judgment against sin: salvation by commandment or salvation by promise. **Salvation by commandment** is expressed by the sentiment: “I will do. I will keep God’s commandment. I will save myself.” This is the Covenant of Works (Galatians 3:10). The second way is **salvation by promise**, and it is expressed by the sentiment: “He (the Lord Jesus) will do it for me. He will keep God’s commandments for me. He will save me.” This is the Covenant of Grace (Jonah 2:9). What I cannot do, what my child cannot do, Jesus alone can do (Ephesians 2:8-9).

As we continue our series through the inspired Book of Acts, we will be addressing the following two main points from our text: (1) The Conviction of the Jewish Men to Peter’s Sermon (Acts 2:37); (2) The Call to Repent and Be Baptized Based upon God’s Promise (Acts 2:38-40).

I. The Conviction of the Jewish Men to Peter’s Sermon (Acts 2:37).

A. The Apostle Peter has now completed his sermon to the Jewish men and proselytes who had gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Pentecost. These were likely men (not families) that came together to hear Peter’s sermon because it was the men of Israel in particular that were commanded by God (in Deuteronomy 16:16) to appear at three feasts each year (Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles). Also note that the form of address to these Israelites is, “Ye **men** of Judea” (Acts 2:14); “Ye **men** of Israel” (Acts 2:22); “**Men and brethren**” (Acts 2:29). What did these Jewish men hear?

1. They heard that Jesus of Nazareth, whom they had put to death, was bodily raised from the dead by the power of God; that Jesus had bodily ascended into heaven; and that as God’s anointed King, Jesus had been seated in heaven upon David’s throne as King of kings and Lord of lords.

2. Then their hearts and consciences were pricked by the Holy Spirit as they realized their sin in rejecting and conspiring with the Romans to put God’s anointed King to death, and they cried out in Acts 2:37, “What shall we do?”

B. "What shall we do?"

1. Here is the response that we should all have to the Spirit of God poking our conscience with conviction that we have sinned against the Lord and His holy commandments. It is the reaction that I pray for in my preparation for every Lord's Day, that the Holy Spirit may prick my conscience and yours, so that we cannot remain in some comfortable state of apathy about our sin or error. In many churches, it is the goal of the preacher to have people walk away from the sermon feeling good about themselves. However, I submit that it is God's will that we walk away praying to the Lord, "What shall I do about this sin or that error or that spiritual need in my life?" There will only be growth in Christ when we are convicted of our sin and see our need of His all sufficient grace to overcome sin.

2. Dear ones, your response to God speaking to you in His Word must not be, "I'll think about that tomorrow." Tomorrow may be too late. You must not ignore or procrastinate what Jesus by His Spirit calls you to do today. What if you sit through sermon after sermon, but say, "I just don't feel guilty." If you do not feel guilty of sin or error, does that mean that you have no need to repent, confess sin, and cast yourself upon the mercy of God in Christ Jesus?

3. Dear ones, there is **the subjective feeling of guilt within** and there is **the objective truth of guilt before God's throne**. Does a murderer who doesn't feel guilty have a right therefore to plead in court that he is not guilty? Many people have so seriously seared their consciences by their constant disobedience to God's Word that they have become calloused to the pricking of the Holy Spirit according to 1 Timothy 4:2 (the skin that is seared or branded is insensitive to the poking of a needle). They have truly sinned against God by disobedience to His holy commandments (the objective truth of guilt), but they do not feel guilty due to their calloused conscience. Dear ones, that is a dangerous place for any of us to be, for without pain in our conscience we will continue in our sin without sensing we are walking away from the Lord (Psalm 139:23-24).

4. However, we must always check a guilty conscience by the infallible standard of God's Law, for many Christians are laden with a guilty conscience over some innocent incident in their life that they had no control over and that was the result of the sin of someone else. Other Christians may wallow in guilt (punishing themselves) because they cannot trust in the forgiveness of God (Psalm 32:5). Dear ones, all our suffering will not forgive our sin (Protestant penance)—only the suffering of Christ can do that—and His suffering for your sin (for you who trust in Him) is once and for all finished and accepted by God the Father (as evidenced by Christ's resurrection, ascension, and enthronement at God's right hand). Whether in the case of a calloused conscience or an overly sensitive conscience, the answer is to appeal to the infallible Word of God, so that our conscience might be directed by God and not by mere man and be directed by love for God and love for one another (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

5. The consciences of these Jewish men were pricked and pierced by the Holy Spirit as they heard the sermon of Peter, and so that asked (as we should all ask at the end of a sermon faithfully preached), "What shall we do?"

II. The Call to Repent and Be Baptized Based upon God's Promise (Acts 2:38-40).

A. That brings us to Acts 2:38 wherein Peter answers the question put to him and the apostles by these Jewish men, "What shall we do?"

1. "Repent" specifically refers to the need of these Jewish men to acknowledge their sin in having rejected Christ and having killed Him and to grieve and sorrow over their sin (all of it). Although faith is not specifically mentioned here, it is certainly implied since it is faith in Christ that leads to a godly and evangelical sorrow.

2. Next, Peter states that each of these Jewish men who believed and repented was to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, i.e. in the authority of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins (this is not the

specific formula to be used in baptism for the Lord gave the formula in the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19).

a. Peter does not say that they are to be baptized in order that they might have remission of sins, but “for” the remission of sins (i.e. with a view to the remission of sins—water baptism is the outward sign which points to the promise of forgiveness of sin in Christ).

b. Water baptism no more cleanses sin in the New Covenant than circumcision cleansed sin in the Old Covenant. They are both outward signs which point to the promise of forgiveness in Christ. Our hearts are purified by faith (Acts 15:9) not by circumcision or baptism (in Romans 4 Paul teaches that Abraham was justified in the sight of God before he was circumcised, not after; also note Acts 10 wherein Cornelius first received the Holy Spirit, then he was baptized).

c. It is always the pattern that **believing adults** who are coming from outside the Visible Church and into the Visible Church must first profess the one true faith before they receive the outward sign of the gospel (in the Old Testament whether it be Abraham, or whether it be proselytes, or in the New Testament whether it be these Jewish men from the Old Covenant coming into the New Covenant, or whether it be Lydia, or the Philippian jailer).

3. Peter then proclaims that those who repent and are baptized will enjoy the blessings of God’s gracious Spirit in their lives. I emphasize that Peter is not laying out a specific chronological order according to which God bestows the Holy Spirit. He is simply noting that those who repent and are baptized in the authority of Christ are also those to whom God gives His promised Spirit. The promise and gift of God’s Spirit comes not by water baptism but by faith, just like the forgiveness of sin (Galatians 3:2,14).

4. The water baptism of which Peter here speaks is an outward **sign and seal**. **As a sign**, water baptism points to the promises of the gospel made by God to these Jews: namely, the promise of remission of sins (Acts 2:38) and the promise of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). **As a seal**, water baptism confirms the promises of the gospel made by God to be truly from Him (like sealing a document in wax). God makes these promises, but these promises are only realized by faith in Christ. Water baptism speaks of our need of Christ (whether young or old) due to our sin. We need His forgiveness, and we need His Holy Spirit to make us a new in the image of Christ. Thus, baptism is God’s visible Gospel in proclaiming what God promises to those who will receive by faith the gospel of Jesus Christ. Because water baptism is a seal that confirms God’s gospel promises, it binds all those baptized to trust Him, love Him, and obey Him. Baptism as a seal brings upon the one baptized a greater aggravation for unbelief, for worldliness, and for disobedience. Dear ones, your baptism is nothing to be taken lightly—it is serious because God has confirmed the gospel promises made to you in your flesh.

B. Now notice what Peter declares is the ground and reason for repentance and baptism in Acts 2:39. Why should these Jewish men repent and be baptized: “For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off”.

1. Please note and do not miss this that the ground and basis for anyone to believe, repent, and be baptized is the gracious promise of God to forgive sin and to give the Holy Spirit. The promise of God always precedes faith, repentance, or baptism. There would be no reason to believe, to repent, or to be baptized if there was no promise of God to graciously forgive sin and to freely give His Spirit. For apart from the promise of God, there is no hope—there is no salvation—there is only judgment and condemnation.

2. But to whom does Peter say the promise of forgiveness and the promise of the Holy Spirit is made? “To you (Jewish men who have just heard the gospel), and to your children (who were not even likely present to hear Peter’s gospel sermon), and to the Gentiles (who shall hear the gospel of salvation through the preaching of the apostles and ministers of Jesus Christ). What I want you to see here is that the promise is made to both adults and to their children—not just to adults.

3. There is a difference between **a promise made** and **a promise received**. The promise of

forgiveness is made to all who hear the gospel and to all who receive baptism (which is the visible gospel). But the promise is only actually received and realized by faith in Christ. Only those who are sovereignly regenerated and therefore take hold of Jesus Christ by faith actually receive the blessings of the promise made in the preached gospel or in baptism (the visible gospel).

4. This is simply the same promise of the gospel made to Abraham and his infant seed 2,000 years before: Genesis 17:7. That is why the same outward sign and seal of circumcision that God gave to Abraham (who heard and believed the gospel preached unto him, Galatians 3:8) was also commanded to be given to Abraham's infant son, Isaac, who was only 8 days old (Genesis 21:4). Circumcision in the Old Testament was not a sign and seal of actual faith already exercised in the promise of God by the one circumcised (otherwise no infant would have been circumcised), but was a sign and seal of the gospel promise made by God which was to be received by faith.

5. And that is why Peter includes not only these Jewish men in the promise, but also the children of those who believe and repent as well. Those to whom the promise of the gospel is given are warranted and qualified to receive the sign and seal of that promise—namely, water baptism. If the promise belongs to these children, then surely the sign and seal of that promise likewise belong to these children.

a. But perhaps this refers only to older children who can make a profession of faith? There is no qualification made at all in the text. Who did the promise of God to Abraham include? Infants. Is the covenant made with Abraham not also made with us as well in the New Covenant? Yes, according to Paul in Galatians 3:14, it is.

b. If this promise only refers to the believing children of these Jewish men, there is no reason to mention parents and their children at all, for regardless of the parental relationship or lack of parental relationship, the promise is only for those capable of exercising faith (in such a case the family relationship has nothing at all to do with it).

c. Had the Apostle Peter only intended that the promise be extended to believing children who would later come to faith, he could not have given the promise presently (at the same time) to both fathers and to their children. Peter does not say that the promise is presently to you Israelite men standing before me who will believe and repent, and shall be later to your children if/when they believe. Peter says, "For the promise IS unto you and your children" at the very same time. The promise **is presently** to the children of believers and **shall be** to all Gentiles called by the Word into the Visible Church.

d. We must interpret this promise in light of how these Israelites would have understood the promise to their children. Unless Peter clearly and specifically excluded infant children or disqualified them from the promises of the gospel, we should not understand their exclusion any more than these Israelite men would have understood their exclusion (or excommunication). I dare say, had they believed Peter was excluding (or excommunicating) their children from God's promise (and from the Visible Church), there would have been some controversy (even a huge controversy) about it here or afterwards. Their silence says they understood their children were included, not excluded from God's promises of the gospel.

6. We might state Peter's argument here for infant baptism in this way: Those to whom God's gospel promise is made ought to be baptized. God's gospel promise to made to believers and their children. Therefore, believers and their children ought to be baptized.

C. Finally, Peter exhorts these Jewish men to "save yourselves (literally, "be saved") from this untoward (crooked, dishonest) generation" (Acts 2:40). Jesus had called the generation at that time "a faithless and perverse generation" in Luke 9:41 and "an evil generation" in Luke 11:29. That generation was one which preferred its lies to the truth of Jesus Christ (just like our own). Peter here wrestles with the consciences of these Jewish men. It would not be easy to turn from their sins and their errors. They would be a minority facing a hostile majority. But they must forsake all that they had previously relied on and trusted in—

and look to Christ and His promises alone. We must likewise turn away from and flee from this evil generation (2 Timothy 3:1-5). Calvin applies Peter's exhortation to us as follows:

For it were not sufficient to have Christ set before us, unless we were also taught to flee those things which do lead us away from him.... For men will not beware of poison, unless they know that it is poison.

Dear ones, you can only be saved from this wicked generation by trusting in the promise of the gospel: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved, and thy house" (Acts 16:31). You do not have to be swallowed up with this evil generation—the promise is to you and to your children.

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