



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

Baptism and Circumcision

Colossians 2:11-13

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Introduction

We are studying in response to Jack Cottrell's assertion, that "a good case can be made that Colossians 2:11-13 is the most important New Testament passage concerning baptism."¹ In previous studies, we saw:

- How Paul's burial and resurrection language shows that baptism is the specific time when a sinner is transferred from being in the body of the flesh and dead in sin to the resurrected life in Christ (vv. 11-13).
- That baptism accomplishes nothing unless the one being baptized has faith "in the powerful working of God who raised [Jesus] from the dead" (v. 12).
- That baptism is a work of God, not men, during which regeneration begins.

Now we turn to Paul's connecting of baptism and circumcision. Cottrell states the issue at hand:

For various reasons many Christians believe that baptism is the New Testament replacement for Old Testament circumcision. For some this is an incidental belief, but for others it is the determining factor in their whole doctrine of baptism. It is used not only to prove the validity of infant baptism, but also to define the very meaning of baptism (Cottrell, 128).

Interpreters who hold this view affirm that "baptism simply replaces circumcision" and thus "it must have the same meaning for us today as circumcision had for Old Testament believers." Thus, they also contend that

Since circumcision is usually interpreted as a sign of membership in the covenant people, this is the meaning assigned to baptism, too. By virtually ignoring everything the New Testament actually says about baptism as God's work of salvation, and by assuming this relationship with circumcision, many Protestants interpret baptism simply as the outward sign that marks one as a member of the church (Cottrell, 128-129).

In other words, since Paul equates baptism and Old Testament circumcision and the latter was a sign of belonging to the covenant community, baptism must be the sign of believing to the new covenant community—and nothing more. Cottrell thus concludes, "It is impossible to overestimate the impact that this equating of circumcision and baptism has had on the doctrine of baptism in modern times" (Cottrell, 129).

A Unique Passage

We should first take note of the fact that, aside from Colossians 2.11-13, no biblical text connects baptism and circumcision in any way. What is the significance of this?

First, although one passage would be sufficient to establish a doctrinal truth, if we assume the connection between baptism and circumcision is crucial, it seems odd that the connection is not mentioned elsewhere. This is especially so given the fact that baptism was so important in early Christianity, the faith that arose from Judaism.

But, having taken note of that oddity, we must still identify what this passage does teach about the connection, especially since some do affirm a connection that circumcision and baptism are spiritually equivalent.

Circumcision in the Old Testament

The Old Testament refers to two kinds of circumcision. Most are aware that several texts speak of physical circumcision. Genesis 17.10-14, for example, relates its origin as a sign of God's covenant with Abraham. And Leviticus 12.3 tells us that every eight-day-old Israelite male was to be circumcised to denote his covenant membership under the law of Moses.

But other passages refer to circumcision in a figurative sense. In Exodus 6.12, 30, for example, Moses complains that he is "of uncircumcised lips," i.e., an incompetent and unpersuasive speaker. And in Leviticus 19.23, the fruit of certain trees they would encounter in the promised land are called "uncircumcised" (KJV, ASV, NKJV, NJB), i.e., "forbidden" (ESV) or off-limits.²

Other texts draw on the figurative sense to speak of circumcision as a spiritual state or a condition of the heart. Jeremiah used it in this sense to call Israel to account for failing to see that Israel's national identity as God's chosen nation, or even consistent ritual observation would not offset attitudes and behaviors that did not singularly honor God. Jeremiah 4.4 is representative: "Circumcise yourselves to the LORD; remove the foreskin of your hearts, O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem; lest my wrath go forth like fire, and burn with none to quench it, because of the evil of your deeds" (cf. Jer 6.10; 9.25-26). Precedence for this prophetic emphasis is found in Deuteronomy 10.12-16 where Moses taught Israel to give attention to the internal expectations associated with being the covenant people.

¹² And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹³ and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I am commanding you today for your good? ¹⁴ Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it. ¹⁵ Yet the LORD set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day. ¹⁶ *Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.*

This idea was so important that Moses included it in his final exhortation to Israel to honor God as they entered the land and moved deeper into their future, set against his prediction of the curses that would come on the people if they did not keep the covenant. If they were faithful, "the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live" (Deut 30.6; cf. 29.19-29; 30.1-5).

What we should see about this teaching about the connection between the physical and figurative uses of circumcision in the Old Testament is that it a comparison by analogy, not equivalence. Physical circumcision was not given to represent spiritual circumcision. Rather,

since physical circumcision was a fact of life in Israel, it served as an ever-present illustration or analogy for what the prophets wanted to teach about being different in one's *spiritual* attitude, in the heart.

Circumcision in the New Testament

Romans 2.25-29 reveals how Paul utilized circumcision to address an important aspect of the new system of faith in Christ. Beginning in Romans 1.18-32, he establishes that the Gentiles were guilty before God. Then, in 2.1-24, he shows that the Jews were no less guilty or less in need of salvation (cf. esp. v. 17). Verses 25-29 respond to some who were claiming a special spiritual status because they had been physically circumcised. Echoing the prophets, Paul tells them that what they really needed to be concerned about was their inward, spiritual circumcision (cf. Deut 10.1; 30.6; Jer 4.4). In language that doubtless came as a shock to some of them, he tells them that it was possible for a physically uncircumcised man to be regarded as having been circumcised because he obeyed the covenant commands in the law and so was pleasing to God.

Paul also uses circumcision in the spiritual sense in Galatians 2.11-13. Verse 11 states that his concern is "with a circumcision made without hands." In other words, he is concerned with whether they had changed their inner spiritual state, just what we would expect given the promise and nature of the new covenant (cf. Jer 31.31-34).

It is possible that, because of Jewish elements present in the Colossian heresy (Col 2.6-23), Paul used the circumcision idea in that text as the prophets had done—as an analogy for the spiritual regeneration they had experienced through baptism

Whatever his intent for using the figure, the text is clear that Paul did not equate baptism with circumcision. He is saying that the "marvelous 'working of God,' the regenerating and life-giving 'circumcision of Christ' *takes place in baptism*" (Cottrell, 131). What is put off is not physical skin, but "the body of the flesh" that had been "dead in . . . trespasses" (Col 2.11, 13). The language is thus clear that baptism is the means by and time at which this transfer occurs, *not* the sign that it has occurred.

Conclusion

In light of Paul's teaching about baptism here, and the reason he teaches about it, we see two things. First, baptism is something the person who commits to follow Jesus is to do, the place where the old person is left behind and the new person emerges. Second, looking back on that definite point of transition can help us as we face challenges that tempt us to think we need more than Christ or are otherwise unsure about our transition from the flesh to the spirit.

As we will see later in our study, our baptism also provides motivation to pursue a life at odds with "things that are on earth," for "[we] have died" to those things (Col. 3:1-3). Thus, the question each of us should ask is, am I "seek[ing] the things that are above, where Christ is" (Col 3.1)?

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Notes

¹ Jack Cottrell, *Baptism: A Biblical Study* (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Company, 1989), 121.

² The word is אֵרֶל (*arel*), the same word translated "uncircumcised" in Gen 17.14; Exod 6.12, 30; and of the stranger who, according to Exod 12.48, was forbidden to eat the Passover because he was uncircumcised.