

## Baptism and the Forgiveness of Sins in Acts 2:38<sup>1</sup>

The relationship of baptism to the forgiveness of sins in Acts 2:38 has long been discussed and variously resolved. In particular, the juxtaposition of the second and third person imperatives has been used to argue both for and against a direct relationship between baptism and forgiveness. However, this passage, perhaps as much as any other, has been the victim of eisegesis—theology controlling exegesis. Commenting on this passage Robertson states: “When the grammarian has finished, the theologian steps in, and sometimes before the grammarian is through.”<sup>2</sup>

Much of the discussion revolves around the meaning of the preposition εἰς, which is beyond the scope of this paper.<sup>3</sup> The question addressed here is the relationship between the two imperatives μετανοήσατε and βαπτισθήτω. Much has been made of the change from the second person to the third person, particularly when the causal use of εἰς is recognized as untenable. If forgiveness of sins is the result of repentance, as most agree, then the conjunctive force of καί with μετανοήσατε and βαπτισθήτω must be avoided, if baptism is not also understood to result in the forgiveness of sins.<sup>4</sup> Roberts traces the argument for the disjunction between the two commands as far back as 1860.<sup>5</sup>

Concerning this disjunction, Robertson goes so far as to claim:

*[There is a] change of number from plural to singular and of person from second to third. This change marks a break in thought here that the English translation does not preserve. The first thing to do is make a radical and complete change*

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<sup>1</sup>The material in this paper is taken directly from my “The Third Person Imperative in the Greek New Testament” M. A. thesis, Abilene Christian University, 1999.

<sup>2</sup>A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934): 389.

<sup>3</sup>See for example A. T. Robertson, *Grammar*, 592, 595; *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol. III, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1930): 35 – 36; J. W. Roberts, “Baptism for Remission of Sins—A Critique,” *Restoration Quarterly* 1 (1957): 226 – 234; J. C. Davis, “Another Look at the Relationship of Baptism and Forgiveness of Sins in Acts 2:38,” *Restoration Quarterly* 24 (1981): 80 – 88.

<sup>4</sup>The same is true if εἰς is understood as causal in relation to βαπτισθήτω. As most acknowledge repentance is not “because of” but “for the forgiveness of sins”; therefore, there must be a disjunction between the two commands so μετανοήσατε can be disassociated from εἰς ἄφεσιν κτλ.

<sup>5</sup>“Baptism for Remission of Sins,” 231. On the other end of the spectrum, Frederick Dale Bruner pushes the aorist tenses too far, takes καὶ as exegetical, and suggests there is no substantive difference between repentance and baptism: “repentance is not a long inner work (as would be expressed by an imperative verb in the present tense) but the once-for-all accepting of God’s offer through preaching of forgiveness by baptism (this is expressed perfectly by the aorist imperative). Repentance is being baptized” (*A Theology of the Holy Spirit* [Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970]: 166).

*of heart and life. Then let each one be baptized after this change has taken place,...So I understand Peter to be urging baptism on each of them who had already turned (repented) and for it to be done in the name of Jesus Christ on the basis of the forgiveness of sins which they had already received (emphasis mine).<sup>6</sup>*

Robertson appears to force the disjunction upon the text by theology.<sup>7</sup> Had Peter's audience already repented, the command to repent would have been meaningless.

Against a disjunction, Carroll Osburn argues that idiomatic usage allows for disagreement of person and number between Greek subjects and verbs, citing among other idioms the distributive use of the third person imperative singular with the second person imperative plural.<sup>8</sup> However, the argument against the conjunction of the verbs in Acts 2:38 confuses the "rule" of concord in person and number between subject and verb—there *is* concord in this case—with an imagined "rule" that the same plural subject (in this case Peter's audience) cannot be the subject of both a plural verb and a singular verb. Peter's audience is the plural αὐτούς, thus the plural μετανοήσατε. The singular βαπτισθήτω is also in concord with its person and subject, ἕκαστος ὑμῶν, which is the same audience (plural ὑμῶν). The use of ἕκαστος in this way violates no "rule" of agreement between person and number in the subject of Greek verbs. That is not the issue in Acts 2:38. Clearly the subject of both verbs is the same, which can be demonstrated by removing either imperative: "And Peter said to them, '[You plural] repent in the name of Jesus etc.," or "And Peter said to them, 'Each one (ἕκαστος) of you (plural) must be baptized (singular, in agreement with ἕκαστος) in the name of Jesus etc.'"

Three of the examples Osburn cites (Josh 6:10; 4 Kings 10:19; 1 Macc 10:63) to demonstrate the distributive imperatival usage of third person in conjunction with second person imperatives are not strictly analogous to Acts 2:38. In each example there is a shift in the subject between the second and third person imperatives, even though the same audience is addressed and responsible to carry out the commands. These examples have *object transfers* in the third person imperatives,<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup>*Word Pictures*, vol. III, 34 – 36.

<sup>7</sup>What needs to be demonstrated is a *grammatical* disjunction, not a *theological* disjunction, which is often assumed.

<sup>8</sup>"The Third Person Imperative in Acts 2:38," *Restoration Quarterly* 26 (1983): 81 – 82.

<sup>9</sup>That is, *the subject of the third person imperative is the result of the "transfer" of an object (direct or indirect), generally from an implied (or actual) second person imperatival context.* The subject of the second person imperatival action remains the same, but the object is brought forward by the third person as the subject for emphasis. The party responsible for carrying out the imperative is the listening/reading audience except in the few cases where the speaker himself is also responsible, or where an intermediary is used. The third person allows the writer/speaker to shift his focus to the object of the subject's actions: "Shine your light" (second person) to "Your light must shine" (third person), "Cease being angry by sunset" to "The sun must not set on

where *subject transfers* (see next paragraph) are required to be analogous with Acts 2:38.<sup>10</sup>

I located over 80 passages in the Septuagint with second and third person imperatives in juxtaposition. Of these only ten are analogous to Acts 2:38. To be analogous, a single audience (with a plurality of subjects) must be addressed, there must be at least two juxtaposing second and third person imperatives,<sup>11</sup> and a *subject transfer* must occur in the third person imperative.<sup>12</sup> The transition from a second person

your anger." That object may also be another person: "Put him to death" (second person) to "He must be put to death" (third person).

<sup>10</sup>In Josh 6:10, Osburn appears to take the accusative (τὴν φωνήν) as the subject of the third person imperative: "do not let the voice of anyone be heard." However, the subject is μηθεὶς (μηδεὶς), "no one must hear your voice." The remaining examples Osburn cites (Exod 16:29; Zech 7:10; Didache 15:3; Ignatius, *Magnesians* 6:2) each contain subject transfers and are therefore analogous ("Acts 2:38," 83 – 84). Judy Glaze, whom Osburn is following, also fails to see this distinction. It is she, however, who first noted the importance of this type of construction for the interpretation of Acts 2:38, and the other examples she cites are analogous ("The Septuagintal Use of the Third Person Imperative," M. A. thesis, Harding Graduate School of Religion, 1979: 27 – 28).

<sup>11</sup>The order is not significant, nor would another imperational form alter the effect. For example Jer 18:11 has a third person imperative followed by a second person future indicative in *Vaticanus* and *Sinaiticus*, but a second person imperative in *Alexandrinus* (see also Exod 16:29; Lev 19:3; 3 Kings 12:24; 4 Kings 11:5). M. W. Humphreys cites an example from Plato *Crit.* 45 with a second person subjunctive followed by a third person imperative (object transfer): μήτε ταῦτα φοβούμενος ἀποκάμης σαυτὸν σῶσαι, μήτε ὃ ἔλεγες ἐν τῷ δικαστηρίῳ δυσχερὲς σοι γενέσθω, "On Negative Commands," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 7 (1876): 47.

<sup>12</sup>That is, *the subject of the imperative is the result of a "transfer" of a subject generally from an implied (or actual) second person imperative, or other imperational form, in the same context.* The third person allows the writer/speaker to shift the focus to certain individuals in the audience, or extend it beyond the audience. In this sense, the third person (singular or plural) imperative is more effective and emphatic than the second person (plural) imperative, which tends to mollify its own force to each individual in the audience. The subject of the third person imperative is the party responsible to fulfill or respond to the demands (or hortative exhortations/warnings) of the imperative, and is either in the immediate audience or the "implied" audience.

There are two basic grammatical constructions used to make a subject transfer. The first is the *determinate nominative construct*. In this case, the subject of the imperative is defined in the immediate context by an articular nominative form which is generally a participle, but may also be an adjective, a noun, or an elided form (usually with an independent definite article). In a few cases the subject is defined by an anarthrous nominative form, yet it is still determined as a specifically named subject among the listeners/readers. This type of construction tends to *narrow* or *limit*—thus, it is determinate—the focus of the imperatives to each individual or groups within the audiences. This type of grammatical construction is not used in Acts 2:38.

The second basic grammatical construction used to make a subject transfer is the *indeterminate nominative construct*. In this case, the subject of the imperative is defined in the immediate context by an indeterminate nominative form. Three adjectives (ἕκαστος, πᾶς, and its negated antonym μηδεὶς), the indefinite pronoun (τις), the relative pronoun (ὅς), and the anarthrous generic noun ἄνθρωπος are each used substantively. As might be expected, with the exception of two cases (Rom 15:11; 1Tim

plural to a third person singular imperative does not diminish the force or extent of either injunction upon the audience:

*[Joshua] said to them [twelve men from the tribes of Israel], go (Προσαγάγετε) before me in the presence of the Lord in the midst of the Jordan, and having taken up a stone from there, each (ἕκαστος) must carry (ἄράτω) it on his shoulders according to the number of the twelve tribes of Israel. (Josh 4:5)<sup>13</sup>*

In the New Testament I was able to identify five additional passages with the same grammatical construction. In 1Cor 16:1 – 2 Paul instructs his readers, “Now concerning the collection of the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so also you do (ποιήσατε). Every first day of the week, each of you (ἕκαστος ὑμῶν) is to set [something] aside (τιθέτω) by himself...” This is a subject transfer which shifts the focus from the whole audience (the Corinthian church) to each individual in the audience.<sup>14</sup> In Eph 5:25, 33 there is a subject transfer (ἀγαπάτε...ἀγαπάτω) separated by considerable discussion, but grammatically the effect is identical.<sup>15</sup>

The so-called disjunction between μετανοήσατε and βαπτισθήτω is also defended on the basis of the plural ὑμῶν in the prepositional phrase εἰς ἄφεσιν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ὑμῶν. It is argued the plural ὑμῶν agrees only with the plural μετανοήσατε, and therefore goes only with repentance. It cannot go with the singular βαπτισθήτω. Lanny Thomas Tanton considers this position, and argues that the grammars do not deal with agreement between number in verbs and prepositional phrases, as if that were an argument against the position, and so he dismisses it.<sup>16</sup>

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6:1), the forms are singular. Such nominatives tend to *extend* the focus of the imperative beyond the audience as a whole to everyone, and thus, concomitantly, narrowing the focus to everyone in the audience. In some cases (with ἕκαστος and τις) this effect is intensified and individualized for the audience when a substantive is conjoined with a partitive genitive (ὑμῶν, ἡμῶν) or is contiguous with a dative of location (ἐν ὑμῖν). Such is the case in Acts 2:38.

The effect of this construction is to universalize the command, and force each individual in the listening/reading audience to have a sense of personal responsibility to the injunction. Thus, “every person must be subject to superior authorities” (Πᾶσα ψυχὴ ἐξουσίαις ὑπερεχούσαις ὑποτασσέσθω, Rom 13:1); “because of acts of fornication, each man must have his own woman, each woman must have her own man” (διὰ δὲ τὰς πορνείας ἕκαστος τὴν ἑαυτοῦ γυναῖκα ἔχέτω καὶ ἕκαστη τὸν ἴδιον ἄδρα ἔχέτω, 1 Cor 7:2); *etc.*

<sup>13</sup>See also Ezek 20:7; Hag 2:4; Zech 7:10.

<sup>14</sup>See also 1 Cor 7:23 – 24; 10:24 – 25 (in reverse order).

<sup>15</sup> See also Gal 6:2, 4 – 5 where a second person plural imperative (βαστάζετε, v. 2) is followed by ἕκαστος and a third person singular imperative (δοκιμαζέτω, v. 4) and (possibly) a third person singular imperatival future (βαστάσει, v. 5).

<sup>16</sup>“The Gospel and Water Baptism: A Study of Acts 2:38,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 3 (Spring 1990): 39 – 40. Interestingly, Thomas reviews and dismisses the major “grammatical” arguments against the necessity of baptism for forgiveness of sins, but then dismisses the necessity of baptism itself based on “theological possibilities.”

Luther B. McIntyre Jr. is another recent advocate of the this so-called “rule of concord” between the pronoun ὑμῶν in the prepositional phrase and the verbs as the major grammatical argument against the necessity of baptism.<sup>17</sup> He states, “The basic rule of concord stipulates that a personal pronoun (in this case ὑμῶν) agrees with its antecedent in gender and number.”<sup>18</sup> Following the idea of concord between subject and predicate, he argues the plural ὑμῶν of the prepositional phrase can only have as its antecedent the subject of the plural verb, “repent,” and not the singular verb, “be baptized.” He dismisses Osburn’s idiomatic exception based on the use of second and third person imperatives in conjunction because he claims the examples cited do have concord between verbs and pronouns. As *he cited* Osburn, this is true; however, Osburn did not cite the complete passage of Zech 7:10, and presumably McIntyre did not examine the text itself. The final phrase of the text connects the plural pronoun ὑμῶν directly to a singular third person imperative: καὶ κακίαν ἕκαστος τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ αὐτοῦ μὴ μνησικακίῳ ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ὑμῶν. According to McIntyre’s “rule” of concord between pronoun and its antecedent, this passages breaks the rule.<sup>19</sup> However, the preceding is not even necessary to demonstrate that the audience of all of Acts 2:38 is one, and that the second person plural μετανοήσατε, the third person singular with ἕκαστος ὑμῶν, and ὑμῶν in the prepositional phrase all point back to αὐτούς. The plural ὑμῶν in the prepositional phrase has as its immediate antecedent the plural ὑμῶν in the phrase ἕκαστος ὑμῶν which is the subject of the singular βαπτισθήτω. Plural agreement is found for both verbs in the form of the first, and in the subject pronoun of the second.

McIntyre’s conclusion as to the place of the command for baptism in Peter’s statement is pure casuistry:

*...the command to be baptized is parenthetical and is not syntactically connected to remission of sins. When Peter commanded the people to repent, he was speaking to the crowd. Then the command to be baptized was directed to each individual. In the “remission of your sins” phrase, Peter again directed his words to the crowd collectively.<sup>20</sup>*

He does not explain what the essential difference is in addressing “the crowd” and “each individual” in the crowd. He has created these artificial categories through a strained exegesis of the passage based on equally artificial “rules” of Greek grammar.

<sup>17</sup>“Baptism and forgiveness in Acts 2:38,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153 (January–March 1996): 54 – 59.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 54 – 55.

<sup>19</sup>See also above on 1Cor 16:2 where ὑμῶν and Eph 5:33 where ὑμεῖς are each used with singular third person imperatives.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 57.

The various attempts to circumvent the most natural meaning of this passage have fallen short. Exegesis governed by theology has resulted in many convoluted grammatical arguments that cannot stand under careful examination. The distinction between subject and object transfers delineated in my thesis has helped clarify the issue; it is not simply a matter of second and third person imperatives in juxtaposition.

Peter's address to his audience is a clear example of a subject transfer where the subject of the third person imperative is always transferred from a second person imperative (in this case actual) in the same context. The effect, in this context, is to emphasize the personal responsibility of *each* person (third person singular) in the audience (second person plural) for his or her participation (direct or indirect) in the death of the Messiah. The sins of each person necessitated the gospel; no one could conceal his or her responsibility in the corporate sin of the audience. The baptism of each person would reveal this to all.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>The direct relationship of repentance, baptism, and the forgiveness of sins would not be a new concept to Peter's audience (Luke 3:3).