

The Relationship of Circumcision to Baptism
with particular reference to Colossians 2. 11-13

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In Colossians 2.11-13 we have perhaps the most prominent reference to circumcision alongside baptism in the NT. It seems generally agreed even by prominent Baptists that there is an analogous relationship between circumcision and baptism here.

The difficulty lies in defining the nature of that relationship. It has been variously expressed. Some suggest it is to be seen in terms of an antithesis, others parallelism, even equivalence. Fulfilment has also been advocated as the primary thrust of the relationship, while contrast between the inner and outer aspects of both signs has been taken as normative. Paedobaptists incline to accept a relationship of equivalence between circumcision and baptism in Col.2.11-13 as signs of the covenant of grace. This means that what is attributed in terms of significance to circumcision in the OT is attributable to baptism in the NT. Indeed they go further and suggest that implicit in Col.2. 11-13 and in other NT evidence is the fact that baptism actually replaces circumcision as a sign of salvation. The following considerations might be seen as supporting this view particularly in respect of Col.2.11-13:

1. Juxtaposition

The evident juxtaposition of circumcision and baptism in Col.2.11-13 creates a parallelism in thought which is highly significant. That Paul in one breath, as it were, can describe Christians as "circumcised with a circumcision made without hands" and, in the next, as "buried with him in baptism" suggests a strongly analogous relationship almost tantamount to equivalence in terms of what is signified by these terms. This is substantiated by the continued use of the aorist passive verbal forms in this passage. While the parallelism in form may be somewhat disrupted in the change from the "in him" of v11 to the "with him" implicit in the verb in v12, taking the subsequent en hō as referring to baptism immediately preceding and not to Christ, yet the parallelism in sense is quite obvious. It would have been most

unusual for Paul to use these expressions in this way had not a relationship of equivalence between the two already existed in his mind.

2. Unity of thought

There is a strong unity of thought in these verses where both images of circumcision and baptism are used to express one and the same relationship of the believer to Christ. This is demonstrable in a number of particular emphases:

(a) In its intensive nature. The basic theme is that of the believer's enjoyment of the fulness which Christ shares with God. The believer shares in this fulness under the metaphor of circumcision in that he receives in Christ a circumcision which, unlike the physical rite removing only part of the fallen fleshly nature, strips right off the whole body of the old nature. This takes place "in the circumcision of Christ", a phrase which it seems better to take as referring to Christ's death rather than to his actual circumcision, itself a token anticipation of the death. Similarly this fulness of completeness is also received under the symbolism of baptism which connotes the believer's sharing in the death and resurrection of Christ. The addition of the prefix sun (= together) to the verbs simply emphasizes the believers' unity with Christ in these events. It is clear that both these signs refer to the believer's enjoyment of Christ's fulness which is theirs as by faith they share in the benefits of his death and resurrection. Both circumcision and baptism are used as metaphors to illustrate the intensive effects of the faith-union of the believer in Christ.

(b) In the inextricable manner in which the two signs are implied particularly in v13. The unity of thought seems to be driven home especially in the way in which the results of the believer's relationship to Christ are described: "and you who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses." The effects of that salvation of which both baptism and circumcision are signs is here stated in a unified manner such as would suggest a relationship of equivalence of the two signs in the writer's mind.

(c) In the spiritual emphasis underlying the union. It is quite clear that Paul is speaking in these verses of the believer's salvation. In this context the reference to "a circumcision made without hands" is significant. There seems here an obvious contrast in his mind between physical and spiritual circumcision - a contrast evident elsewhere in his writings. It is not at all clear that there was any contrasting thought in his mind between water-baptism and baptism of the Spirit. But the key-thought here is primarily inner and spiritual rather than outer and symbolic. If however there is evident unity of thought vis-a-vis the inner spiritual reality of which Paul is speaking and he uses language of an outer symbolic nature, it is not unreasonable to assume an equivalence of meaning in the outer symbol. Otherwise his use of these terms is inexplicable.

3. Contextual background

There are two ways in which this seems relevant to our discussion:

(a) Paul in the general context seems to be combatting the Colossian heresy. It is difficult to assess whether it was of a Jewish or Greek nature or syncretistic. Certainly it seemed to contain elements of Jewish legalism, e.g., human tradition (2.8), festival, new moon or sabbath (2.16). Could it be then that among these circumcision was being stressed? The context does not make this clear but if it was, then Paul is dealing here a crushing blow to its observance in stressing the physical rite as superseded by the fulness or substance of Christ's circumcision and its application to the believer.

(b) Circumcision is a prominent theme in Ch.2 of Colossians. The use of apekduomai is significant. The double prefix apo and ek emphasizes the completeness of the action - a total stripping off. It is only used here in Paul (Col.2.15; 3.9; cf. noun apekduosis, 2.11). The use in 3.9 is certainly interesting for here it is used in a context of language sometimes ascribed to baptismal metaphor, i.e., "put on" or "put off", again suggesting the link with baptism.

If then in the context Paul is attacking a legalistic

attitude to physical circumcision and perhaps contrasting it with a "spiritual circumcision" of which Christian baptism is the same in essence, a degree of equivalence in circumcision and baptism underlies the thought.

4. Kerygmatic background

The close kerygmatic background of the death and resurrection of Christ in Col.2.11-13 and Romans 6.3f is evident as well as a strong similarity of thought in these passages. A major difference is that circumcision is present in the Colossian passage but not in Romans. The reason for this may be related to the purpose in writing. In Romans Paul is countering antinomianism where the baptismal reference sufficed to make the point. In Colossians if he were attacking Jewish legalism, the reference to circumcision would be most relevant. The point is not the absence of circumcision from Romans 6 but the reference to it in Colossians 2 in a kerygmatic context, making precisely the same point as is made in the reference to baptism. Both circumcision and baptism are related to basic Gospel facts.

5. Oath Background

In his book, "By Oath Consigned", Meredith G. Kline stresses this particular aspect. Examining circumcision and baptism in the light of practices followed by ancient Near Eastern kings and vassals in treaty-making, curse or malediction as well as blessing is seen to be involved in the oath-signs of circumcision and baptism. Both these aspects are said to be evident in both OT and NT and are especially obvious in Col.2.11-13, "As a death in union with Christ, the representative sin-bearer, in his crucifixion, the Christian's circumcision-death is an undergoing of the wrath of God against sin, a falling under his sword of judgment. It is a judicial death as the penalty for sin." According to Kline this judicial-ordeal aspect of Christ's death continues as Paul deals with baptism: the curse claim of the law satisfied on the Cross (v14), decision rendered through combat (v15) and the accusing role of Satan (v15) are all said to be further judicial features of Christ's death. He concludes: "Graphical

confirmation of the ordeal significance of baptism is thus found in the Pauline integration of baptism with the Messianic death-burial-resurrection schema, especially where Paul expounds the latter as both a circumcision and a judicial ordeal by combat."

While a degree of reticence may remain for accepting Kline's thesis completely, yet this highly suggestive analysis does tend to substantiate further a very close relationship in the significance of circumcision and baptism.

6. Implied repeal of circumcision

While a certain analogy may be seen between circumcision and baptism in Col.2.11-13, even to a degree of equivalence, does this passage necessarily imply a repeal of circumcision and its replacement by baptism? A number of considerations might tend in that direction:

(a) The fulness, completeness and substance as opposed to shadow by which Christ's person is described and the fact that the believer shares that fulness in his faith-union with Christ in his circumcision-crucifixion, would all incline to suggest that circumcision had been superseded. It is no longer necessary for the believer is complete in Christ and in his circumcision. The way in which the passage emphasizes the total effect of Christ's circumcision as opposed to physical circumcision, i.e., "putting off (apekduomai) the body of (the sins of) the flesh", underlines this feature.

(b) The non-material, spiritual and superior aspect of this "circumcision without hands" incident in the passage also predicates the cessation of the physical rite.

(c) If the context implies that physical circumcision was one of human traditions which were being imposed on the Colossian believers, then Paul seems here to be urging its cessation by showing its superfluosity.

(d) The lack of distinction between water-baptism and baptism by the Spirit as compared with the evident contrast in thought between physical and spiritual circumcision seems here to be significant. That Paul does not categorize a "baptism without hands" as he does circumcision, seems to point up the fact that Christian baptism takes up the spiritual side of circumcision within the OT and is there-

fore both meaningful and admissible under the NT. There is, it seems, this element of fulfilment in the imagery of Col.2.11-13 and it is because of this that baptism can be seen to replace circumcision here.

It is difficult to understand Kingdon's dilemma when he claims that regeneration, not baptism, is the antitype of which circumcision is the type. There is a sense in which both circumcision and baptism are the types of which regeneration is the antitype. Both circumcision and baptism are related to regeneration. The reference to baptism *per se* in Col.2.12f implies its proper continuance in the light of circumcision's cessation. The replacement however of circumcision by baptism as a sign of the covenant of grace has been urged on other supplementary grounds also.

7. Other considerations

There are additional grounds on which the analogy of circumcision and baptism in equivalence might be advocated, viz. : that they have a similar meaning if by contrasting imagery of grace and salvation; there appears to be a link between baptism and the Abrahamic covenant in Galatians 3.27,29; other Pauline passages exist where the signs of circumcision, Passover, baptism and the Lord's Supper are used indiscriminately of the church in both OT and NT, e.g., 1 Cor.10.1f; 5.7; Rom.15.8; both circumcision and baptism are said to be referred to as a "seal", e.g., Rom.4.11;cf 2 Cor.1.22; Eph.1.13; 4.30 (Cullmann, Jeremias), though the link is somewhat inferential and thus, in my opinion, weak; both circumcised and baptized are described as "holy" (Cullmann quoting Strack-Billerbeck), though such evidence is here extra-biblical. /1/

However in respect of the actual replacement of circumcision by baptism the following considerations have been urged.

(a) Paul's attitude to circumcision. It is maintained that Paul generally advocated the cessation of circumcision. With regard to the Gentiles Gal.5.2 is cited, "Now I Paul say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be no advantage to you." But such cessation is rather implicit than explicit here and Acts 21.21, quoted in reference to Jewish Christians, is much clearer, "And they have

been told about you that you teach all the Jews among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcize their children or observe the customs." Beasley-Murray /2/ notes that this action of Paul was a subject of amazement to James and the elders and thus claims that it was hardly a general practice. He maintains that both circumcision and baptism were practised side by side. He further suggests the unlikelihood of Christians administering baptism on circumcision principles since the one initiated into a national status, the other to the spiritual community. The partial or widespread cessation however hardly affects the general principle of reasoning here. If this was Paul's policy whether generally acceptable or not, the replacement of circumcision by baptism implicit in Col.2.11-13 might well be substantiated. Further the spiritual significance of circumcision evident in both OT and NT would preclude Christian leaders from divorcing circumcision from baptism in their considerations for the administration of baptism.

(b) Cullmann, advocating baptism as a fulfilment of circumcision and thus not a repeal of circumcision nor a supplement, claimed that this was explicit in Rom.2.25f; 4.1f; Gal.3.6ff; Eph.2.11f. This is an important and vital principle. The aspect of fulfilment does seem evident in Col.2.11-13 and could presuppose the repeal of circumcision in favour of baptism. It may well be implicit in these other passages quoted by Cullmann but the significance would need to be more precisely defined and indicated. If it is fulfilment, then this would substantiate the replacement thesis.

Cullmann thus finds it difficult to understand Barth who, while accepting baptism as the fulfilment of circumcision, yet denies infant baptism on the grounds that circumcision is pre-messianic, but baptism spiritual and messianic. Cullmann suggests that for Barth to accept an inner relationship between circumcision and baptism and yet to reject it in practice is inconsistent. Circumcision while in one sense pre-messianic, yet connotes a spiritual significance in OT and NT and the covenant place of children continues within the NT.

(c) Proselyte baptism where children were baptized as well as adults is introduced as corroborative evidence but this is extra-biblical.

Thus these are some of the grounds for maintaining a relationship of equivalence between baptism and circumcision especially in Col.2.11-13 but in other NT evidence. The contention also that baptism replaced circumcision as a covenant sign does seem to be implicit in Col.2.11-13 and other NT texts. In respect of this last matter, Paul's general attitude and the way in which baptism is a fulfilment of the significance of circumcision appear to be most relevant.

Notes

1. Oscar Cullmann, Baptism in the New Testament, London 1958, p57; J. Jeremias, Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries, London 1960, p40.
2. G.R. Beasley-Murray, Baptism in the New Testament, London 1962, p159