

Celebrating Sacraments

Week 6 - Baptism and Circumcision

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CATECHISM CORNER

Heidelberg Catechism

Lord's Day 27

Q&A 74

Q. Should infants also be baptized?

A. Yes. Infants as well as adults are included in God's covenant and people (1), and they, no less than adults, are promised deliverance from sin through Christ's blood and the Holy Spirit who produces faith (2). Therefore, by baptism, the sign of the covenant, they too should be incorporated into the Christian church and distinguished from the children of unbelievers (3). This was done in the Old Testament by circumcision (4), which was replaced in the New Testament by baptism (5).

1) Gen. 17:7; Matt. 19:14

2) Isa. 44:1-3; Acts 2:38-39; 16:31

3) Acts 10:47; 1 Cor. 7:14

4) Gen. 17:9-14

5) Col. 2:11-13

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WHAT WE BELIEVE

1. Read Colossians 2:1-15. What "struggle" or effort is Paul describing in verse 1?

2. What alternative does Paul provide to philosophy, empty deceit, human tradition, and elemental spirits of the world? What reasons does Paul give that make the alternative a good choice?

3. According to our text, who circumcises Christians? What takes the place of physical circumcision?

4. How does God cancel our debt of sin?

WHAT IS CIRCUMCISION?

"Surgical removal of the foreskin of the male reproductive organ. In Bible times circumcision was the seal of God's covenant with Abraham (Gn 17:1-14).

The rite of circumcision is far older than the Hebrew people. Cave paintings give evidence that it was practiced in prehistoric times. Egyptian temple drawings show that the operation

was common in 4000 BC and probably earlier.

Among the West Semitic peoples the Ammonites, Edomites, Midianites, Moabites, and Phoenicians all practiced circumcision (Jer 9:25); the Philistines, however, did not. Young men were usually circumcised at puberty, evidently in preparation for marriage and entrance into full tribal responsibilities. The Hebrews were the only ancient practitioners of circumcision to observe the rite in infancy, thus freeing it from association with fertility rituals.

In the Bible the practice of circumcision began in Genesis 17 as a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham. God promised Abraham a land and, through a son yet to be conceived, numerous descendants, from whom kings would come. Blessing would come upon Abraham and through him to all nations (Gn 12:1-3). After the covenant was formally inaugurated (Gn 15), God sealed it, ordering Abraham to be circumcised along with all the males in his household (Gn 17:9-13). Circumcision was to be an expression of faith that God's promises would be realized. Because Abraham's faith had lapsed (Gn 16) even after he had seen the awesome display of God's majesty (Gn 15:9-17), a permanent reminder of God's covenant promises was placed on his body and the bodies of his male descendants (Gn 17:11). This sign was so closely related to God's covenant promise that the rite itself could be termed the "covenant" (Gn 17:10; Acts 7:8)."

-Elwell, W. A., & Beitzel, B. J. (1988). Circumcision.

In Baker encyclopedia of the Bible (Vol. 1, p. 462). Baker Book House.

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GOD SPEAKS TO US

1.What do baptism and circumcision have in common? How are they different?

2.What specific sinful habits or attitudes has Christ helped you "put off" since you came to faith, and how can you actively rely on His power to keep resisting them today?

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GOD SPEAKS TO OUR FAMILY

1. Read verse 11. Where do you see "the body of the flesh" (like anger, selfishness, or unkind words) showing up in your home? How can you encourage one another this week to rely on Christ's power to "put off" that sin and replace it with love and patience toward each other?

2. What philosophies of the world are attempting to influence your family life? What can you do about it?

CUT TO THE HEART

"...the physical circumcision that God had commanded of Abraham and his physical descendants in Genesis 17 pointed to a true and better circumcision that is now a reality in the new covenant - circumcision of the heart. While circumcision under the old covenant was enacted with human hands, under the new covenant it is a spiritual matter. As Paul notes in

Colossians 2:11, it is one that comes "by the circumcision of Christ." Just as bodily circumcision noted a ritual cleanliness and was a physical sign of separation from ungodly nations, circumcision of the heart denotes separation from sin and from the ungodliness of the world. A circumcised heart denotes devotion to God and to his ways.

Once again, the accent is on the sovereign grace of God. We cannot circumcise our own hearts. Only God can do that. We are objects of God's infinite mercy. The blessings of the new covenant that had now fallen on those Gentiles came only according to God's gracious provision. As with these early Christians, our only response to these great truths should be to glorify God (Acts 11:18) with profound and unceasing worship."

Mohler, R. A., Jr. (2018). *Acts 1-12 for You* (C. Laferton, Ed.; pp. 155-156). The Good Book Company. (Hebrews 9:15- 28).

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GOD SPEAKS IN WORSHIP

1. From a Reformed view, baptism succeeds circumcision as the sign and seal of the covenant of grace (Col. 2:11-12; cf. Belgic Confession Art. 34), pointing to the same spiritual realities of cleansing, regeneration, and union with Christ - but now in an unbloody, retrospective form after the cross. In worship, how does baptism lead the congregation to renewed gratitude for God's covenant faithfulness?
2. Knowing that baptism, like circumcision in the old covenant, is a visible sign of God's promises to His people and their children (Acts 2:39; Col. 2:11-12), how does this covenantal understanding transform the church's approach to worship?

AUGUSTINE ON CIRCUMCISION AND BAPTISM

"Accordingly, when you ask why a Christian is not circumcised if Christ came not to destroy the law, but to fulfil it, my reply is, that a Christian is not circumcised precisely for this reason, that what was prefigured by circumcision is fulfilled in Christ. Circumcision was the type of the removal of our fleshly nature, which was fulfilled in the resurrection of Christ, and which the sacrament of baptism teaches us to look forward to in our own resurrection. The sacrament of the new life is not wholly discontinued, for our resurrection from the dead is still to come; but this sacrament has been improved by the substitution of baptism for circumcision, because now a pattern of the eternal life which is to come is afforded us in the resurrection of Christ, whereas formerly there was nothing of the kind."

Reply to Faustus the Manichaen. Book XIX. Paragraph 9. In: Dods M (ed).

The Works of Aurelius Augustine, Bishop of Hippo. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark. 1872. vol. 15, p. 334.

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INFANT BAPTISM AND THE SILENCE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

"The New Testament is clear that circumcision is no longer the rite of entry into membership in God's church, as it had been in Old Testament times. At the Council of Jerusalem, recorded

for us in the fifteenth chapter of the book of Acts, the apostles and elders of the church met in Jerusalem to decide what to do about certain men (known as Judaizers) who were spreading the teaching that a person must be circumcised in order to be saved (Acts 15:1).

After discussing the issue, these men issued a decree that was unmistakably clear: circumcision was no longer required for membership in Christ's church, much less a requirement for being saved (of course that had never been the case). Paul, indeed, had choice words for those who taught such things, at one point calling them 'the mutilation' (Phil. 3:2).

But if baptism is the sign of the new covenant (as all agree that it is), and circumcision no longer has any religious significance, is it necessarily valid to say that baptism is the New Testament replacement for circumcision? And if so, is that sufficient warrant for assuming that, like circumcision, baptism was designed to be administered to the children of believers? Is baptism, as Reformed Christians argue, 'the circumcision of Christ,' with all of the implications that attend such a statement?

Colossians 2:11-12 seems to answer those questions in the affirmative. That passage reads as follows:

In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of 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.

What is the significance of this passage? This passage demonstrates the essential continuity and progression of the covenant signs, circumcision and baptism. Paul's message to the Colossians that they did not need to undergo physical circumcision because they had received the spiritual reality of it, which was confirmed and sealed at their baptism, presents baptism as the sign to which circumcision was ultimately pointing. Indeed, as we will develop further in the next few pages, it identifies baptism as the 'circumcision of Christ.' In this way, then, baptism is set forth as the replacement for circumcision in the New Covenant era."

Holstrom, B. (2008). Infant Baptism and the Silence of the New Testament (pp. 37-38). Ambassador International.

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THE GOSPEL CALL

1. How does this text equip you to share the gospel clearly with someone who thinks salvation involves human effort, rituals, or moral improvement? In conversations, how can you point them to Christ's finished work-rather than their own "circumcision" or works-as the only way the sinful nature is truly removed?
2. According to our text, what are the benefits of being a part of God's covenant community?