

TRACTS, AND FACTS IN ACTS

Those who take upon themselves the task of writing and publishing religious tracts, and other gospel literature, shoulder a great responsibility. One might even say, an awesome responsibility. And yet when we read the many tracts which come our way it is staggering to see that the vast majority of them not only give misinformation, but would confuse and lead the seeker-after-truth astray. Some months ago I referred, in an article, to a tract I had received which purported to prove that Christians can never be lost or fall from grace, and I tried, in these columns, to show how erroneous that doctrine is. I now have before me another tract which claims to inform people "How To Be Saved" and is one of many tracts published by a Mr. T. L. Osborn. The strong theme (indeed the only theme) of this tract is to show us that all that is required of us is that we should believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and we shall be saved. Mr. Osborn is not, of course, saying anything new but is simply following a long tradition of tract writers whose theme is "only believe."

For the benefit of some of our younger readers, or readers otherwise new to this widespread doctrine, I offer the following comments and if anything unfair or inaccurate is said by me I hope I will be challenged. I will certainly print any ensuing correspondence. In trying to be charitable we imagine that some of these tract writers don't know any better and are doing their best with the knowledge that they have, but invariably we are forced to the conclusion that they certainly know better and *studiously avoid* all passages of scripture which may interfere with their chosen subject.

Although there are slight variations to the theme of "only believe", the basic core of the dogma is that people can be saved instantaneously (even sitting beside their radio sets or driving their cars) by suddenly "believing" in Jesus. Those who preach this particular belief and accept it (and there are vast numbers) would advise enquirers that they have nothing to DO in regard to their salvation (for Christ did it all on the cross) and they need simply believe. Obviously we must all BELIEVE on the Lord Jesus Christ to be saved, and certainly Christ accomplished our salvation on the cross, but as we shall clearly see from the N.T. there are also things that we must DO in our acceptance of salvation. We do not have to rely on the interpretation of one or two verses of scriptures on this subject for, in the Acts of the Apostles, we have several clear examples of conversion, and what can be better that *real examples* of how men, and women, from all walks of life, were saved in N.T. times? From these examples we can judge for ourselves as to whether the apostle Peter believed in the "only believe" teaching, or Philip, or Ananias or Paul. In short, *how* did the apostles carry out Christ's instructions to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature? What did *they* understand by this and *how did they* convert enquirers?

REAL EXAMPLES OF TRUE CONVERSIONS

The Book of Acts takes up where the Gospels leave off. The Gospels close with the account of the ascension of Jesus to God's right hand in heaven, after giving His final instructions to His apostles. These instructions, according to Mark, were **"Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned."** (16:15). Even at the outset, these instructions of Christ seem to be in conflict with Mr. Osborn, in that, according to Jesus Himself, salvation *was to be preceded* not only by belief but repentance and baptism. We shall see if this view is borne out by how the apostles interpreted Christ's instructions. Subsequent to Christ's instructions, the first recorded instance of the preaching of the gospel is by the apostle Peter, on the Day of Pentecost, and is in consequence of the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the assembled apostles (Acts 2).

THE SAVING OF THE 3000 AT PENTECOST (Acts 2)

Moved, supernaturally, by the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles, Peter preached to a massive Jewish audience so effectively that he convicted them of having killed the Messiah, the Son of God. Stricken in conscience they called out **"Men and brethren, what shall we do?"** In Peter's reply we shall notice that he did not tell them to BELIEVE on the Lord Jesus Christ, for evidently they already believed in Him, but he directed them in *the next steps* of their conversion. He said, **"Repent and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."** (2:37). Here is a passage of which Mr. Osborn must be completely unaware for it does not mention "belief" but does mention repentance and baptism. And baptism is for the remission of sins. And surely "remission of sins" must be *a very important ingredient* in a person's salvation. In response to Peter's preaching 3,000 souls **"gladly received his word and were baptised"** that same day (v.41). Baptism didn't seem "unnecessary" to those 3,000.

PHILIP AND THE SAMARITANS (Acts 8)

The next conversions in the Acts refer to the preaching of Philip the evangelist to the Samaritans. This was during the persecution of the Churches in Jerusalem orchestrated by Saul (later Paul). Many of the citizens of Samaria had hitherto been under the spell of Simon the Sorcerer, who had **"For a long time bewitched them with sorceries. But when they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the Kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptised, both men and women. Then Simon himself believed also: and when he was baptised he continued with Philip, and wondered, beholding the miracles and signs which were done."** (v.12). Here we are informed that the large numbers of Samaritans who believed were also baptised (including Simon the Sorcerer).

PHILIP AND THE EUNUCH (Acts 8)

The next conversion mentioned in Acts involves the Ethiopian Eunuch, Chancellor of The Exchequer to Queen Candace. The eunuch is returning home in his chariot from Jerusalem and is not only reading Isaiah Chap. 53 but is debating within himself as to whom it refers. The Holy Spirit brings Philip to the chariot, and Philip at the eunuch's request, boards the chariot and enters into a conversation on the predictions of Isaiah. **"Then Philip opened his mouth and began at the same scripture and preached unto him Jesus. And as they went on their way came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water, what doth hinder me to be baptised."** Before we look at what happened next we should, I think, wonder how the eunuch knew to mention baptism. It seems clear that Philip was not preaching an "only believe" doctrine: but baptism was an important element of his gospel message. Philip had preached unto him "Jesus" and obviously this included the element of baptism. We notice, too, that the eunuch did not say, "Who is going to force me to be baptised" but rather "What can stop me from being baptised." Clearly the eunuch had the attitude that God

requires. **“And Philip said, if thou believest with all thy heart thou mayest . . . And he commanded the chariot to stand still and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch and he baptised him.”** (v.38). Thus according to Philip, only those who believe in Christ totally (with all their heart) are fit subjects for baptism. Can any sane person contemplate Philip telling the eunuch about baptism, stopping the chariot, going down into a pool of water waist-high and immersing the eunuch if the whole business was quite unnecessary? Can we imagine it? And yet many tract writers either manage to avoid the mention of baptism, or completely dismiss it as “unnecessary to salvation.” Perhaps they have overlooked Acts 8.

PAUL’S OWN CONVERSION (Acts 9)

Paul was an unlikely candidate for God’s selection to service. It was while Paul (then Saul) was **“Yet breathing out threatening and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord”** (and was in fact, on his way to Damascus to wreak havoc on the Christians there) that he was struck down and blinded by the Lord Jesus Christ. Horrified to learn that he had, in fact, been persecuting Christ, he **“trembling and astonished, asked the Lord, What will thou have me to do?”** This, of course, was a golden opportunity for Jesus to say, **“Do? You have nothing to do: Only believe.”** But the Lord said no such thing. **“Jesus said, Arise and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou MUST DO.”** Struck temporarily blind, Paul was led by the hand into Damascus and was in such a state of mental turmoil that **“He was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink.”** After three days God sent a reluctant Ananias to Saul to restore his sight and tell him what he must do. **“Immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales, and he received his sight forthwith, and arose and was baptised.”** Luke (who wrote the Acts) merely mentions that Paul **“arose and was baptised.”** However, years later, when Paul was recounting the circumstances of his own conversion, he gave us a little more detail. He says that after Ananias had restored his sight, Ananias informed him that he (Paul) had been chosen by God to know God’s will and **“to see the Just One, and to hear word from His mouth. For thou shalt be a witness to all men of what thou hast seen and heard. And now, why tarriest thou, Arise, and be baptised and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord”** (Acts 22:15). One would have imagined that if Paul was specially chosen by God to do God’s will, and to actually see Christ, and actually hear Christ’s words, that baptism could have been dispensed with. I’m sure Mr. Osborn would think so. Yet Paul’s conversion is similar to all the rest: God is no respecter of persons in this. Paul had spent the last three days in remorse, fasting and prayers, but these prayers had not erased his sins; otherwise Ananias, at the end of the three would not have said, **“Arise, and be baptised and wash away thy sins . . .”** Again, we cannot imagine a man being “saved” if, three days later, he is still “in his sins.” Thus Paul was not “saved” at his conversion with Christ, but was saved only after the three days when he had “obeyed the gospel” in baptism, and had “washed away” (not “prayed away”) his sins. Thus Ananias confirms the words of Peter (in Act 2:37) that *baptism is for the remission of sins*: and “remission of sins” is a very important consideration in a person being “saved.” How can tract writers ignore such things?

CORNELIUS AND HIS HOUSEHOLD (Acts 10)

After Paul’s conversion in Chap. 9 we have the conversion of the first Gentiles in Chap. 10. We see from the record that the apostle Peter had to be convinced by a vision from God that the Gentiles should receive the gospel. However reluctant Peter may have been, he duly arrives at the house of Cornelius, a Roman soldier, and preaches to a very enthusiastic group of Gentiles. Peter concludes his gospel address with these words: **To Him (Christ) give all the prophets witness that, through His name, whosoever believeth in Him shall receive remission of sins. While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Spirit fell on all them which heard the word. And they of**

the circumcision which believed (the Jews) were astonished (as many as came with Peter) because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the Holy Spirit." (There are only two recorded instances in the N.T. of baptism in the Holy Spirit: this one and that of the apostles, in Acts 2). Most of our tract-writing friends would tell us that men baptised in the Holy Spirit were highly honoured and certainly saved instantaneously. Yet Peter, after he recovered from his astonishment that the Gentiles had been baptised in the Holy Spirit, said, "**Can any man forbid water that these should not be baptised (which have received the Holy Spirit as well as we). And he commanded them to be baptised in the name of the Lord**" (v.47). To Peter, baptism in water was not some unnecessary humbug, or optional appendage to salvation, but was vital and something he *commanded to be done*, even with those who had just, in his presence, been baptised by God, in the Holy Spirit.

CONVERSION OF LYDIA Acts 16

Paul and Silas describe how, on their second missionary journey, they came to Philippi and stayed there several days. "**And on the sabbath we went out of the city by the riverside, where prayer was wont to be made: and we sat down and spoke to the women that resorted thither. 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 to the things which were spoken by Paul. And when she was baptised and her household, she besought us saying. If ye have judged me faithful to the Lord, come into my house and abide there.**" Again, all those who heard the gospel and believed it, were baptised.

CONVERSION OF THE JAILER (Acts 16)

While in the same city of Philippi, Paul and Silas later encountered much persecution and ended up in jail. God intervened, and by means of an earthquake sundered open the prison doors. Thinking that the prisoners had escaped, the jailer prepared to kill himself but Paul restrained him and said, "**Do thyself no harm, for we are all here.**" Although the jailer was a heathen man, he was astute enough to realise that he had angered the God of Paul and Silas, and, in fear and trembling, said, "**Sirs, what must I do to be saved?**" Paul replied, "**Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.**" Plainly the jailer knew nothing about Christ and so "**Paul spoke unto him the word of the Lord, and to all that were in the house.**" The outcome is recorded in the next verse. "**And he, (the jailer) took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes, and WAS BAPTISED he and all his straightway.**" The jailer and his household were baptised *immediately*.

THE CORINTHIANS (Acts 18)

Paul, still on his second missionary journey, came from Athens to Corinth, and preached the gospel to everyone: Jews and Gentiles. When many Jews rejected his message and blasphemed, Paul concentrated his efforts on the Gentiles. "**And Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his house, and many of the Corinthians hearing, believed and were baptised**" (v.8). And so the pattern is maintained: those in Corinth who heard and believed, were immersed.

THE EPHESIANS (Acts 19)

The last relevant mention of baptism in Acts relates to what Paul found at Ephesus. When he asked certain brethren if they had received the Holy Spirit since they believed they replied, in surprise, that they had never even heard of the Holy Spirit. This, in turn, surprised Paul, and he asked, "**Unto what, then, were ye baptised? And they said, Unto John's baptism.**" Paul then explained to them that whereas John's baptism had been previously relevant, it had now been superseded and overtaken by Christ's baptism. "**And when they heard this, they were baptised in the name of the Lord.**" Thus we have here an example of *Godly men*, who having already been baptised with John's baptism, had to be baptised again, with Christ's baptism. This incident is of

great interest and shows us *the importance* that Paul attached to baptism: Christ's baptism.

THE THIEF ON THE CROSS

"But", someone says, "The thief on the cross was 'saved' without being baptised. I want to be saved like the thief on the cross."

Prior to Pentecost, and while Jesus trod the earth, being all powerful, He could at will, retain sins or forgive sins on *whatever terms He pleased*, or indeed, *upon no terms whatsoever*. This was during His ministry and prior to His burial. After His death however, the will of Christ as Testator assumed its full force and, since Christ had ascended into heaven, He was in any case, no longer here to forgive people personally. Thus from the time of the ascension Christ's terms for salvation were committed into the hands of His earthly representatives (the apostles) and they were sent into all the world to make these terms known. As we have already seen, Christ's parting instructions to His apostles were, "**Go ye unto all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved.**" Consequently people today cannot be 'saved' like the thief on the cross, who was, after all, the *only person* to whom Jesus ever said "**Today thou will be with Me in paradise,**" (whatever that meant). Similarly Jesus said to various people, "Thy sins be forgiven thee" and to the woman taken in adultery, He said, "neither do I condemn thee, go and sin no more," But no one expects that to happen today. Those who asked to be saved like the thief on the cross are very selective and, predictably don't want to be saved on the terms given to the rich young ruler: "**go and sell all thou hast and give it to the poor.**" We can't ask to be saved in a preferred manner. Salvation is non-negotiable. Even Paul (a chosen vessel) as we have seen, was *not* "saved like the thief on the cross" but was instructed by Christ personally, to go into the city and wait until he was told the things he must do. The *terms of entry* into the Kingdom of God, and for the remission of sins, were enunciated at Pentecost and have never changed.

CONCLUSION

Many years ago, the late brother David Dougal, an evangelist for whom I had great respect and admiration, assured me that once we had a solid grasp of the Acts of the Apostles we could go anywhere. His words are so true and a study of the Acts is one of the most profitable pursuits of the Bible student. It certainly sheds much light on the question of conversion: and how men can be saved.

Fortunately, in this article, it has been possible to squeeze in **all** the conversions in the Acts, and surely the record speaks for itself. Every conversion there (without any exception) has clearly shown us that, in N.T. times, all believers were called upon to renounce sin (repent) and to be baptised (immersed) that their past sins might be washed away and that they might rise from the watery grave to walk in newness of life (Rom 6). Mr. Osborn and the many others, will doubtless continue to write their tracts and maintain that we need "only believe", but from this very brief look at the Acts we have seen that Peter did not subscribe to the doctrine and neither did Philip, Ananias or Paul. This is hardly surprising when we remember that Jesus, in His commission, said, "He that believeth and is baptised will be saved." Jesus, in His purpose, placed baptism between belief and salvation, and as I say, a great responsibility rests with those who would alter the sequence of Christ's words and would make Him say, "He that believeth is saved, and may be baptised if he feels the need." Truly an awesome responsibility rests on those who write tracts. Tracts should reflect the facts in Acts.

(I regret this article is even longer than usual but I wanted to include all the conversions in Acts.)