

What does "For" (eis) in Acts 2:38 Mean?

Bernie Gillespie

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From a recent email:

I recently began a discussion with a guy concerning EIS in Acts 2:38. ... After offering the approach I have been using in the past that baptism is EIS (with a view toward) repentance [Matthew 3:11], EIS (with a view toward) Christ [Galatians 3:27; Romans 6:3], and EIS (with a view toward) the remission of sins [Luke 3:3; Acts 2:38] I offered another possible view using the UPC definition of EIS, i.e., "in order to obtain." It's the approach which recognizes the command to "repent" in Acts 2:38 to be in the 2nd person plural, the command to "be baptized" to be in the 3rd person singular, and the phrase "for the remission of [your] sins" to again be in the 2nd person plural seeming to connect the 2nd person plurals, repentance and remission of sins, while making baptism a parenthetical insertion. The verse would thus show an emphasis on repentance being "EIS [in order to obtain] the remission of sins."

I find this interesting because my Nestle Aland Greek New Testament has the phrase "repentance and remission" found in Luke 24:47 as "metanoia eis aphesis." It has Christ saying that "repentance EIS remission of sins" was to be preached in his name. We also know John the Baptist preached the baptism of "repentance EIS the remission of sins" (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3). I've presented the argument that, if grammatical nuances of Acts 2:38 are taken into consideration, Peter preached the same thing... that the remission of sins is to be connected to repentance and not to baptism. Meaning, like John the Baptist and Christ, Peter preached repentance EIS the remission of sins. If EIS is to be accepted as "in order to obtain," then we have John the Baptist, Jesus Christ, and Peter teaching that man was to repent EIS (in order to obtain) the remission of sins. Then again, the argument is stronger if the grammatical argument of the plurals vs singular holds water.

My response:

I have been working on a paper on eis for several years, but never have been able to finish it. Obviously, we agree on the general idea that baptism does not cause remission in Acts 2:38. Getting at how eis functions in Acts 2:38 is what is challenging. I think it is good to show that eis is used in Matt. 3:11 "baptize you in water unto repentance." When you parallel Matt 3:11, Mk. 1:4 and Lk. 24:47 it is apparent that the connection is between repentance & the remission of sins and the stress is on repentance. Baptism is associated with repentance and remission because it is the sign of repentance as found in Jewish proselyte washing/baptism. The simple comparison of these passages should be enough to keep the UPCI from an exclusive baptismal remission. But, of course it isn't.

The issue of baptismal remission cannot be solved by simply determining the usage of eis. This is a major point for interpreting Acts 2:38. The finest Greek scholars have disagreed over this. Most of them don't believe that eis intends a baptismal remission, even those who say eis is purposive or causal. It can be noted that one could hold to an

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interpretation that eis is causal without concluding that Peter teaches baptismal remission. For example, G. Campbell Morgan [The Birth of the Church, p. 156.] believes that epi in "in the name of Jesus" means "upon", which would connote "upon the name of Jesus." Campbell (and others) says that to repent and be baptized "upon" the name of Jesus would mean to repent and be baptized resting upon or **DEPENDING** on the name of Jesus. In essence, to depend on the name is a Jewish way of saying trusting or believing in that person. So if Peter exhorts the people of the Jewish nation to repent of killing their very Lord and Christ, he means for them to repent, and be converted, or come over to Christianity, signified by baptism, as they trust in or depend on Jesus to remit or take away their sins. So then eis could be causal, with the cause being trusting in the Jesus (upon the name of Jesus) for the forgiveness of their sins.

Traditionally, Acts 2:38 has been problematic for those who hold to "forgiveness by faith alone in Jesus" because Peter's statement is constructed in such a way that those who read the Bible with a literalistic interpretation read it to mean that forgiveness is effected or brought about by water baptism. However, the difficulty for the baptismal remission view is that the grammar links remission to repentance as well as baptism "depending upon" the name of Jesus. In effect, the remission can be said to connect to all three: repentance, baptism, and depending upon (the name) Jesus. Because of this, we could say that the grammar does not support a view that baptism alone effects remission. At the very best for the baptismal remission position, it could be grammatically **POSSIBLE** that baptism is a part of the remission, but **NOT** exclusively. However, as most (non-Roman Catholic) scholars say, the force of Peter's statement is on repentance and "depending" on Jesus for forgiveness.

The UPCI must be reminded, that since this is the only verse in the NT which **COULD BE** taken to indicate baptismal remission - and that is exegetically dubious - it is bad hermeneutics and theology to force such a strained doctrine onto the whole of Scripture, not to mention the whole Church. This must be, when all the rest of the NT lacks any clear articulation (and I don't mean torturing two or three passages for vague, mystical "hints") of baptismal remission. If the NT church believed in baptismal remission, such a crucial doctrine would call for lengthy passages explaining it. Yet, we do not find any of the NT books presenting a specific treatment of such a belief. Instead, the NT places all the emphasis on the importance of faith in Jesus for forgiveness. It is baffling (and I used to do it) that one could turn all the focus which the NT places on Jesus as the means of forgiveness and somehow propose that the focus is on a specific form of baptism.

My approach in talking with UPCI people (as it obviously is with you as well) is to show them that they draw their support for their position from just a few verses and that those texts are so hastily and poorly interpreted within the UPCI, that it leaves their doctrinal position in jeopardy. If they can see that the few poorly interpreted verses, upon which they hang everything, are not supportive of their position, then they may see that they are left with the consensus of texts in the NT that say that salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone. That is the hope.

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So I have come to the view that the answer isn't in the precision of the grammar, but in the context, usage, precedence and the analogy of Scripture – in other words, good principles of interpretation. The UPCI rests its doctrine on the few, historical problematic or grammatically vague verses, rather than on the general, comprehensive and clear teaching of all of Scripture. They are convinced that if their exclusive interpretation is right on one or two supportive text, then the whole remaining consensus is disproved. This is a fallacy. Rather than take the approach that a few problematic texts should defer to the concurrence of the majority of texts, they hold that the "truth" resides in their "special" or unique interpretation of just a few verses from which they must tease out their unorthodox distinctives. It is this way of handling the Bible that always leads to sectarian and ultimately heretical forms of Christianity.

But the broad consensus of Scripture is crucial. For example, if Abraham was justified BY FAITH before circumcision, this should be taken as an analogy for anyone who would consider making baptism the NT circumcision. The larger truth of Scripture is that God justifies those who trust in him. Neither circumcision, baptism, nor all the blood of all the bulls and goats under the Law can be turned into an instrument of forgiveness. The apostolic teaching is to depend on the name of Jesus for forgiveness: Acts 13:38-39 "Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses."

Ultimately, with us or those in the UPCI, only God can open the heart to truth: Acts 16:14 "And a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, which worshipped God, heard us: whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul."

To read my paper go to [Does the Word "For" in "For the Remission of Sins" in Acts 2:38 Signify that Water Baptism Remits Sin?](#)