

Circumcision and Baptism

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Extracts from : "KINDERDOOP, GROOTDOOP, HERDOOP"

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Editor's Preface.

We are especially grateful, first to Professor Floor for granting us permission to reproduce here, for the first time in English, excerpts from his book written in Afrikaans on the topic of Baptism, and to our good friend, Mr. Andries Theunissen for the translation.

There is a keen argument contained herein, one which we have not ourselves come across before, one which opens up areas of Scriptural truth which are rarely seen, and one which we venture to affirm as being totally unanswerable by those who would promulgate Baptist views. We would encourage our readers to study this article carefully with open Bible to hand, to follow the argument step by step, and to note the fatal blow it delivers to the baptist polemic against the Scriptural doctrine of Infant Baptism.

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CIRCUMCISION AND BAPTISM.

Did Baptism take the place of Circumcision ?

This question is of great importance. Baptism in the place of circumcision - is this a Biblical proposition or is it only a man-made contention ? In the Reformed

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tradition infant baptism is defended with the argument that baptism came into the place of circumcision. Without any doubt we have here to do with one of the central arguments for infant baptism of Christians who adhere to the Reformed Faith. With Calvin it is the decisive proof.

The adversaries of infant baptism are of the opinion that circumcision radically differs from baptism. Circumcision only has to do with blood descendants and not with faith and rebirth, as baptism is. There is, according to the opposers of infant baptism a deep and drastic difference between the old and new covenants. The old covenant is the dispensation of forgiveness, righteousness and life. Circumcision is merely a sign that the child in Israel belongs to that covenant people.

The essence of the argument about infant baptism lies in the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. The two arguments are as follows :- Is there contrast between the Old and New covenants ? Or, is there a unity of revelation in the Holy Writ ?

Only one of these statements can be true. Either the maintainers of infant baptism overestimate the meaning of the Old Testament and they make that which is natural only into something spiritual; or the opposers of infant baptism underestimate the Old Testament and see that that which is natural and spiritual, as only natural.

The Unity between the Old and New Testaments.

When we listen to the language of the Bible we are continually struck by the unity of thought of Holy Writ. For example, where we read in I Peter 2 : 9 and 10 about the church we find it being described by using Old Testament terms (Exodus 19 : 6). We find the same thing about circumcision and baptism in Colossians 2 verses 11 and 12 thus :

“In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off of the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: buried with Him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead.”

Also, we find that baptism terminology is used for circumcision in Romans 4 : 11. thus :

“And he (Abraham) received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had being yet uncircumcised; that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised; that righteousness might be imputed unto them also:”

Here, circumcision is called a seal, a guarantee that man through faith will come into a right relationship with God (Romans 6 : 4-7). Baptism is also a guarantee that man by faith is brought into a right relationship with God.

In the Old Testament circumcision is seen as a cleansing rite. Someone not circumcised is seen as unclean. When Israel as a nation is taken into the Covenant of God, cleansing is necessary. (Jeremiah 4 : 4).

Baptism is also a cleansing rite. In the New Testament baptism is shown as washing to cleanse from sin, thus :

I Corinthians 6 : 11 , “ And such were some of you; but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.”

Ephesians 5 : 26 , “That he (Christ) might sanctify and cleanse it (the Church) with the washing of water by the word,”

Acts 22 : 16 , “And now, why tarriest thou ? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord.”

Hebrews 10 : 22 , “Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.”

We also see that the Bible speaks of two sorts of circumcision - the circumcision by hands administered by man and the circumcision of the heart administered by God (Deuteronomy 10 : 16; and 30 : 6 ; Romans 2 : 29). The Bible also speaks of two sorts of baptism - baptism by hands, i.e., the water baptism administered by man, and the baptism without hands administered by Christ thus :

Acts 1 : 5 , “For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence”.

The Circumcision of Abraham.

With Israel circumcision was a sign of the covenant that the Lord made with His people. “And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin: and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you” (Genesis 17 : 11, taken up by St. Paul in Romans 4 : 11), - a sign and a seal.

The circumcision spoken of in Genesis 17 : 11 is the adult circumcision. Abraham was thus circumcised after he came to believe.

When we read through Romans 3 : 23 - 31 we see that when Paul talks here about salvation it is worth noting that he also talks about circumcision. God's salvation in Jesus Christ, as we see here, only becomes ours through faith. We also see that this salvation is found back in the Old Testament (See Romans 4 : 3 and 6).

Abraham believed God and it was counted unto him as righteousness. Here, again, just as in Genesis 17, we see that Abraham was circumcised after he came to believe. Abraham's circumcision can thus be described as a testimony of his faith or as adult circumcision. In Romans 4 : 11 Paul gives us a description of circumcision. He calls it a sign and a seal of the righteousness of the faith.

So what was then sealed to Abraham in circumcision? Not his faith, but that that was received by faith - the righteousness of God.

In Romans chapter 3 we have seen that this righteousness is the righteousness of Christ. It is further made clear that this righteousness which is sealed in the circumcision must be brought in line with the salvation that Christ has brought about.

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There is a relationship between circumcision and the salvation work of Christ. Through circumcision God signified to Abraham that he was justified before God. Abraham stood before God in the right relationship. Circumcision is a seal of the righteousness of faith. It means that circumcision is the guarantee that the person who believes in God is saved. Paul's explanation of circumcision shows very clearly the spiritual character of it. It had to do with the right relationship with God.

Romans 4 : 11- 12 shows us without any doubt the unity between the Old and New Testaments. We read that Abraham is the father of two groups of people : -

- (1) he is the father of all that believe though they be not circumcised ;
- (2) he is the father of them who are not of the circumcision only but who also walk in the steps of Abraham's faith.

Abraham is thus the father of all the believers out of Israel; but he is also the father of all believers out of the gentiles.

The unity between the old covenant and the new covenant is quite clearly expressed here. In essence it is in the Old Testament and in the New Testament the same faith and the same covenant. In the Old Testament the guarantee that one is saved by faith is given in the sacrament of circumcision.

It is clear that in Abraham's case faith goes before circumcision. His circumcision is to him a sign and a seal that he is saved by faith. By faith he stands in the right relationship with God. Take note that it was not Abraham's faith that was sealed by circumcision but his right relationship with God, that can only be had by faith. Circumcision served thus to strengthen this faith.

Again, in Galatians chapter 3 we see the unity between the old and the new covenants. In verse 6 - "Abraham believed God and it was counted unto him for righteousness". In verses 7 and 9 we read these words : "which are of faith" - with those words Paul indicates the heathens or gentiles who believe. Two things are thus said of the believing gentiles. First, that they are children of Abraham, and secondly, that they are blessed with the faithful Abraham. Verse 14 calls this blessing that the gentiles receive "the blessing of Abraham". And the blessing of Abraham is, according to Galatians 3 : 6, 11, and 13, being made righteous by faith. This blessing was preached to Abraham as "gospel" (Galatians 3 : 8). Galatians 3 : 8 also says that in Abraham shall the heathen nations be blessed. What does the blessing consist of ? Justification by faith ! the heathen shall be saved in the same way as Abraham - by faith.

Of this salvation, in the Old Testament circumcision is a sign and a seal. Just as baptism in the New Testament is a sign and seal of the same salvation. In closing, circumcision, as such, gives no guarantee of salvation, faith is necessary.

Infant Circumcision.

We have seen that the circumcision of Abraham was through and through an adult circumcision. But now we find in the Old Testament this remarkable phenomenon that this same circumcision that Abraham received, that is a sign and seal of the righteousness of the faith, must also be received by his household. Adult circumcision is transferred over into household circumcision (Genesis 17 : 12 - 14). It even became a suckling circumcision (Genesis 17 : 12). Children who are only 8 days old must be circumcised. The question is : Why must Abraham circumcise little children when there is no faith like Abraham's to be found in them ? The answer is simply because God commands it.

It is easy to understand that infant circumcision is a sign of the covenant, but can we say that it is a seal of the righteousness of the faith ? Well, without any doubt, because the Lord had instituted it like that and commanded it to be done. The adult circumcision does not differ from infant circumcision. We read in Genesis 17 : 26 that Abraham and Isaac, father and son, were circumcised on the same day. So we see that even to the children through the sacrament of circumcision the guarantee is given that they are saved by faith. They do not receive this guarantee because they believe already. God even gives this guarantee to them who do not yet believe. It is rightly so that the circumcision calls them to faith. Therefore the Jewish parents had to bring their children up in the Covenant of the Lord, even when Israel wandered away from God, even when they did not take the Covenant of God seriously, then still circumcision was the sign of the covenant and the seal, the guarantee that everyone that believed would be saved. But then the people had to be called back to God, then also those being circumcised had to have circumcised hearts.

But opposed to the blessing God gives for obedience to the covenant, stands the curse for disobedience to the covenant (Leviticus 26 : 14 - 39, and Deuteronomy 28 : 15 - 68). The Old Testament shows very clearly that circumcision as such is not satisfactory to receive the blessing of the covenant (to receive righteousness). The heart also must be circumcised. Following circumcision must be repentance and faith. In Ezekiel 44 : 7 the circumcision of the heart and the circumcision of the flesh are spoken of in one sentence. The circumcision of the flesh is thus never a guarantee that the heart also has been circumcised.

With Israel there was always the danger of only looking at the outward circumcision and thus devaluing the covenant.

The spiritual meaning that it is the sign of the covenant and seal of the righteousness of the faith was often forgotten by Israel. And when this had happened God did not look upon circumcision as of no value, but he sent His prophets to call the people back to Himself, back to a true spiritual meaning of circumcision. Even when the whole nation of Israel had gone away from the Lord, even when they were all satisfied with only the outward sign of the covenant, then still circumcision was the seal of the righteousness of the faith. But when there is no faith, righteousness cannot be received, and the guarantee of the right relationship towards God cannot

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be enjoyed.

We can learn that out of *the continuation from adult circumcision to infant circumcision* the consecutive order of :

faith → circumcision

can be *turned* round to :

circumcision → faith

This does not mean that infant circumcision is of a lesser standard, but it means that infant circumcision calls for the circumcision of the heart. It means that infant circumcision calls for faith when the child grows up.

At circumcision we must distinguish between the moment of circumcision and the result of the circumcision. The result of circumcision had to do with faith. Paul shows the two elements when he writes in I Corinthians 10 : 2 - 11 about the baptism of Israel unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea. All were baptised but verse 5 says that in many of them God was not well pleased and some of them (verses 7 - 10) were idolaters, fornicators, murderers, and tempters of Christ.

In his commentary on Romans 4 : 11 Calvin shows that Abraham's circumcision follows the righteousness of faith, but with Isaac and his descendants the case is reversed. We cannot therefore tie ourselves to a consecutive order, namely that of faith → circumcision. When the Lord, by the institution of infant circumcision, put circumcision before faith then we cannot say that it cannot be. Otherwise we want to be wiser than God.

Lastly, it must be shown that already in the Old Testament the natural factor of blood descent did not serve as a basis for circumcision. As we have already seen, infant circumcision was actually a household circumcision. We must not limit circumcision in the Old Testament to a pure case of blood and natural descent. That is one of the great mistakes of Karl Barth. He sees circumcision as only occasioned by natural birth.

There is actually a biological motif in connection with circumcision but that motif is not conclusive. The natural event of propagation, which is a creation command of God, is not broken or ignored in God's covenant, but brought into consideration : "And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and thy seed after thee." (Genesis 17 : 7). In history God's work of mercy is not atomised to target individuals but flows in the bond between parents and children.

In circumcision, also infant circumcision, we already see the same motif that will characterise John's baptism - the pointing to Him that brought righteousness through His suffering and death.

The uniqueness and beauty of circumcision in the Old Testament is that in it there lies a direction pointer to the salvation work of Christ. When Paul in Romans 4 : 11 calls circumcision a seal of righteousness of the faith, he means by that the righteousness that he shows us in Romans 3 : 21 - 31, namely, the righteousness of Christ.

Although circumcision is a sign and seal of the righteousness of the faith it is still an unfulfilled sign. The circumcision image is a promise image. The righteousness to which the circumcision points had yet to be accomplished by Christ. But, yet, through faith Abraham can take part in it.

Circumcision itself goes together with blood. The blood image points to the salvation in Christ. It is a mark of the proclamation of salvation in the Old Testament that it went together with blood. All of the offerings give a clear example of this. Circumcision comes to an end after Christ had shed His blood. Then comes another sign and seal whereby no blood needs to flow.



Editor's observations.

Certain parts of the foregoing article we have printed bold. Very important is the isolation of the logical sequentiation connecting the sacramental sign of the covenant with the actual inward heart state of the recipient of that sign. Baptist dogma insists that regenerating faith must precede administration of the sacrament of baptism, hence they insist that to apply the sacrament to infants reverses this, what is to them, divinely appointed order. However, Professor Floor has clearly now shown that any insistence that faith must precede baptism is unbiblical, in that the Old Testament equivalent of baptism, i.e., circumcision, was manifestly applied in both sequential orders, pre-faith for infants, post - faith for adults. And this by manifest Divine appointment, recorded in Holy Writ.

Also, Professor Floor has shown herewith how even certain adults received the sacrament of circumcision prior to any regenerating faith being manifest in their hearts, namely many of those who came out of Egypt. It happens, too, that a large number, in fact, an alarmingly large number, if only the truth is known, of Baptists who have been baptized as adults are yet totally unregenerate ! And there are many who have come to regeneration after adult baptism ! Your editor is one such example !

All this of course dynamites the foundation of the Baptist refusal to countenance paedobaptism, and displays the baptist system as being an unscriptural innovation founded on a selective interpretation of scripture.

The import therefore of Professor Floor's article is that the Presbyterian and Reformed Paedobaptist position is thoroughly Scriptural. Following its Old Testament sacramental predecessor, i.e., circumcision, New Testament baptism is to

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be administered pre-faith to covenant infants, and post-faith to adult converts from outside the covenant community.

John Calvin's comments on Circumcision and Baptism Extracts taken from his commentaries on Genesis and Colossians.

Gen. 17 : 14. "And the uncircumcised man child whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant."

Calvin : In order that circumcision might the more be attended to, God denounces a severe punishment on any who should neglect it. And as this shows God's great care for the salvation of men; so on the other hand, it rebukes their negligence. For since God thus benignantly offers a pledge of his love, and of eternal life, for what purpose does he add threatenings but to rouse the sluggishness of those whose duty it is to run with diligence ?

But because it is not in the power of man to sever what God has joined together; no one could despise or neglect the sign, without both rejecting the word itself, and depriving himself of the benefit therein offered. And the Lord punished bare neglect with such severity.

Whoever, having neglected baptism, feigns himself to be contented with the bare promise, tramples, as much as in him lies, upon the blood of Christ, or at least does not suffer it to flow for the washing of his own children. Therefore, just punishment follows the contempt of the sign, in the privation of grace; because, by an impious severance of the sign and the word, or rather by a laceration of them, the covenant of God is violated.

We must go farther, and say, that God indeed, will not acknowledge those as among his people, who **will not** bear the mark and token of adoption.

Editor's note : The reader should note carefully the words "will not" emphasised in the last line of Calvin's comments above. Calvin is pointing out how the Lord's anger is directed against a *wilful* neglect of the sacrament, not against those who are for various reasons *unable* to subject themselves to it, due to ignorance, erroneous theological influence (as extant in Baptist circles), or circumstances such as those attending on the thief on the cross. But it behoves all those who have been brought up under a Baptist influence to ponder these comments seriously in conjunction with the preceding article by Dr. Floor, and we would exhort them to prayerfully reconsider and review their position on the question of Infant Baptism, and also the mode of baptism, as insistence on immersionism, not only being unwarranted by Scripture, can act as a precluding factor preventing the baptism of aged or infirm converts, or converts in arid countries or Arctic conditions, or in prisons. Baptism by effusion can of course be administered easily and conveniently in all such

places and times.

Colossians 2 : 11 and 12. "In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead."

Calvin : Let us, therefore, bear in mind that **outward** circumcision is here compared with **spiritual**, just as a figure with the reality.....

He takes the term *flesh*, as he is wont, to denote corrupt nature. The *body of the sins of the flesh*, therefore, is the *old man with his deeds*; only, there is a difference in the manner of expression, for he here expresses more properly the mass of vices which proceed from corrupt nature. He says that this divesture (French : "Ce despoillement") (of "the body of the sins of the flesh") we obtain through Christ, so that unquestionably an entire regeneration is his benefit. It is He that circumcises the foreskin of our heart, or, in other words, mortifies all the lusts of the flesh, not with the hand, but by his Spirit.

"*Buried with Him in baptism*". He explains still more clearly the manner of spiritual circumcision - because, "being buried with Christ", we are partakers of his death. He expressly declares that we obtain this by means of baptism, that it may be the more clearly apparent that there is no advantage from circumcision under the reign of Christ. For some one might otherwise object : "Why do you abolish circumcision on this pretext - that its accomplishment is in Christ ? Was not Abraham, also, circumcised spiritually, and yet this did not hinder the adding of the sign to the reality ? *Outward* circumcision, therefore, is not superfluous, although that which is *inward* is conferred by Christ." Paul anticipates an objection of this kind, by making mention of baptism. Christ, says he, accomplishes in us spiritual circumcision, not through means of that ancient sign, which was in force under Moses, but by baptism. Baptism, therefore, is a sign of the thing that is presented to us, which while absent was prefigured by circumcision. The argument is taken from the economy which God has appointed; (French : "Du gouvernement et dispensation que Dieu a ordonne en son Eglise;" lit. : "From the government and dispensation which God has appointed in his Church".).

When he says that we are *buried with Christ* (Greek συνταφεντες : συν= with, and ταφεντες= interred, or put in the tomb. Today we are prone to interpret this as 'burial' in the sense of being 'lowered in to a grave 6 feet deep', and thus get a connecting picture with the 'immersion' of the Baptist viewpoint. But of course, Christ was not 'lowered into a grave 6 feet deep', but carried in through a door into a rock-hewn tomb. And the text says we are "buried **with** Christ" in baptism. No connection with 'immersionism' is therefore in the text. *Ed.*) this means more than that we are crucified with him; for burial (that is, entombment, or interment, *Ed.*) expresses a continued process of mortification.