

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "Who Is Qualified To Be Baptized?" (Colossians 2:9-13, Acts 2:38-41)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

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The Nature of the Circumcision and Baptism in Colossians 2:11-12

Let me read for you once again the passage we are studying at the present time, in Colossians chapter two, beginning at verse nine. The Apostle Paul declares to us the glorious and unique position of the believer – the fact that we are truly “in Christ.” Colossians chapter two, beginning at verse nine:

For in Him [that is, in Christ] dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power. In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. (Colossians 2:9-12)

If you have been following our series of messages in Colossians, you may recall that in our last message we focused on Paul’s statement in verse twelve of this passage, that believers in Christ have been “buried with Him in baptism.” We asked the question, “What is this baptism?” As we searched the Scriptures together, we saw two very important things.

First of all, we saw that just as the circumcision of verse eleven is a spiritual circumcision – “the circumcision made without hands” – so also the baptism of verse twelve is a spiritual baptism. It is our intimate identification with Christ in

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His burial and resurrection. What Paul is saying is that in the eyes of God the Father, every believer was crucified with Christ, every believer was buried in the tomb with Christ, and every believer was raised from the dead with Christ.

Secondly, we saw that Scripture makes a clear distinction between Spirit baptism and water baptism. No one is or has ever been saved by water baptism. Salvation involves Spirit baptism – the baptism of the Holy Spirit, the indwelling of God the Holy Spirit, which all believers receive when they are saved.

Two Positions on Water Baptism Among Believers

At the end of our last message we also took note of the fact that there are two positions on water baptism among Bible-believing Christians.

There are those who believe that Scripture teaches that water baptism is exclusively an act of testimony on the part of someone who has already been baptized by the Spirit of God, someone who already possesses saving faith in Jesus Christ. Water baptism has no other purpose, and no other significance. That is what theologians call the credobaptist position, or the believer's baptism position, and that is the position that I hold.

Now I also mentioned that there is another position. Many true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ take a different view. They practice what the theologians call paedobaptism, or infant baptism. They practice the baptism of the infant children of believing parents.

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Now once again, let me be very clear. These are not people who believe that infant baptism, or water baptism of any kind, has any saving effect. I'm not talking about Roman Catholics or Lutherans or liberal Presbyterian and Reformed churches that teach the heresy of baptismal regeneration. I am talking about Bible-believing churches that practice infant baptism. I'm talking about churches that preach the one true Gospel. They preach that we are saved by God's grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone, and they will be the first to tell you that water baptism saves no one.

But they practice infant baptism for a different reason. They believe that water baptism has a different significance than the significance of witness to saving faith. They believe that baptism is the New Testament replacement for Old Testament circumcision. They believe that water baptism signifies membership in the Covenant of Grace, and therefore they believe that it signifies admission to the rights and privileges of membership in the visible church. And so, they believe that water baptism should be administered both to un-baptized adults who come to saving faith in Jesus Christ, and also to the infant children of believing parents. This is how they interpret the verses in Colossians chapter two that we are presently studying.

Now I also mentioned last time that I was saved many years ago in a church that held that view, and I was also originally ordained to the Gospel ministry in a church that holds that view. But as I told you in our last message, after a great deal

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of intensive study I came to believe that the paedobaptist view is not what the Bible teaches.

In other words, I came to the credobaptist position. I believe that God's Word teaches that the exclusive purpose of water baptism is testimony of saving faith in Jesus Christ, and therefore water baptism is for believers only, because only believers in Christ are in covenant with God.

The Key Question About Water Baptism

Now, the critical issue is the fact that both positions on water baptism cannot be correct. And so, as I promised last time, today we are going to take up the question that is at heart of the matter: According to Scripture, who is qualified to receive water baptism, and why?

I believe the best approach to answering this question will be to examine two key passages that the paedobaptists refer to as the bedrock foundation of their position. One is the passage we are currently studying in Colossians chapter two. The other is a passage that we find in Acts chapter two, in the account of Peter's great sermon on the Day of Pentecost. I want to begin with the passage in Acts, and then we'll come back to the passage in Colossians.

What Is The Promise of Acts 2:38-41?

The paedobaptists believe that Acts chapter two, verses 38 through 41, teach that water baptism is to be administered to both believers and their infant children.

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But in fact, if you look carefully at this passage, in its context and also in the light of the rest of Scripture, what you find is that it actually teaches the opposite. It teaches that water baptism is for believers only. If you are able to do so, I hope that you will turn with me to this passage, Acts chapter 2, beginning at verse 38:

Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for [or because of] 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." And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation." Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them [that is, to the church].

Now in using this passage to support the infant baptism position, the paedobaptists focus especially on Peter's statement at the beginning of verse 39. He says, "for the promise is to you and to your children." The paedobaptists say that the people who were listening to Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost would have assumed from his statement that the covenant sign of baptism was to be administered to them and to their children.

The question is: Does the text of this passage support that position?

Now to answer that question, we need to be careful to do something that we must always do as we study God's Word. We need to pay attention to the context.

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And so the first thing that we have to pay careful attention to is the immediate context. Now, the first thing you will notice is that the phrase, “for the promise is to you and to your children” does not stand by itself. It is part of a longer sentence. And so we need to make sure we read the entire sentence, so that we understand Peter’s entire thought. Here is the full statement, verse 39. Peter says, “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.*”

Now that we have the whole sentence in our minds, we need to answer two questions about this statement. First, what is the promise that Peter speaks of here in verse 39? And secondly, to whom is that promise given? Once again, we find the answers to those questions by paying attention to the context. First of all, we find the answers to both questions in the immediate context of this passage. And then, we also find that the answer that we discover here in Acts chapter two is confirmed to us as we consider the larger context, as we consider other passages in the Bible that speak about the same subject. God does not say something in one place in the Bible that contradicts what we find in the rest of the Bible.

So, what is the answer to our first question? What is the promise that Peter speaks of here in verse 39? We find the answer earlier in this same chapter, back at the beginning of Acts chapter two.

We need to remember how this chapter begins. We read at the beginning of Acts chapter two that on the Day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit came upon the 120

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believers who were obeying Jesus' command to wait at Jerusalem for that purpose. And when the Spirit came upon them, they spoke in other languages, so that all the Jews who were gathered from all over the world for the Feast of Pentecost heard the Gospel preached to them in their own language. And we read that the people were amazed at this, and they began to speculate about what was happening.

And we read beginning in verse fourteen that Peter stood up, and he told them exactly what was happening. And this is what he said, beginning at verse sixteen:

[T]his is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: "And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, what I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams. And on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days; and they shall prophesy" (Acts 2:16-18).

Here is what Peter is saying: What you have seen and heard today is the promised pouring out of the Holy Spirit on all believers, which was prophesied in the book of Joel in the Old Testament. And then in the verses that follow, Peter preaches the Gospel of Jesus Christ to them. Notice how he concludes, beginning in verse 32. He says, "This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses. Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the

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Father” – notice – “*the promise of the Holy Spirit*, He poured out this which you now see and hear.” (Acts 2:32-33)

And in response to this, the Israelites ask Peter in verse 37, “What shall we do?” And what does Peter say, beginning at verse 38? He says, here is what you need to do: “Repent, and be baptized each of you in the name of Jesus Christ because of the remission of your sins, and” – notice – “you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” You also will receive the promise of the Spirit, just as we who were waiting in the upper room have received the promise of the Spirit this very day.

So this is the answer to our first question: What is the promise of which Peter is speaking in this passage? The promise he is speaking of is the promise of the Holy Spirit.

To Whom Is the Promise Made?

And so this leads us to a second question: To whom is this promise made?

Now there can be no doubt about how the people who heard Peter speak would have thought about this. These people were Israelites, and they were gathered in Jerusalem from all over the world to observe one of the great commanded feasts of the Old Testament ceremonial law. And so when Peter said, “the promise is to you and to your children,” there can be no doubt that these Israelites would have

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called to mind God's covenant promise to Abraham and to his seed, which we find in Genesis chapters 12 and 15.

But who is the seed? Once again, we need to be careful to handle the Word of God properly. And proper handling of the Word of God means that we need to be careful to understand exactly what the entire Bible says about God's promise to Abraham. In the book of Galatians, chapter three, we find a very clear and striking statement about God's promise to Abraham. It is a statement that settles for all time the question, "To whom was the promise made?" Turn with me, if you are able as you listen, to Galatians chapter three, beginning at verse five. We read this:

Therefore He who *supplies the Spirit to you* and works miracles among you, does He do it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Just as Abraham "believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." Therefore know that *only those who are of faith* are sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the Gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, "In you all the nations shall be blessed." So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham. (Galatians 3:5-9)

And then notice verse thirteen:

Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree"),

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[and then notice what comes next] that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, *that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.* (Galatians 3:13-14)

And then notice verse sixteen:

Now to Abraham and his Seed the promises were made. He does not say "and to seeds," as of many, but as of one, "And to your Seed," who is Christ.

And finally notice verse twenty-two:

But the Scripture has confined all under sin that *the promise* by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to *those who believe.*

What is Paul telling us about God's promise to Abraham? He is telling us that God fulfills His promise to Abraham in the pouring out of the Spirit on his seed, and Abraham's seed consists exclusively of believers on the Lord Jesus Christ, both Jew and Gentile. The promise of the Holy Spirit is limited to those who believe.

Summing Up

So then, the sum of the answer to the two questions is this: The promise of Acts 2:39 is the promise that God would send the Holy Spirit to raise up regenerated spiritual descendants of Abraham, both Jew and Gentile, from among all nations –

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and the exclusive recipients of that promise are those whom God calls to salvation through repentance from sin and faith in Christ.

The wording of Acts 2:39 reinforces this. To whom does Peter declare that the promise applies? He says, “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.*” Peter declares that the promise is not a blanket promise. Literally, the Greek text reads like this: “For to you is the promise, and to your children, and to those who are at a distance, as many as the Lord our God may summon to Himself.”

Now notice especially the very last part of verse 39 – “as many as the Lord our God may summon to Himself.” Here is the decisive condition for the application of the promise. Is that decisive condition the fact that an infant child has believing parents? No. The decisive condition is the effectual calling of God in salvation.

Now, at this point we need to dig just a bit deeper into something else that is important as we study the Bible, and I hope you will bear with me. We need to make sure that we understand exactly what is being said in the original language in this passage. Now, many paedobaptist commentators support the infant baptism position by saying that in Acts 2:39 the words that are translated “as many as” only refer to the phrase “those who are afar off”, and they claim that “as many as” does *not* refer to the phrase “to you and to your children.” However, the rules associated with the Greek grammar that is used in Acts 2:39 do not support this position.

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The Greek grammar and syntax of Acts 2:39 tell us that the phrase “as many as” refers to all three classes of people that Peter names here. And so here is what Peter is saying in verse 39: The promise is, number one, to as many of you, my adult hearers, as the Lord may call to Himself in salvation; the promise is, number two, also to as many of your children as the Lord may call to Himself in salvation; and the promise is, number three, to as many people who are at a distance as the Lord may call to Himself in salvation. Now, what does all that mean? It means that in Acts 2:39, Peter is telling us that the condition for water baptism is not family relationship, it is the effectual calling of God in salvation, the effectual calling that is expressed in the words “as many as the Lord our God may call.”

Now we began today’s message with a question: According to Scripture, who is qualified to receive water baptism, and why? Here we have the answer to the first part of that question. The promise of which Peter speaks – the promise of the Holy Spirit – is a promise to saved individuals only.

Why Water Baptism?

The only person who is qualified to be baptized with water is someone who has given evidence of the fact that he has believed on the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation.

But that still leaves the last part of our question yet to be fully answered: *Why is this true?* Why do we baptize with water? Is it a matter of admission to membership into the Covenant of Grace and membership in the visible church, or

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is it a matter of personal testimony to faith in Christ, personal testimony to the fact that someone is already a member of the eternal invisible church, the true body of Christ? Is water baptism the New Testament replacement for Old Testament circumcision, or is baptism with the Holy Spirit the replacement for Old Testament circumcision?

I hope you'll join us next time as we take up these very important questions.

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