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Q&A#129 Baptism and Circumcision

May 1, 2019



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Today's question: "Wondering whether or not you see a tight connection between baptism and circumcision? If yes, why no mention of it in Galatians/Romans? If no, what's going on with Colossians 2:11-12?"

Within this episode, I mention my recent Theopolis article on circumcision: <https://theopolisinstitute.com/article/the-rite-of-circumcision-a-response-to-dru-johnson>. I recommend Peter Leithart's book *The Priesthood of the Plebs*: <https://amzn.to/2PFatjO>. I also mention Alexander Schmemmann's work: <https://amzn.to/2UVfgyC>.

My blog for my podcasts and videos is found here: <https://adversariapodcast.com/>. You can see transcripts of my videos here: <https://adversariapodcast.com/list-of-videos-and-podcasts/>.

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, wondering whether or not you see a tight connection between baptism and circumcision. If yes, why no mention of it in Galatians Romans? If no, what's going on with Colossians 2, 11-12? Colossians 2, 11-12, just for reference, reads, 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.

When we talk about baptism and circumcision, within certain circles, there is a temptation to regard them fundamentally as generic initiation rites that are distinguished by accidental features that are particular to them. So baptism happens to be washing of water, and circumcision happens to involve a cut in the generative organ of the male. Now, it could have been something completely different.

It could have been a holy handshake, or it could have been some sort of dressing event that you could be initiated by putting on certain clothing, or it could be something else entirely. What really matters is that its symbolic meaning is initiation, and everything else besides that is just icing on the cake. It's the frills.

There's no need to reflect that much upon the specific form that it takes. But yet, when we look in the New Testament, there is a lot more attention, perhaps, given to the way that circumcision or baptism relates to water events in the Old Testament. The Red Sea Crossing, the washing of the priests as they are established in their ministry, something like the flood.

And these connections are drawn because of the form of the rite, not just because of some abstract meaning that is associated with the theological sense of the rite. Now, when you read Scripture, what you'll notice is there are a number of breaches in our theology of the sacraments that Scripture does not have. So we have a breach between the form of the sacrament and the meaning of the sacrament.

So we have a theology of baptism, but the theology of baptism will often be explored in fairly significant detachment from the actual form of the rite. You don't find many doctrines of baptism that spend a great deal of time reflecting upon the form of the rite. On the other hand, there's a breach between the sacrament and Scripture.

So the meaning of the rite is determined in abstraction from the biblical text and its symbolism. Yet, when you look through Scripture, both of those things are important. The connection between the form of the rite and its meaning, and the connection between the sacrament and its meaning, and the symbolism of Scripture.

If you read someone like Alexander Schmemmann, he gets into this in quite some detail in his book on the Eucharist and other stuff that he has done on baptism and the sacraments more generally. He makes some very important points about the need to hold together, in the integrity of the symbol, the form of the rite and the meaning of the rite. When we look at the meaning of circumcision, we'll see that circumcision is performed upon the male generative organ because that's part of its integral to its meaning.

I've written a long piece on this recently for the Theopolis Institute, and I'll leave the link for that in the show notes. But when we look at the context in which circumcision is given, when we think about the symbolic connections, both with the body, natural symbolism, with the symbolism of the text and the location within which it's given, physically and also textually, you will notice that this is not an accidental feature. The form of the rite is integral to what the rite means, that it involves something performed upon men, that it's involved with procreation, that it is connected with preparing for fruitfulness, that it is something that's associated with coming judgment, and all these sorts of connections.

That the penis is associated with the meaning of flesh and a concentrated meaning of flesh. All these connections are things that help us to understand what it means. Likewise with baptism.

If we're thinking about the meaning of baptism in the New Testament, there are a host of different things that baptism is connected to. Whether in natural symbolism, washing can connote cleansing, it can connote some connection with things. Water is a medium that connects things to other things, and so it's a form of union.

We are baptized into one body. It's also something that's associated with waters of blessing, waters above, waters beneath, waters of judgment. It's connected with symbolism of death and resurrection.

It's connected with all these different things, both in natural symbolism but also within biblical typology. Within biblical typology you see baptism connected with events such as the Red Sea Crossing in 1 Corinthians 10, or with the initiation of the priests in Hebrews, or with things such as the baptism of the flood in 1 Peter 3. All of these connections help us to understand what baptism means. By developing a network of symbolism, natural and biblical typology, it situates that rite within a matrix of meaning.

And as you explore that matrix, it makes a lot more sense. Now, how do we relate baptism and circumcision? Baptism and circumcision have meanings that are entangled together in certain respects. There are ways in which they interface, and there are ways in which they contrast.

When we look at the teaching of the New Testament concerning circumcision, there's often a focus upon circumcision and its relationship to what Christ has done, that Christ has somehow made circumcision unnecessary. It's connected with the death of Christ, that the putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ. Now, I submit that the circumcision of Christ there refers to Christ's death.

The point being that circumcision was an action performed upon the flesh, a symbolic excision of the flesh, removal of the flesh, to prepare the body as a site of promise, a symbolic death in order that the body might be the bearer of new life, divine life. Now,

when we're thinking about the meaning of circumcision in the New Testament, circumcision connects with the death of Christ, the cross of Christ. It's where his flesh is cut off.

It's the circumcision of Christ. It's the cutting off of Christ for the people. What we see in Christ's death is an absolute definitive cutting off of the flesh.

And so to continue cutting off the flesh in anticipation of some greater cutting off the flesh in the future is unnecessary, but it's also distracting from the event in which the actual cutting off took place. Baptism is something that looks back. Baptism is a baptism into Christ's death.

It's a washing. It's a union. It's something that no longer represents the cutting off of Israel from the other nations to form a distinct people.

It now represents the bringing together of all these different people in one body. No longer is it about fruitfulness, anticipating the seed that's to come. It's about being the seed, being born again.

Baptism, the labour of regeneration, it's a washing of rebirth. It's all these symbols are things that associate baptism more with a womb. And as a womb, it's something from which the seed of the people of God are born.

And the new covenant is also associated with a different sort of circumcision, the circumcision of the heart, not just the flesh. So as the heart is circumcised, we are set to serve God in a new way. Our hearts are set apart for him.

Our organs are no longer organs that are set against God, that are wild, but they've been tamed, they've been pruned, and now they can be of service to God. As we look through the Pauline treatment of circumcision, he connects them with Christological circumcision, with Christological events in a number of respects. So he talks about circumcision no longer being necessary, but what matters is new creation.

In Galatians 5, 6 we read, For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything but faith working through love. And in verse 15 of chapter 6, For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything but a new creation. Earlier on in the book, he talks about, You're all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise.

Think about the meaning of circumcision. It was connected with Abraham's seed, the promise of coming seed. And now in Christ, through his death and resurrection, the seed

has come and we are all baptized into Christ and marked out as his seed.

Now, on the other hand, when we're talking about baptism and circumcision, many people, particularly from a creedobaptist perspective, are thinking about the relationship between the two in terms of a contrast between old covenant circumcision of infants and the new covenant baptism of adult believers. But yet God has always worked with families. God has always worked with children being seen as being included within the faith of their parents.

That's not something new. God would have to change. This is something, it's not something that's just stipulated in relationship to circumcision.

I think some people have that notion that God works that way and he just stipulates it in the case of circumcision. The normal way that we'd expect God to work is just with detached individuals. But when God establishes circumcision in that way, he's working with the grain of humanity as he created it.

The child that is born is not born as a neutral entity, detached from all religious allegiance, detached from all religious identity. The child who is born is born into either a network of faith or unbelief and they are bound up with that from the very outset. Israel's children were not seen as just neutral figures nor just as opponents of God who were waiting for that moment of conversion when they would come to individual faith and then they could be circumcised.

No, from the very outset, on account of the faith of Israel, they were seen as part of the faithful people. When God speaks about circumcision in the case of Abraham, it's a sign and seal of the righteousness of faith. It's bound up not just with some physical identity with your ancestors and with this ethnic people group, it's a sign and seal of faith.

And people who are born into the family of faith are implicated in that. Now, I've compared this to something like adoption. The young infant that's adopted into a family, it's a prospective meaning.

It's looking forward towards the future where they'll enter into the full enjoyment of the life of their family. Now, we can often think about baptism of infants as something that's a kind of you're done sort of thing. You're safe.

You're not going to go to hell or anything like that. You're okay. When we're thinking about baptism, however, baptism's meaning is very much forward-looking for adults as for children, that it is an entrance into a family and an assurance with God's word that you belong to that people.

And you're supposed to live by faith, to live out the meaning of that sign and that symbol that seals to you that truth. Now, in the same way as the child who lives out adoption, they don't yet understand the full meaning of it. They're entering into it and entering into

the fuller intent of that sign.

And so the contrast between circumcision and baptism is not to be found in fact that the candidates for one are eight-year-old males and the candidates for the other are merely adults. When we're talking about baptism and circumcision, another thing to notice is that the differences between them are differences that mark out the contrast between two different sorts of people. So baptism and circumcision are not just about individuals.

It's about rights that form specific sorts of social bodies. One forms a cut-off people, the people of Israel that's cut off from the people of God. The other forms a new people found in the union that's formed by baptism of Jew and Gentile and male and female as well.

When we think about circumcision, it's something that implicates women. That if you're a woman, you're implicated in circumcision in various ways. You're implicated because your husband and your sons have been circumcised.

But yet you are not circumcised yourself. You're implicated in that. You participate in the meaning because the meaning of these things, again, that's important.

Why are women implicated in the meaning of circumcision? Not because that's something stipulated in the association with the right, but just because as human beings, we are connected in bodies of people. We are not detached religious individuals. So the woman and the children are implicated in the faith of other members of their family.

Except under circumstances where they rebel against that, the assumption is that they belong to this solidarity of people. If your husband and your children and your sons are circumcised and you're a woman, it's quite natural that you are seen as included in that. You're implicated in what has happened to them.

Likewise, the child of a family where they're believers, they're implicated within the faith of their parents. They don't have to make a choice for themselves. And when we're thinking about circumcision, circumcision rests upon a creational reality in the circumcision of infants, not so much upon some specific stipulated ordinance that young males should be circumcised before they come of the age where they can decide for themselves.

No, this is based upon just the way the world is, the way that God has created humanity, that we are not detached individuals, but we are implicated in other people. And as we think about the relationship between circumcision within the New Testament, we'll see that these things connect together within that broader matrix of symbolism. Baptism is a burial into Christ's death in anticipation of resurrection.

And so it's an act that anticipates something yet to come. We are baptized in order that our bodies might be marked out for resurrection. Our bodies are being marked out in

this.

And that's a commonality with circumcision. Circumcision marks out something about the body, that the body has a specific meaning. And that meaning is associated with its procreative potential and the way that it's dedicated to God.

The body is dedicated to God in the act of circumcision. It's a sort of sacrifice. Baptism, likewise, we are to present our bodies, plural, as a living sacrifice, singular.

And the sacrifice is associated with baptism. Our bodies are presented in the form of our limbs and organs in baptism. As we are baptized, our bodies are declared to be Christ's.

They're washed, they're sanctified, and they are declared to be the temple of the Holy Spirit. We participate in the body and blood of Christ. And in all these ways, there is a similarity between baptism and circumcision.

They both have a sacrificial meaning and sacrifice the body to God, set the body apart for divine service. There's a priestly meaning here in some kind. And Peter Lighthouse in his Priesthood of Plebs has written upon this at length in his PhD thesis and that book.

I highly recommend that you read it. I'll leave the link for that below in the show notes. So the meaning of baptism and circumcision is tied up with a series of new covenant events.

The death of Christ, the gift of the spirit that circumcises the heart and the resurrection of Christ as well, of course, and the way in which we are set apart as a people that have been delivered from the realm of the flesh. There's a cutting off of a different kind, but it's a more definitive thing. It's not just a symbolic cutting off of a part in anticipation of the greater cutting off of the whole.

The greater whole has been cut off. And then we have not just a symbolic removal of the flesh, but a symbolic death, a symbolic removal of the complete reality of the flesh. And that more definitive and more complete cutting off of the flesh, I think, is what baptism refers to.

And it's why Paul can bring these things into close relationship with each other. He can talk about circumcision in Colossians 2, verse 11 and 12 and bring that into association with baptism. These things are not alienated from each other.

They're not opposed to each other. There are ways in which they both depend upon common, creational and symbolic realities. But the differences between them are important.

Pay attention to the differences and find the meaning of these rites primarily within their particularities. And then connect them with the larger matrix of symbolism and think

about the way they work together within the larger, as it were, like words within a larger sentence. As we look at the movement from Old Covenant to New Covenant, part of what we're seeing there is a movement from circumcision to baptism in certain respects, but there's not a straightforward mapping of one onto the other.

There are ways in which there are a series of Old Covenant rites that map onto circumcision in ways that circumcision, that map onto baptism in ways that circumcision does not. Likewise, when we look back at the Old Covenant through baptism, circumcision may not always be the most proximate rite to understand what's taking place. I'll leave the links to the things that I mentioned below.

Thank you very much for listening. Lord willing, you're having a good day. If you'd like to ask any questions, please leave them on my Curious Cat account.

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