“Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.” (Acts 2:38–39)
“For Remission Of The Sins”

Just seven weeks after Christ’s death on the cross the first gospel sermon this side of Calvary was preached. After Peter accused his audience of crucifying the Son of God, they cried out “What shall we do?” (Acts 2:37). Peter announced the terms of Divine pardon: “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins” (Acts 2:38). This passage makes an inseparable connection between baptism and the remission of sins. It makes the remission of sins depend upon baptism in the same sense as it is made to depend upon repentance. Through the years, many attempts have been made to negate the force of this passage.

I have never understood how Baptist preachers can make repentance a condition for salvation and then exclude baptism. They usually claim that repentance is “for” (“in order to obtain”) the remission of sins and baptism is for (“because of”) the remission of sins. However, the preposition “for” cannot express two different relationships to the two words—what it means to baptism it means to repentance. If repentance is essential to salvation, then so is baptism.

In several debates with Baptist preachers I have illustrated this verse with a chart showing two box cars on a train track. “Repentance” is one car and “baptism” is the other. They are joined by a small coupler—the word “and.” Because these cars are joined by the coupler, whatever direction one car travels, the other has to move in the same direction. If baptism is “because of” the remission of sins, then so is repentance. If repentance is “in order to obtain” the remission of sins, then so is baptism.

A parallel passage can be found in Acts 3:19, “Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out.” Repentance occupies the same place in both passages. In Acts 3:19 “be converted” occupies the place that “be baptized” is given in Acts 2:38. They are therefore identical in act and purpose—whatever baptism is for in Acts 2:38, conversion is for in Acts 3:19.

We have all been told “If you can’t stand the heat, get out of the kitchen.” Some commentators have apparently followed this advice when dealing with Acts 2:38.

A. T. Robertson, the world renowned Baptist scholar, sought to avoid the issue in his Word Pictures In The New Testament (Broadman Press, 1930). In Volume III, on pages 35 and 36, while commenting on the phrase “for the remission of sins,” as used in Acts 2:38, he wrote, “This phrase is the subject of endless controversy as men look at it from the standpoint of sacramental or of evangelical theology… One will decide the use here according as he believes that baptism is essential to the remission of sins or not.” But, while explaining the same phrase in Matthew 26:28, he wrote in Volume I, page 210, “This passage answers all the modern sentimentalism that finds in the teaching of Jesus only pious ethical remarks or eschatological dreamings. He had the definite conception of his death on the cross as a basis of forgiveness of sin. The purpose of the shedding of his blood of the New Covenant was precisely to remove (forgive) sins.”

Another smoke screen often used to get around Acts 2:38 is the argument that since the words “repent” and “be baptized” are different in
both person and number in the original text, the phrase “for the remission of sins” cannot refer to both verbs.

A few years ago I wrote to several prominent Greek scholars to see if the above line of reasoning was valid. The question I sent to them was as follows: “Is it grammatically possible that the phrase ‘eis aphi̱sin hamartion,’ ‘for the remission of sins,’ as used in Acts 2:38, expresses the force of both verbs, ‘repent ye and be baptized each one of you,’ even though these verbs differ in both person and number?” The following men responded to my inquiry. I will give their qualifications along with their response to my question.

Bruce Metzger was the editor of the Textual Commentary on The Greek New Testament, published by the United Bible Societies. He is currently teaching at Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey. He wrote, “In reply to your recent inquiry may I say that, in my view, the phrase ‘eis aphi̱sin hamartion’ in Acts 2:38 applies in sense to both of the preceding verbs.”

F. W. Gingrich was a professor of New Testament Greek at Albright College in Reading, Pennsylvania. Gingrich, along with William Arndt, published A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature in 1957. He wrote, “The difference in person and number of ‘repent’ and ‘be baptized’ is caused by the fact that ‘repent’ is a direct address in the second person plural, while ‘be baptized’ is governed by the subject ‘every one of you’ and so is third person singular. ‘Every one of you’ is, of course, a collective noun.”

Arthur L. Farstad was the chairman of the New King James Executive Review Committee and general editor of the NKJV New Testament. The NKJV was translated by over 120 Greek scholars, many of whom teach in Baptist schools. He wrote, “Since the expression ‘eis aphi̱sin hamartion’ is a prepositional phrase with no verbal endings or singular or plural endings. I certainly agree that grammatically it can go with both repentance and baptism. In fact, I would think that it does go with both of them.”

John R. Werner is the International Consultant in Translation to the Wycliffe Bible Translators. He was also a consultant to Friberg and Friberg with the Analytical Greek New Testament. From 1962 to 1972 he was professor of Greek at Trinity Christian College. He said, “Whenever two verbs are connected by kai ‘and’ and then followed by a modifier (such as a prepositional phrase, as in Acts 2:38), it is grammatically possible that modifier modifies either both the verbs, or only the latter one. This is be-

cause there is no punctuation in the ancient manuscripts, so we don’t know whether the author intended to pause between the first verb and the ‘and.’ It does not matter that, here in Acts 2:38, one of the verbs is second person plural (“you all”) and the other is third-person singular (“is to”). They are both imperative, and the fact that they are joined by kai ‘and’ is sufficient evidence that the author may have regarded them as a single unit to which his modifier applied.”

Barclay Newman and Eugene Nida edited The Translator’s Handbook On The Acts Of The Apostles. This book, published by the United Bible Societies, says on page 60: “So that your sins will be forgiven (literally ‘into a forgiveness of your sins’) in the Greek may express either purpose or result; but the large majority of translators understand it as indicating purpose. The phrase modifies both main verbs: turn away from your sins and be baptized.”

The New Testament plainly teaches that accountable people have to be baptized into Christ in order to have their sins remitted. Have you been baptized for the remission of sins? “And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.” (Acts 22:16).

—David Padfield
F.W. Gingrich  
Albright College  
Reading, PA  19604  

Dear Professor Gingrich; 

I wonder if you would give me some information --- 

Is it grammatically possible that the phrase 'eis apheia

hamartion,' 'for the forgiveness of sins,' as used in Acts 2:38,

expresses the force of both verbs, 'repent ye and be baptized
each one of you,' even though these verbs differ in both person

and number? 

I would be very grateful for your opinion as a scholar of

New Testament Greek.

July 4, 1983  

Dear Rev. Padfield:  

The difference in 

person and number of πεντακοσία  
and Βαπτίζω is caused by the fact that here -- is 

direct address in the second person plural, while 

Βαπτίζω is governed by the subject Ἐκατόρος, and so is 

third person singular. ΕΚ -- is, of course, a collective noun.

Sincerely yours,  

F. Wilbur Gingrich  

Respectfully yours,  

David A. Padfield  
Minister  

"For The Remission Of Sins"  

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6218 Prospect Avenue
Dallas, Texas    75214

September 20, 1983

Mr. David A. Padfield
P.O. Box 4013
Evansville, IN    47711

Dear Brother Padfield,

Thank you for your letter received in late July. As you can imagine, as executive editor of the New King James I receive quite a bit of mail and am usually behind in answering it.

Since the expression "eis apthesin hamartion" is a prepositional phrase with no verbal endings or singular or plural endings I would certainly agree that grammatically it can go with both repentance and baptism. In fact, I would think that it does go with both of them. Exactly what is the interpretation of it is another question.

Sincerely,

Arthur L. Farstad

ALF/ac

P.S. I'm glad that you use the NKJV in your preaching and writing.
July 1, 1983

Dear Mr. Padfield,

In reply to your recent inquiry may I say that, in my view, the phrase eis ἀφεσιν hortion in Acts 2:38 applies in sense to both of the preceding verbs.

With all good wishes,

Sincerely yours,

Bruce M. Metzger
For The Remission Of Sins

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Translation Department
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July 1, 1963

David A. Padfield, Minister
Focus on Faith
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Dear Pastor Padfield:

Your letter of June 28 has been referred to me.

Thank you for your testimonial to the Analytical Greek New Testament, on which I consulted.

By a glad Providence, I yesterday updated my vita at the request of an administrator here. To fulfill your request that I state my qualifications, I enclose a copy. I might add that I consider my chief qualifications to be the help of the Holy Spirit, and the benefits of some 35 years of daily reading of the Greek New Testament.

Now, in answer to your question whether, in Acts 2:38, the phrase "for forgiving of your sins" could grammatically depend upon both "Repent, y'all" and "each one of you is to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ."

Whenever two verbs are connected by kai 'and' and then followed by a modifier (such as a prepositional phrase, as in Acts 2:38), it is grammatically possible that modifier modifies either both the verbs, or only the latter one. This is because there is no punctuation in the ancient manuscripts, so we don't know whether the author intended to pause between the first verb and the 'and'.

It does not matter that, here in Acts 2:38, one of the verbs is second-person plural ("y'all") and the other is third-person singular ("is to"). They are both imperative, and the fact that they are joined by kai 'and' is sufficient evidence that the author may have regarded them as a single unit to which his modifier applied.

(When grammar leaves us with two or more possibilities, we look for the nearest evidence of which the author intended. In this instance the same preacher is reported in the very next episode as saying "So repent and turn back for the wiping away of your sins" (3:19). So we infer that in 2:38, too, he meant that)
repentance, as well as identification with Jesus Christ, was for the forgiving of sins.

We of Wycliffe Bible Translators, whom God has called to do the exacting scholarly work necessary to translate His Word into every language, appreciate you pastors who feed God's sheep and help them become involved with their Lord in His work. If He has led you to any young people whom He has talented in language and who are open to His possible calling into missionary service, tell them about us, won't you?

Your fellow servant,

John R. Werner
Ph.D.
International Consultant in Translation
John R. Werner

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