

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "Baptism: The New Circumcision?" (Colossians 2:9-13)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 8/28/2011

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Today is our final message on a critical question for all believers and all churches: According to Scripture, who is qualified to receive water baptism, and why?

Now, in this series of messages we have taken note of the fact that among Bible-believing Christians – among people who believe the one true Gospel, among churches that preach the one true Gospel – there are two positions on this question. The main difference between these two positions is a difference over the significance of water baptism. And that difference in turn leads to a difference on the question of who in the church should be baptized with water.

The credobaptist or believer's baptism position is that the significance of water baptism is testimony to saving faith in Jesus Christ. In other words, baptism with water is a testimony to the fact that an individual has already received Spirit baptism. The individual has already believed on the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation from sin, and God the Holy Spirit has taken up residence within that individual, and therefore that saved person is qualified to be baptized with water as a public testimony of that fact. As I have told you, this is the position that I hold.

The paedobaptist or infant baptism position is that water baptism in the New Covenant is the direct replacement of physical circumcision in the Old Covenant, and this position says that water baptism therefore signifies membership in a visible body – in our time, membership in the visible church. And so the

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paedobaptist view is that water baptism is to be administered to both adult believers in Christ and their infant children – because, they say, the parent's position as a believer confers a special New Covenant status upon the child.

Now, as I have told you, I was saved in a Bible-believing church that held this position, and I was originally ordained to the ministry in a church that holds that position. But at a later time and after considerable study of the Scriptures, I came to the credobaptist position.

The Passages We've Studied

Clearly the credobaptist and paedobaptist positions cannot both be correct. And so we need to answer the question, "Who is qualified to receive water baptism according to Scripture, and why?" And of course answering that question involves answering the related question, "What is the significance of water baptism under the New Covenant?"

Let me also remind you of the approach we have taken in examining these two positions on baptism. We have been examining two key passages that paedobaptists use to support their position. One of those is in Acts chapter two, and the other is in Colossians chapter two.

The passage in Acts is found in chapter 2, beginning at verse 38, and these are the closing words of Peter's great sermon at Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. In Acts chapter 2, beginning at verse 38, we read this:

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Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for [that is, 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. (Acts 2:38-41)

The other passage that is used as a proof-text for infant baptism is found in the book we have been studying on our broadcasts, the book of Colossians. In Colossians chapter 2, beginning at verse 9, the Apostle Paul declares this:

For in Him [that is, in Jesus 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)

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A Critical Issue: How We Must Interpret Scripture

As we have approached those two passages, we have kept in mind some very important principles that must govern how we interpret the Bible. One of the most important of those principles is this: We must remember that God's Word gives us a progressive revelation of God's plan of redemption. Later passages in the Bible give us a fuller revelation on a particular subject than earlier passages do. And so we must look at all of what Scripture says on the subject of baptism, and we must look at it with the progressive nature of God's revelation clearly in our minds.

We have more than the Old Testament. God has given us the New Testament, and the New Testament is God's own inspired 27-volume commentary on the Old Testament. The New Testament explains the Old Testament to us in light of the fuller revelation of the person and work of Jesus Christ. The New Testament tells us about God's New Covenant, and it tells us how the New Covenant in the blood of Jesus Christ has superseded the Old Covenant and has made it obsolete.

The New Testament takes precedence over the Old. The later revelation that we find in the New Testament is fuller and clearer than the revelation of the Old Testament. The Old Testament revelation was often given in terms of types and shadows of things that have now come to pass in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

And so we must approach the Bible in this way. We must read the Old Testament in light of the New, and not the other way around. We must not re-impose Old Testament types and regulations – things that have been done away

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with in Christ – we must not re-impose those things on the New Testament church. That, dear friends, is a form of legalism. We must never read the New Testament through an Old Testament lens. We must read the Old Testament through the New Testament lens. Now, these imperatives are not man-made principles and priorities. They are derived from Scripture itself.

What We Have Seen Thus Far

And so this is the way in which we have taken up our question: On the authority of Scripture alone, who is qualified to be baptized with water, and why?

And what we have found is this: The condition for water baptism, the condition for a covenant relationship with God, is not family relationship but salvation. The condition for water baptism is not a matter of who your earthly parents are. This condition for water baptism is who your Heavenly Father is. The condition for water baptism is how a person can answer this question: Have you been reconciled to God through personal repentance from sin and personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ?

Peter told the Jews on the Day of Pentecost that the promise of God for this New Covenant age is the promise of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit for every believer in Christ. Individual salvation, which is signified by the baptism of the Holy Spirit, is the issue. In other words, those who are qualified for water baptism at the hand of man are those who have first received Spirit baptism from the hand of God. This is the qualification for water baptism, not human parentage.

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In a previous message we saw this confirmed for us in Galatians chapter 3. Let me remind you what we found there. We saw that the promised gift of the Holy Spirit under the New Covenant is to the promised Seed of Abraham. And we saw that this promised seed consists of those who are in Christ, believers on the Lord Jesus Christ, those who have, in the eyes of God the Father, the intimate identification with Jesus in His death, burial, and resurrection that we read of in Colossians chapter two and elsewhere.

What Remains to Be Considered

Now, in order to complete our study of this subject, we are coming back now to Colossians chapter two. We have two questions that remain to be answered:

First, is water baptism the New Testament replacement for Old Testament circumcision? The paedobaptist position says that Colossians chapter two verses eleven and twelve teach exactly that. Now I will tell you right away that we are going to find that this interpretation of Colossians 2:11-12 is incorrect, and I will explain why that is the case.

But that leaves open a final question that we must then answer: If water baptism is not the New Covenant replacement for Old Covenant circumcision, then what is?

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Does Water Baptism Replace Circumcision?

The infant baptism position says that the significance of baptism with water in the New Covenant is that it is the direct replacement of physical circumcision in the Old Covenant. The infant baptism position says that both Old Testament circumcision and New Testament baptism are signs and seals of membership in a visible body. The text that the paedobaptists use as the foundation of this premise is Colossians 2:11-12:

In Him [that is, in Christ] 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.

Now, in discussing this passage, paedobaptist theologians speak of both Old Covenant circumcision and New Covenant baptism as the “sign” and the “seal” of the covenant. They often cite Romans 4:11 as a proof-text regarding circumcision. This is what we read there. Paul tells us that Abraham “received the sign [which in the original Greek means the mark or token] of circumcision, a seal [which in the original Greek means the confirmation or authentication] of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised...”

Now, it is true that in Genesis 17:11 we find that circumcision is called a “sign” of God’s covenant with Abraham. But circumcision is never called the

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“seal” of that covenant. The verse I quoted a moment ago, Romans 4:11, is the only place where Scripture uses the term “seal” in relation to circumcision, and Romans 4:11 tells us that circumcision was “a seal of the righteousness of the faith which [Abraham] had yet being uncircumcised.” In other words, circumcision was not a seal of physical membership in the covenant. It was a seal, or the confirmation or authentication, of Abraham’s personal saving faith.

Furthermore, we need to read Romans 4:11 in context. We need to go on to read verse twelve. Paul says that circumcision was a seal of Abraham’s saving faith in order “that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised, that righteousness might be imputed to them also, and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised.” And as we have seen in previous messages, in Galatians, in Romans, and in Hebrews, we find that it is believers who are the true seed of Abraham – not believers and their infant children.

What Is the New Covenant Replacement for Circumcision?

So, circumcision is never called the “seal” of God’s covenant with Abraham. It was a seal of the righteousness that God imputed to Abraham by faith. And likewise, Scripture never calls baptism the “seal” of the New Covenant. The seal of the New Covenant is the regenerating, indwelling Holy Spirit, the gift of the Holy Spirit, of

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which Peter spoke in Acts chapter two. We find confirmation of this in Ephesians chapter one, beginning at verse thirteen. Paul writes this:

In Him [that is, in Christ] you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the Gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, Who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory. (Ephesians 1:13-14)

Let me give you two other passages that confirm this –

- Ephesians 4:30 – “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.”
- 2 Corinthians 1:21-22 – “Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us is God, who also has sealed us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.”

Let me also remind you of something very important that we found in Colossians chapter two. Keep in mind that the Colossian believers were primarily Gentiles. They were physically uncircumcised. Paul declares to these people that they are complete in Christ. You are fully furnished in every way, he tells them. You lack nothing that is necessary for salvation or for sanctification. You do not need to be physically circumcised, as the Judaizers would require, Paul says,

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because believers in Christ under the New Covenant have been “circumcised with the circumcision made without hands” which is “the circumcision of Christ.”

In a previous message in this series, we saw what Paul means by “the circumcision of Christ.” Notice what Paul calls this circumcision made without hands, the circumcision of Christ. He calls it the “putting off” – literally, the stripping off, of “the body of the sins of the flesh” What does the flesh signify in Scripture? The flesh signifies the old, corrupt nature. Paul says, literally, that the body of the sins of the flesh, this old nature, has been “stripped off” by the work of God in Christ.

Paul says the same thing in Romans chapter six, verse six. He says: “Knowing this, that our old man was crucified with [Christ], [so] that the body of sin might be done away with [literally, that the body of sin might be annulled], [so] that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin” (Romans 6:6-7). The power of the sinful nature was broken at the cross. The power of our old nature was literally stripped of its control over us. We are no longer slaves to sin.

How was this accomplished? Paul tells us here in Colossians 2:11. It was accomplished “by the circumcision of Christ.” It is, Paul says, “a circumcision made without hands.” In other words it is a spiritual circumcision that every believer receives through Christ at conversion.

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Now perhaps at this point some of my paedobaptist brethren are saying, "Yes, but this passage in Colossians does establish linkage between physical circumcision and water baptism, and therefore it establishes them as direct counterparts." We saw in an earlier message that the answer is, "No, it does not." And here is the reason: Paul is not speaking of either physical circumcision or physical water baptism in Colossians chapter two, verses eleven and twelve. So you cannot use these verses to establish a linkage between Old Testament physical circumcision and New Testament water baptism, because neither one is mentioned in the passage. Let me explain once again.

First of all, Paul says that New Covenant believers have been "circumcised with the circumcision not made with hands." As I just explained, he is speaking of spiritual circumcision, the breaking of the power of the sinful nature. But then Paul says that you as a believer have been "buried with Christ in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead." And in a previous message we saw that literally, Paul is saying, you "have been entombed together with Christ in the immersion in the tomb [the *baptisma*] in which you also were raised together [from the tomb] with Him through the faith of the working of God who raised Him from the dead."

Dear friends, as I have said before, there is no water in this picture. But there is a cross in this picture. There is a tomb in this picture. There is a resurrection in this picture. We are in Christ. Paul repeats that thought five times in these verses in Colossians chapter two. Our identity with Christ is so close, so intimate, that in

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the eyes of God we were crucified with Christ, we were placed into the tomb with Christ – that’s the meaning of the word “baptism” here – and we were raised from death to life with Christ.

Paul is saying the same thing in First Corinthians chapter 12 verse 13: “For by one Spirit [God the Holy Spirit] we were all baptized into [that is, placed into] one body” – the body of Christ, the true church of Jesus Christ. This is not water baptism. It is Spirit baptism. We need to be very careful to notice that Scripture maintains a clear and definite distinction between water baptism and Spirit baptism.

Summary

As I have said many times in this series, we must view the Old Testament record through the New Testament lens. And when we do that, it brings these facts into crystal-clear focus: Salvation by faith, through regeneration by the Holy Spirit, which is the believer’s circumcision of the heart – that is what corresponds to the Old Testament type of Abraham’s circumcision of the flesh because of his saving faith. This is a saving faith that cannot be exercised by an infant or a child who has not yet come to understand the Gospel message of personal sin, the need for personal repentance, and the need for personal saving faith in Christ.

Baptism with water in the New Covenant is not the replacement for physical circumcision in the Old Covenant. Baptism with the Holy Spirit, not baptism with water, is the New Covenant seal. Water baptism signifies membership not in a

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visible body composed of believers and unbelievers. Water baptism testifies to the fact that an individual is a member of the invisible Church which consists of believers only. Baptism is to be administered only to believers in Christ.

The children of believers do enjoy special privileges. They have the influence of the Word and the Gospel within the home and the church. And with that great privilege comes great responsibility. Jesus said that unto whom much is given, of that person much shall be required (Luke 12:48). But the children of believing parents are not entitled to receive water baptism unless they personally and credibly confess saving faith in Christ.

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