

The Membership Commitment of Repentance-Baptism (Acts 2.36-42)

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Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified."³⁷ Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"³⁸ 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.³⁹ 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."⁴⁰ And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation."⁴¹ So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Introduction

According to Luke in Acts 2, when the Spirit was poured out on the disciples on the day of Pentecost, it caused a great commotion among large multitudes gathered at Jerusalem (2.1-5). To explain what happened, Peter preached on the guilt of his listeners for the crucifixion of Jesus, concluding his sermon with these words: **Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified"** (2.36). Thus, we read that these Jews were deeply troubled: **Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"** (2.37).

So, what then is the responsibility of the hearer? What are people to do if they are cut to the heart with conviction of their sinfulness? In a loaded word, they are to commit themselves to Christ's church in repentance-baptism. Thus, the title of this message is "The Membership Commitment of Repentance-Baptism." We can divide the text (Acts 2.36-42) into two sections: the offer of the gospel and the response to the gospel. Then we can emphasize some important things about this commitment and the way of salvation.

I. The offer of the gospel by Peter

Peter presents three things that his sin-laden listeners are to do: repent, be baptized, and join the church. Let's consider each in order.

A. Repentance

To repent means to turn; that is, to turn away from one thing and to another. We are to turn away from sin that we acknowledge. The central sin is rebellion against Christ. These people rejected Him with a vengeance by crying out for His death on the cross. Therefore, repentance means to acknowledge your sin and to turn away from it. However, that is only half of the story because you cannot properly *turn away from* sinning against Christ without turning *to* Him. This brings us to the fact that repentance is in the name of Jesus: **Repent...every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ** (2.38). Hence, the positive side of repentance involves the acknowledgement of the authority of Jesus Christ over you as crucified but risen Lord; it involves submission to His claims on the totality of your life.

B. Baptism

What does baptism add to this picture of repentance, given its close connection with repentance on one hand and with the Lordship of Christ on the other: **Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ?** Fundamentally, baptism is repentance in action because it is an act of obedience to a simple command. There is nothing special about the water of baptism. It is not holy water. It is just water with no power infused into it for washing sin away. This is similar to the tree in the garden of Eden. There was nothing in the fruit that gave it the power of the knowledge of good and evil. Everything rested in God's command. Disobedience opened a

wide door of evil (by it sin entered into the world and death by sin, Rom 5.12). Likewise, the water of baptism has meaning *because of God's command*. It is the test of repentance as a turning from disobedience to obedience, from insubordination to submission to the authority of Jesus Christ.

C. Church membership

Peter also exhorts these guilt-ridden sinners saying: **Save yourselves from this crooked generation** (2.40). John's water baptism helps us understand the meaning of these words. John paved the way for the baptism of Jesus and the baptism ordinance of the church. As forerunner, he said, **do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father'** (Lk 3.8a). "Say to yourselves" means to think in your hearts, to stake a claim to some distinction. Clearly, they are not to depend on their membership in the family of Abraham for cleansing and deliverance from God's judgment. To ground this claim, John cites the ability of God to form a new family: **For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham** (Lk 3.8b). Surely, these words tell us that God does not depend on the children of Abraham in forming the new covenant people prepared for the Lord. The baptism of repentance is a point of turning away from the old Israel that stands under God's wrath to enter the new Israel of the coming Messiah. In this context, we should pay close attention to the connection of Peter's words of 2.40 with repentance and baptism. We have the language of turning in his exhortation: you are to save yourselves, Peter says, *from* something, from this crooked generation. This naturally implies a turning *to* something else. Therefore, part of the call to repent and be baptized is the call to enter into membership in the new Israel.

Accordingly, Peter calls for the fruits of repentance, if it is to be considered genuine. Recall how John addressed the people he baptized: **Bear fruits in keeping with repentance** (Lk 3.8). They were baptized by John "confessing their sins" (Mat 3.6), but their baptism and these words of confession were not sufficient, so, he also called them to a new life, a repentant life in the new Israel. Peter does the same thing regarding Christian baptism. The demonstration of repentance by submission to baptism is not enough. There is more to pin down here. The bond of repentance, baptism, and entering Christ's new church needs emphasis. These three things are tightly knit together. Entering the church (the new Israel) is tied to repentance and repentance is tied to baptism. We have a repentance-baptism-entry into the church. You save yourself, Peter says, by leaving the old church and entering the new church through baptism. This raises many questions, but the first one to answer is about the response of the people to Peter's sermon.

What did *they* do? Let's consider their response and then we will see more of the tightly knit nature of repentance, baptism, and membership in the church.

II. The response to the gospel by many

In Acts 2.41, Luke reports that many embraced the gospel offer: **So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls**. By repentance-baptism, these new converts were added to the church Jesus promised to build (Mat 16.18). Clearly, He refers to His church in local settings because the promised church has a process of church discipline in which apostle-pastors have authority to use the keys of the kingdom (Mat 16.18-19; 18.15-20). These new saints were added to the church at Jerusalem in its infancy, as it started to take shape in a rough and ready way. Thus, the description of verse 42 gives us insight into the fundamental ingredients of life in Christ's church as a new covenant community: **And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers**.

So we ask: in entering the church by repentance-baptism, to what did the new converts devote themselves as the fruit of repentance? The devotion in view is that of perseverance. They

persevered (**continued steadfastly**, KJV) in four overlapping activities: 1) the study of apostolic teaching, 2) fellowship with the apostles and one another, 3) the breaking of bread together, and 4) praying together. These things describe a vibrant mutuality in the study of Scripture. These Christians devoted themselves to the word of God with one anothering love.

What can we learn from the bond that exists between entering the church by repentance-baptism and persevering in the church with one anothering love? Entering the church by repentance-baptism was the point at which the things described in verse 42 began. We cannot separate the continuing in loving fellowship from its beginning. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the obedience of repentance-baptism included not only a commitment to Christ (v. 38: in the name of Jesus Christ) but also a commitment to His church, as unpacked in verse 42.

Surely, then, details of the baptismal commitment were taught in the **many other words** of Peter's sermon (2.40), as he called his listeners to leave the old and enter the new family through the door of repentance-baptism (**40b: Save yourselves from this crooked generation**). Accordingly, in his first letter, Peter tells us that the one being baptized makes a pledge of obedience (1 Pet 3.21). In the Great Commission, Jesus makes it clear that this baptismal pledge of obedience involves a commitment to discipleship under the authority of the triune God, and under the instruction of teachers appointed by Christ (Mat 28.20). These teachers are apostle-pastors. Later, Paul tells us that the apostles hand the gospel over to ministers like Timothy who entrust it to faithful men who, in turn, teach others also (2 Tim 2.2).

Therefore, when we connect the dots, we have to conclude that the command to receive baptism in repentance is a command to commit yourself to the church of Christ in a local expression where the apostolic word of Christ is taught. Well, can we give a name to this commitment? Yes, it is a membership commitment. So, the command of repentance-baptism is a command of Christ to join the membership of a local church by a covenant of membership. Like a marriage covenant, the membership covenant is a public vow (also demonstrated by good and necessary consequence). As part of baptism, it is a vow of obedience to be a disciple in the way of Acts 2.42, which means it is a vow expressing devotion to the apostolic word of God with one anothering love. Making this commitment and persevering in the life to which it leads is a matter of submission to the authority of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Mat 28.19-20).

Implications and applications

1) First, by baptism and under conviction of sin, the people of Acts 2 left the old Israel and entered into the new covenant community, the church, in its local expression at Jerusalem. In this context, we cannot break the bond of the true church and the visible local church.

2) Second, the membership commitment of repentance-baptism gives us pause in the face of anomalies. Because union with Christ in His death is applied by the Spirit in the gift of repentance-baptism into the local church of Christ (1 Cor 12.13), then profession of faith in Christ without baptism is an anomaly, and the profession of obedience to Christ in baptism without membership in His local church is an anomaly. Calling these things anomalies is just saying that they are odd, unusual, even inexplicable against the background of Peter's offer of the gospel on the record in Acts 2.

Consider what it means to have faith in Christ: it means to call Jesus Lord, to acknowledge His Lordship **in the Spirit** and thus from the heart (1 Cor 12.3; Rom 10.8-10). If someone says, Jesus is my Lord, and his Lord commands that he obey Him in baptism, but he does not obey Him in baptism, then how can he claim that Christ is his Lord? If he says that Jesus is his Lord as head of the church, and his Lord commands that he obey Him by making a commitment to his gathered people for instruction as a disciple (in a concrete and substantive

way), but he does not obey Him by making this commitment, then how can there be any validity to the Lordship claim? The apostle John makes it clear that people may lie about knowing God: **Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him** (1 Jn 2.4). Moreover, John connects his warning with love for the church: **We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love [the Christian family] abides in death** (1 Jn 3.14). Additionally, Jesus says, if you love me you will keep my commandments (Jn 14.15). How can you make a credible claim to love for Christ and refuse to obey Him in His simple requirement of a repentance-baptism-entry into fellowship with His church?

Furthermore, in the perspective of James, a person may say that he has faith (or repentance), but if that claim does not work in obedience by love, then it is a useless, dead faith: **So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.**¹⁸ **But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works** (James 2.17-18). The important point here for our study of Acts 2 is that *the gospel offer includes a call from the Lord to turn around, to repent, to fill the gap, to receive baptism and join the Lord's local church family*. This is the gospel call of the Great Commission to be a disciple under Christ in His church (Mat 28.19-20). Of course, this duty stands over us all our days and therefore it needs to be fulfilled, *mutatis mutandis* (with the necessary adjustments) in a judicious way when members of Christ's church transition between churches. *Thus, Acts 2 gives us pause with anomalies.*

3) Third, we cannot leave "in His church" out of the equation of discipleship. If we leave the church out of the equation, then our preaching, witnessing, and exhorting will tend toward an easy believism that soothes guilty consciences with false assurance. We do not help people by being enablers of a counterfeit sense of safety. Of course, we do not want to give ground for any idea of salvation by good works. Nor do we want to discourage people of weak faith. These concerns are understandable, but it is in the interest of gospel clarity and the strengthening of true faith to emphasize the means that God has instituted for the saving and sanctifying of sinners. A key to having rightly informed assurance that one is God's child is the diligent use of the means of grace *from within the membership of a local expression of Christ's church.*

In this context, a common question surfaces: "What is the truth deep down in your heart?" Of course, I cannot say; no one but God can look into your heart. However, we can change the question to this, "Is your confession of membership in Christ's true church credible if you are not a member of Christ's church in a local expression of it?" The answer is clear for all to see. In cases of members in prayerful transition from one church to another, it is credible. Otherwise, if you are not a member of Christ's church, it is not credible. Even more important, *you cannot count yourself a member of Christ's true church* if you are unfaithful regarding a bond of fellowship with His church in a local setting. To count yourself to be a member of Christ's church without a public membership vow and covenant with a specific church would be like counting yourself to be married without a public vow and covenant with a specific spouse. If you leave the church out of the equation, you wander in a fog of confusion.

4) Finally, whatever your standing may be, there is good news here. The good news is that if you repent, receive baptism, and commit yourself to Christ's church, then you have the foundation in place for assurance against the Day of Judgment because in this way *the promise* of forgiveness of sin and all the benefits of the Lord's saving work is yours forever.

May we fall down before the majesty of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit with confession of our need of salvation that the triune God planned, secured, and applies through the means of grace in the context of the Lord's local church; may the Spirit enlighten our eyes to the depth of our union with Christ and may He deepen our love for one another as one body with many members, to the glory of God forever, amen.