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ARE YOU
CIRCUMCISED?





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TOM NETTLES

Introduction:

“Are You Circumcised?”

In his treatise, *Of Baptism*, Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) recounted a moment in his theological journey in which he considered rejecting infant baptism. “For some time, I myself was deceived by the error [of rejecting the sign in the absence of faith] and I thought it better not to baptize children until they came to years of discretion.” (LCC: 24, 139). He also conceded that baptism implies some kind of intention of purposeful dedication to Christ: “The man who does that undertakes to live a new life, and it is the whole nature and character of baptism that in it we dedicate ourselves to God, and indeed pledge ourselves to a new life” (LCC: 24, 169). Zwingli recounts his detailed engagement with the Anabaptists over many exegetical issues, all of it instructive concerning biblical interpretation, but finally rejects their arguments for baptizing only of those who demonstrate faith.

Geoffrey Bromiley admitted that Zwingli’s arguments “failed to work out any fully developed or coherent theology of baptism.” (LCC: 24, 127). He did not develop a clear connection between circumcision of infants as analogous to baptism of infants in perpetuity of covenant relations. He did, however, suggest this as a fertile area for theological development for subsequent Reformed paedobaptists. He wrote of a “sacrament” as a “covenant sign or pledge” and went on to assert that “Baptism is a sign which pledges us to the Lord Jesus” and continued, “You will find ample proof of this if you consider the pledge of circumcision.” (LCC: 24, 131) He illustrated that Christ’s blood-shedding rendered the lamb’s sacrifice and the rite of circumcision as unnecessary since “the blood of circumcision ... he has now changed to water.” (LCC:24, 132)

Zwingli, discussing Abraham's circumcision, proposed that it "did not confirm the faith of Abraham" but was a "covenant sign between God and the seed of Abraham." Given his assertion that "baptism in the New Testament is a covenant sign," not a confirmation of faith, he used infant baptism to prove this. "Against those who unthinkingly accept the idea that signs confirm faith, we may oppose the fact of infant baptism, for baptism cannot confirm faith in infants for infants are not able to believe" (LCC: 24, 139). If infants are unable to believe, this would seem an obvious contradiction to A. A. Hodge's statement of the relation of faith to baptism as recorded below.

One of Zwingli's main arguments is that there is only one baptism. The baptism of John and of Jesus were the same and thus we should not take actions that create a fissure in the history of Christian baptism.

Now it is quite certain that Christ was baptized as an example to us. And if there are any who say: Leave off baptizing infants, for they belong to God in any case, let them note in passing that Christ, the very Son of God, took to himself baptism in order that he might give us an example of unity, that we may all enter under the one sign. (LCC: 24, 167).

It seems that he argued at this point, since we have infant baptism, we must not challenge its validity since baptism in one (Ephesians 4:5). The baptism of John and the baptism of Jesus are the same (167); believers' baptism, therefore, is the same as infant baptism. If Scripture records no example of the apostles baptizing infants, one cannot be justified in concluding that the apostles, therefore, did not baptize infants. Because of the apostles' assumption that the covenant sign of circumcision belonged to infants, we conclude, that no none are recorded except under the nebulous report of "household," so he argued, we must conclude that they regularly baptized infants. That is a strange argument indeed, for one who sought to give loyalty to the regulative principle.

Zwingli explained to Francis, king of France, "In baptism sight and hearing and touch are all claimed for the work of faith. For whether the faith be that of the Church or of the person baptized, it perceives what Christ endured for the sake of his Church and that he rose again victorious." Baptism, therefore, does not point to the faith of the one baptized, but to the faith of the church. It does not confirm the credibility of the faith of the one baptized but is a covenant sign available to infants of covenant people like the infant males of Abraham and his descendants.

John Calvin (1506-1564) intensified and systematized the argument for infant baptism based on the covenantal status of circumcision. "We have, therefore, a spiritual promise given to the

patriarchs in circumcision,” Calvin reasoned, “such as is given to us in baptism since it represented for them forgiveness of sin and mortification of flesh.” Christ is the “foundation of baptism” just as He is “the foundation of circumcision.” (Inst. IV. xvi. 3). Whatever belongs to circumcision also belongs to baptism.

For the Jews, circumcision was “their first entry into the church,” an important assertion and use of vocabulary built on the assumption that the nation of the Israelites constituted the church as Jesus described it in Matthew 16:18—“I will build my church.” Calvin continued, “it [circumcision] was a token to them by which they were assured of adoption as the people and household of God, and they in turn professed to enlist in God’s service. In like manner,” Calvin continued his comparison, “we also are consecrated to God through baptism, to be reckoned as his people, and in turn we swear fealty to him. By this it appears incontrovertible that baptism has taken the place of circumcision to fulfill the same office among us.” (Inst IV. xvi. 4). Calvin asserted that “it is evident that baptism is properly administered to infants as something owed to them.” God did not require circumcision “without making them participants in all those things which were then signified by circumcision.” It was entirely fitting, therefore, that the “circumcision of a tiny infant will be in lieu of a seal to certify the promise of the covenant. . . . It applies no less today to the children of Christians than under that Old Testament.”

In this context, Calvin queries that since the covenant with Abraham was sealed also in children by circumcision, “what excuse will Christians give for not testifying and sealing it in their children today?” [Inst. IV. xvi. 6]. Calvin’s fervency on infant baptism leads him to see satanic instigation in the attempts to argue against it—“It behooves us to note what Satan is attempting with this great subtlety of his.” Nothing, therefore, should dissuade Christians from bringing their infants to the baptismal font “unless we wish spitefully to obscure God’s goodness.” Christians “offer our infants to him, for he gives them a place among those of his family and household, that is, the members of the church.” [Inst. IV. xvi. 32]. All that is requisite for church membership either is bestowed or promised in infant baptism, or perhaps a combination of bestowment and promise.

This theology under the influence of Calvin and the Puritans who exiled in Geneva during the reign of Bloody Mary (1553-1558) was embedded within the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 28. The connections between covenant, circumcision, and the faith of the church were made more explicit and given a central place in the theology of infant baptism. *The Westminster Confession* asserts briefly, “Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptized” The Scripture proofs include Genesis 17: 7, 9 compared with Galatians 3:9, 14 and Colossians 2:11, 12, Acts 2:38, 39, Romans 4:11 12, 1 Corinthians 7:14 and others.

The *Westminster Larger Catechism* in question 166 asserts, “Baptism is not to be administered to any that are out of the visible church, and so strangers from the covenant of promise, till they profess their faith in Christ, and obedience to him, but infants descending from parents, either both, or but one of them, professing faith in Christ, and obedience to him, are in that respect within the covenant, and to be baptized.” Proof texts for infant baptism focus on the covenant with Abraham, physical continuity (“thy seed”), circumcision mentioned in Colossian 2 and Romans 4:11, 12, Acts 2:39 (“your children”), 1 Corinthians 7:14 (“unbelieving husband is sanctified, ... your children are holy.”), Romans 11:16 (“the lump is also holy”).

In his commentary on the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, A. A. Hodge (1869) argued that sprinkling, or washing, or purification adequately expressed the concept of baptism—no necessity to take seriously the meaning of “immerse” (Hodge, *The Confession of Faith*, 340-342). He then described what was necessary knowledge of the gospel and expression of faith and repentance in one received into the church from the world by baptism: competent knowledge, personal experimental faith, and a lifestyle supportive of such profession. Earlier (332) Hodge, in remonstrating against Catholic views said that the efficacy of the Lord’s Supper and baptism depended on two things: “The sovereign will and power of the Holy Spirit” and second, “the lively faith of the recipient.” This at least would seem to introduce the idea of two different types of baptism. One requires conscious knowledge, belief, and piety, that is a “lively faith;” the other requires none of that from the person baptized but is assumed as promised through the faith of the parent(s).

When he turns to justification of infant baptism, the covenant sign of circumcision plays an important role in showing the “abundant scriptural evidence” for Christian baptism of infants (345). Hodge prefaced his argument with the claim that “God has in all respects made the standing of the child while an infant to depend upon that of the parent” (*Confession*, 346). He then gives argument for the spiritual application of circumcision as “circumcision of the heart” similarly to what is argued in this *Founders Journal*. He stated, “Circumcision, precisely in the same sense and to the same extent as Baptism, represented a spiritual grace and bound to a spiritual profession. ... It was the seal of the righteousness of faith.” Again, showing the assumption of saving faith connected with both circumcision and baptism, Hodge noted, “True circumcision unites to Christ and secures all the benefits of his redemption” but then makes an application involving a subtle *non-sequitur*, “and Baptism has now taken the precise place of Circumcision” (346f, *Confession*). Though connected with the symbol of circumcision, this *Founders Journal* argues that baptism, rather than forecasting covenant inclusion, assumes that the typological meaning of circumcision (circumcision of the heart) already is present in the person who receives baptism. Later, as he did earlier in a preliminary section, in arguing against the *ex opere operato* sacramentalism of Roman Catholicism, Hodge makes a very Baptist statement

consistent with the content of the arguments made by the authors of this *Journal*, “Baptism cannot be the only or ordinary means of regeneration, because faith and repentance are the *fruits* of regeneration, but the *pre*-requisites of Baptism” (350, *Confession*). It seems that according to the theological synthesis of the New Testament on baptism, considering faith and repentance as pre-requisites, does not apply to certain members of the human race who are “children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (Ephesians 2:3).

In his clearest passage concerning the perfect identity between circumcision and baptism, Hodge sets forth the very thesis with which our contributors interact.

Infants were members of the Church under the Old Testament from the beginning, being circumcised upon the faith of their parents. Now, as the Church is the same Church; as the conditions of membership were the same then as now; as Circumcision signified and bound to precisely what Baptism does; and since Baptism has taken precisely the place of Circumcision—it follows that the church membership of the children of professors should be recognized now as it was then, and that they should be baptized. (347, *Confession*).

To add one more “precisely,” it is precisely that assumption of absolute continuity between circumcision and baptism that our authors seek to challenge. Each is given a passage, sometimes more than one, that is relevant to this typological/theological question. We believe that the canonical and exegetical arguments provided will provided a scripturally defensible position for Baptist ecclesiology. We also ask sincerely, “*Are You Circumcised?*”

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SCOTT N. CALLAHAM

Circumcision in the Old Testament and Why It Matters to Christians

The Introduction

“Circumcision” rings disconcertingly in the modern Christian ear like a chord struck off key. This is because circumcision carries no theological meaning for many contemporary Christians; it is simply either a hospital procedure for male newborns or an arcane Jewish ritual that the Church rejected in New Testament times. Yet the Old and New Testaments mention circumcision a great deal. Even as a matter that itself is no longer a source of much controversy in the church, circumcision looms large in theology. Therefore, gaining an understanding of circumcision in the Bible—starting in the Old Testament—is vital, for all Christian doctrines must derive from and cohere with authoritative and sufficient Scripture.

The Abrahamic Covenant and the Sign of Circumcision

Ancient peoples other than the Hebrews practiced circumcision. Jeremiah lists these other peoples circumcised “merely in the flesh” as Egyptians, Edomites, Ammonites, and Moabites (Jer 10:26). Yet for the Hebrews, circumcision was no mere cultural practice. Instead, circumcision was a core component of the Abrahamic covenant, whose key establishing passages are Genesis 12:1-9, all of Genesis 15, and Genesis 17:1-14.

Briefly, God initiates covenant relationship with Abram in Gen 12:1-3 with commands and promises. [1] Abram immediately obeys God's command to leave his home and to proceed to an as yet unrevealed land. Then in Genesis 15, Abram and God perform a covenant entry rite involving animal sacrifice. [2] Finally, God grants circumcision as sign of the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 17:10-14.

Studying these Abrahamic covenant passages together with the earlier Noahic covenant passage in Genesis 9:8-17 leads to three observations that prove relevant for theological reflection on covenants and their designated signs. First, biblical covenants may function without signs; God's command alone is sufficient to establish covenants. After all, Abram is 75 years old in Genesis 12:4 and 99 years old in Genesis 17:1. About 24 years passed with no covenant sign.

Second, covenant signs need not be covenant entry rites. The rainbow is not any kind of ritual, and while circumcision was a ritualistic act, it was a ceremony for a covenant whose entry rite was already enacted years before, in Genesis 15:7-17.

Third, once God grants the covenant sign, its presence is mandatory for the continuance of the covenant. For example, the rainbow's presence ensures that "all flesh" will never be "cut off" by floodwaters in Genesis 9:11. Then under the Abrahamic covenant, refusing the required covenant sign of circumcision is a covenant breaking act and results in being "cut off" from the covenant people (Genesis 17:14).

Circumcision as Theological Metaphor

Throughout Old Testament times, the bloody physical act of circumcision remains a mandatory act of covenant faithfulness.[3] Yet circumcision, the sign of the covenant, also attains a metaphorical meaning involving the lips, ears, and heart. In Exod 5:1-5 Pharaoh rebuffs Moses and Aaron at their first meeting, then in Exod 6:12 and 30 Moses laments that he is "of uncircumcised lips"—unequipped for his calling to speak to Pharaoh.[4]

As for ears, the LORD proclaims that the Hebrews' "ears are uncircumcised, they cannot listen" in Jer 6:10. Here there is no hint that Hebrews should cut their ears, but only imagery that attests to non-listening ears that are unfit for the covenant people.

As for the heart, Lev 26:41 decries the Hebrews' "uncircumcised heart" (see Jer 9:26). God commands that the Hebrews circumcise their own hearts in Deut 10:16 (see Jer 4:4), but then Deut 30:6 promises a future when God himself will perform this needed act: "And 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." The verbal

allusion back to the Greatest Commandment in Deut 6:5 is striking. Deuteronomy thus teaches that what God has commanded regarding the heart, he will himself do. God’s “heart surgery” enables his people to obey him.

Deuteronomy’s pattern of commanding heart change and then promising that God will one day do it himself returns in Ezekiel. “Make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!” is the Lord GOD’s command to the house of Israel in Ezek 18:31. Then Ezek 36:26-27 reads: “And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.” Here appears the unprecedented promise that the Holy Spirit would dwell in all members of the covenant, and that his presence would enable obedience to God’s law.[5] This covenant is the “new covenant” of Jer 31:31-34, in which the LORD places his law upon the hearts of his people (v. 33).

According to the book of Hebrews, this “new covenant” of Jer 31:31-34 (cited in Heb 8:8-12) is the covenant for which Jesus is the mediator (Heb 9:15, 12:24). Hence when Rom 2:29 reads that “circumcision is a matter of the heart” and that it is “by the Spirit,” the New Testament unveils the Holy Spirit’s fulfillment of the promise in Deut 30:6 for God’s new covenant people. The New Testament counterpart to circumcision of the flesh is the circumcision of the heart, performed by the Spirit, who is the seal of the new covenant (see 2 Cor 1:22; Eph 1:13-14, 4:30).[6]

NOTES:

1 God gives Abram the new name “Abraham” in Genesis 17:5.

2 This ritual appears again with other covenant parties in Jer 34:18-19. See the potential Ancient Near Eastern parallel incised upon the Sefire Stele: [רזגי אלגע הזו נכ רזגי לאענמ י [רזגי יאז]] “Just as] this calf is cut in two, so may Mat’el be cut in two ...” Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Aramaic Inscriptions of Sefire*, BibOr 19 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1967), 14–15.

3 Note, for example, that Lev 12:3 codifies in Mosaic Law the requirement from Gen 17:12 that the eighth day after a male infant’s birth is the day of his circumcision.

4 G. Mayer, “אָרַל, ‘āral,” pages 11:359–361 in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 17 vols., ed.

G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, trans. David E. Green (Grand Rapids:

Eerdmans, 1974–2018), esp. 11:360.

5 Ezek 11:19-20 is similar, though this passage does not specify that the “new spirit” would be the “Spirit of the LORD” as does Ezek 36:27. The covenant formula in Ezek 11:20 (“And they shall be my people, and I will be their God”) entails that the impartation of the Spirit is specifically a covenant promise. See Rolf Rendtorff, *The Covenant Formula: An Exegetical and Theological Investigation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1998).

6 Markus Barth, *Ephesians 1–3: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 34 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), 135–143.

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TOM ASCOL

The Meaning of Circumcision in Romans 2:25-19

In Romans 2:25-29 the Apostle Paul gets to the heart of the question of what it means to be right with God. He does so by making the point that it is not enough merely to be a Jew outwardly. A true child of God must be a Jew inwardly. More specifically, to be a true Jew one needs God's Spirit to change him inwardly. Paul writes,

For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. 26 So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? 27 Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. 28 For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. 29 But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.

Physical circumcision is useless if the one circumcised breaks God's law. The Spirit is the one who works true circumcision and his work is internal and changes the heart. Robert Haldane says that "Paul here pursues the Jew into his last retreat, in which he imagined himself most secure" (*Commentary on 2:25*).

To be called a "Jew" and to have the sign of circumcision were points of pride and spiritual security for Jewish people. They had the name and bore the mark of belonging to God. But Paul

shows them that this is not enough to be right with God. To be a real Jew they need to be born of God's Spirit.

Circumcision is useless to the person who does not keep God's commandments. It becomes "uncircumcision" (25). To understand Paul's meaning we must remember that circumcision was given to the Jewish people as a sign of God's covenant with Abraham & his offspring (as Genesis 17:9-14 makes clear). It marked the Jewish people as belonging to God

The act of physical circumcision, however, was never intended to be the sum and substance of the covenant between God and the Jewish people. The covenant that circumcision signified called the Jews to live righteously before God. When He instructed Abraham about using circumcision as the sign of the covenant God said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless" (Genesis 17:1).

So, the sign is only significant if they faithfully live the way that God calls them to live. "But," Paul says, "If you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision." That would have been a shocking revelation to the typical Jew of Paul's day. Such a person would be offended at the thought that he was not in God's good favor. After all, he had the sign of the covenant! He was circumcised!

Paul's point is that circumcision—or any outward religious activity or ritual—is useless to a person who does not keep God's commandments. In addition to this, the apostle goes on to argue in vv. 26-27 that the uncircumcised person who keeps God's commandments is welcomed by God.

An uncircumcised Gentile who "keeps the precepts of the law" will be right with God because he trusts the Lord, submits to His ways, follows His precepts, and orders his life according to God's revealed will. He will "be regarded" (λογισθήσεται) as one of God's people. That is, God will judge him as being properly circumcised—as being exactly what circumcision signifies, which is devoted wholly to the true God.

The person who is submissive to God, who trusts and obeys Him, will find acceptance from Him. This is exactly what Paul means in Philippians 3:3 when he writes, "For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh."

In vv. 28-29 Paul wraps up his main point by showing that the person accepted by God obeys God from the heart because he has been born of God's Spirit. In words that would have shocked first century practitioners of Judaism Paul explains what it means to be truly, properly circumcised, and what it means to be a true Jew.

He writes, “For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter...” (28-29). Paul uses three antitheses to make his point.

First, he contrasts outward Jewishness to inward Jewishness. To be a Jew under the Old Covenant was to be outwardly part of God’s people. But not every member of that covenant was included among the genuine people of God. Rather, “only a remnant of them will be saved” (Romans 9:27). The reason for this is that “not all who descended from Israel belong to Israel” (Romans 9:6).

The Jew who “is one inwardly” has more than the mere name of God, he has an inward reality that makes him genuinely a child of God. Paul elaborates on this inner reality in the other two antitheses.

The true Jew has more than physical circumcision, he has circumcision as “a matter of the heart.” This inner work of heart circumcision was required even under the Old Covenant as the admonition of Deuteronomy 10:16 makes plain: “Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn” (see also Jeremiah 4:4). It is this inner work of God that makes a person a true child of God, a true Jew. It is this work that Moses promised God would do in Deuteronomy 30:6, “And 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.”

Paul states exactly what this work is in the third antithesis—it is the inner circumcision of the heart “by the Spirit, not by the letter.” What Paul is talking about is the promise that God made through Ezekiel when He said, “And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.”

This is what makes a true child of God, a true Jew, and what constitutes true circumcision. The physical sign points to the inward reality without which, no one can be right with God. One of the main differences between the Old and New Covenants is that members of the latter all know the Lord, they all have circumcised hearts, they all have the internal work of the Spirit.

Or we could say, only members of the New Covenant are Jews inwardly.

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Tom Ascol has served as a Pastor of Grace Baptist Church in Cape Coral, FL since 1986. Prior to moving to Florida he served as pastor and associate pastor of churches in Texas. He has a BS degree in sociology from Texas A&M University (1979) and has also earned the MDiv and PhD degrees from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Ft. Worth, Texas. He has served as an adjunct professor of theology for various colleges and seminaries, including Reformed Theological Seminary, the Covenant Baptist Theological Seminary, African Christian University, Copperbelt Ministerial College, and Reformed Baptist Seminary. He has also served as Visiting Professor at the Nicole Institute for Baptist Studies at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida. Tom serves as the President of Founders Ministries, The Institute of Public Theology and Founders Seminary. He has edited the Founders Journal, a quarterly theological publication of Founders Ministries, and has written hundreds of articles for various journals and magazines. He has been a regular contributor to TableTalk, the monthly magazine of Ligonier Ministries. He has also edited and contributed to several books, including *Dear Timothy: Letters on Pastoral Ministry*, *The Truth and Grace Memory Books* for children and *Recovering the Gospel and Reformation of Churches*. He is also the author of *Suffering with Joy, As the Darkness Clears Away*, *From the Protestant Reformation to the Southern Baptist Convention*, *Traditional Theology and the SBC* and *Real Life in the Fallen World*. Tom regularly preaches and lectures at various conferences throughout the United States and other countries. In addition he regularly contributes articles to the Founders website and hosts a weekly podcast called *The Sword & The Trowel*. He and his wife Donna have six children along with four sons-in-law and a daughter-in-law. They have twenty-three grandchildren.



JAMES M. RENIHAN

Circumcision in Romans 4:5-12

In the midst of a lengthy discussion of the nature of justification by faith alone, Paul asks a vital question in Romans 4:9ff.: “Does this blessedness (i.e. justification by faith alone) come upon the circumcised only, or upon the uncircumcised also?” Or, must a person be Jewish in order to enjoy the blessedness of the forgiveness of sins? His answer is clear and straightforward. No, this gift is granted to all who believe in Jesus Christ, regardless of their ethnicity and possession of the outward sign. This is similar to the more extensive comments he makes in Galatians 4:21-31. Paul makes this abundantly clear through the figure of the bondwoman and the freewoman. David Kingdon points out that, “[Paul] tells us that the children after the flesh (vv. 23 and 29) possessed the land, and were marked off from the nations round about them by the covenant sign of circumcision in their flesh, but they were not all born “after the Spirit” (v. 29). Indeed the children of the flesh opposed the children born after the Spirit. The principle that the children of the flesh inevitably persecute the children of the Spirit, Paul says, was operative then, and is operative now. So those who were born after the flesh, although they had an interest in the earthly blessings promised in the covenant, had no interest in the spiritual and eternal inheritance that God declared would be the lot of his own people. They belonged in a physical sense to the seed of Abraham but they were not the seed of Abraham by faith.”[1]

This is very much the point of Romans 4:9-12. Abraham believed many years before he received circumcision, and this is explicitly why he can be the father of uncircumcised believers. Paul argues based on the chronology of the important events of Abraham’s life recorded in Genesis:

the call of the gentile Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees in Genesis 12; the covenant revealed and believed in Genesis 15; and the covenant of circumcision described in Genesis 17. A comparison of these texts reveals that at least thirteen years passed between the events of Genesis 15 and Genesis 17. Some rabbis apparently believed that twenty-nine years occurred between them. [2] Whether thirteen or twenty-nine does not matter for the passage of at least more than a decade of the patriarch's life is central to Paul's argument. What is important is that Abraham was justified by faith long before he was circumcised, so it must be said that faith preceded circumcision, and this circumcision could not have been the *basis* of his relationship with God.

The Abrahamic covenant must be understood on two levels: spiritual identity and national identity. National identity was forefront in the consciousness of the Scribes and Pharisees. This is recorded in texts such as John 8:31-41 and Acts 15:1. The religious leaders of Israel collapsed these two things together so that circumcision was considered the distinguishing sign of God's people. They believed that Israel was in fact a peculiar nation before God and in the world. They missed, however, the true nature of spiritual identity, which is what Paul describes in Romans 4. Justification has no relation to circumcision.

This fact makes Abraham the father, not only of the Jews, but of everyone who believes. For many years, Abraham was an uncircumcised believer, which makes him the true father of all uncircumcised believers as well as the father of all circumcised believers. Physical descent brought earthly promises and blessings to Abraham's earthly seed. But spiritual descent brings eternal blessings, received by faith. Abraham is the true spiritual father of all who believe – and this is a more lasting legacy than any of the Scribes and Pharisees could have imagined.

He is our father Abraham.

The issue is not the sign/seal of circumcision, but the prior presence of faith. In fact, Paul jumps right over the whole notion of circumcision in order to assert the relationship between Abraham and believing Gentiles. They are his "children" by faith, and the outward sign is utterly irrelevant to their status as his children. So long as they possess faith, they are his. To move from circumcision to baptism is to miss this point entirely. Faith, not circumcision, is what constitutes his children.

NOTES:

[1]David Kingdon, *Children of Abraham* (Sussex: Carey Publications, 1973) 32.

[2]See John Stott, *Romans: God's Good News for the World* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994) 129.

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JEFF JOHNSON

The Juxtaposition of Circumcision and Baptism in Paul's Epistle to the Galatians

Paul's epistle to the Galatians utterly dismantles the Judaizers. Paul did not hold back but unraveled their false teaching by exposing that the true children of Abraham are those and only those who have been saved by grace, justified by faith, and born again by the Holy Spirit.

The Judaizers were Jews who confessed Christ with their mouth but trusted in their Jewishness with their hearts. Because they rested in their Jewish identity, they demanded pagan converts be circumcised. Because they thought God's blessings resided within the walls of Israel, the Judaizers could not perceive how Gentiles could be members of God's covenant community and co-heirs with them in the blessing of Abraham without at least identifying (via circumcision) with the Jewish people (Acts 15:1). Their demand for circumcision was really their demand for Gentiles to unite themselves with the children of Abraham. As the Old Covenant made provision for Gentiles to be integrated into Israel via circumcision (Ex. 12:48-49), the Judaizers argued that Gentiles had to be united to Abraham's physical offspring through physical circumcision. Therefore, the Judaizers mistakenly believed that Gentiles had to be united to Abraham in some fleshy way. Sadly, they trusted in the flesh rather than the Spirit (Gal. 3:3).

Yet, according to Paul, the Judaizers had failed to understand that national Israel had failed

to inherit the blessing of Abraham. They were no more righteous than the pagan nations surrounding them. They were covenant breakers. They were not only in exile, but they were also born into slavery to their sin (Gal. 4:25). By desiring the Gentiles to be circumcised, they desired Gentiles to bear what they could not carry (Gal. 2:14; Acts 15:10).

The Judaizers also failed to see that Jesus Christ alone (in the singular) is the sole heir to the blessing of Abraham (Gal. 3:16). Because Christ was the only Jew who kept the conditions of the covenant of circumcision (Gen. 17:10; Gen. 18:19), the blessing is His and resides exclusively in Him. Jesus is the true Israel of God. Christ succeeded where the Israelites failed. He came out of Egypt (Hosea 11:1; Matt. 2:5), passed through the waters (Matt. 3:16), was tested in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1), and was declared to be God's Son (Heb. 5:5). Only in Christ can sinners be set free.

Moreover, the Judaizers failed to understand the gospel foretold to Abraham that in his seed (Jesus Christ), all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 22:18; Gal. 3:16). Because they didn't understand that all the blessings of Abraham dwell in Christ, the Judaizers failed to see that the only way anyone, both Jew and Gentile, could partake in the inheritance of Abraham was by being spiritually united to Christ Jesus by faith (Gal. 3:29). The Judaizers failed to see that the inheritance of Abraham is received not by natural birth or by circumcision but by faith alone in Christ alone. "Know then," Paul said, "that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham" (Gal. 3:7).

Thus, for all these reasons, the Judaizers failed to comprehend how Gentiles could become heirs with Abraham by faith without circumcision or identifying themselves with physical Israel (Gal. 3:14). To be joint heirs with Christ and heirs of Abraham, Gentiles don't need to be united to Abraham by some fleshly means, such as circumcision. Instead, they must become spiritually united to Abraham's promised seed, Jesus Christ, by faith. It is a spiritual union rather than a physical union with Abraham that matters. And this spiritual union takes place not by physical birth or circumcision but by the new birth of the Holy Spirit and faith in Christ Jesus.

In gist, rather than Gentiles needing to join themselves to Abraham's physical offspring via circumcision, Jews need to reject their circumcision and Jewishness and trust in Christ alone to become Abraham's spiritual offspring.

Paul's resounding rebuttal against the Judaizers is also an argument against those who appeal to paedocircumcision as a theological justification for paedobaptism. Some say as circumcision was administered to believers and their physical children in the Old Covenant, baptism needs to be administered to believers and their physical children in the New Covenant. This reasoning is built on the notion that both the Old and New Covenants are administrations of the covenant

of grace, and their membership is essentially the same—believers and their seed. With this reasoning, baptism is the new circumcision. In other words, for Presbyterians, baptism carries the fundamental significance of circumcision—an identity marker of God’s covenant people, which consists of a mixture of spiritual and physical seeds.

If circumcision was a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, however, then Paul’s argument against the Judaizers is not what we would expect. If baptism has the same significance and meaning as circumcision, why didn’t Paul argue that the Judaizers were misrepresenting the meaning of circumcision? Why not say that just as believers in the Old Covenant were required to signify their *faith* and unity with God’s people by circumcision, now all believers (Jews and Gentiles) in the New Covenant are required to signify their *faith* and unity with God’s people by baptism?

Of course, there are exceptions, such as the thief on the cross, but shouldn’t all believers be baptized? If circumcision represents Abraham’s *spiritual* people, and if baptism has replaced circumcision as the sign and seal of the covenant of grace, then wouldn’t this clarification have been the more natural argument for Paul to have made? Rather than requiring all covenant members to be circumcised, God now requires all covenant members to be baptized. If baptism replaces circumcision, then this would seem to be the likely argument Paul would have used. But this is not Paul’s argument at all.

Instead of affirming that God’s covenant people in the Old and New Covenant are a mixture of physical and spiritual offspring, Paul separated Abraham’s physical seed from Abraham’s spiritual seed. The two seeds are not to be mixed or conflated (Deut. 22:9). By contrasting physical Israel with spiritual Israel, Paul contrasted circumcision with baptism. Rather than linking circumcision to the covenant of grace (*freedom*) and Abraham’s *spiritual* offspring, Paul linked circumcision to the covenant of works (*bondage*) and Abraham’s *fleshly* offspring (Gal. 4:21-25). Ultimately, Paul disagreed with the Judaizers and did not think believers needed to identify themselves with Abraham’s physical seed via circumcision in order to be united to Christ by faith and heirs to Abraham’s inheritance (Gal. 4:27-31). This is because God’s true children are birthed not by the flesh but by being baptized into Christ by the Spirit (Gal. 3:27).

Thus, Paul juxtaposes the meaning of circumcision with the meaning of baptism. Circumcision unites a person to physical Israel, while baptism unites a person to Christ (Gal. 3:27). As we shall see, circumcision signifies the physical and fleshly realities of the Old Covenant, which are utterly foreign to the spiritual realities of the New Covenant. Rather than circumcision signifying the same realities of baptism: (1.) spiritual Israel, (2.) grace, (3.) faith, (4.) the Spirit, and (5.) the new birth, circumcision signifies (1.) ethnic Israel, (2.) works, (3.) law, (4.) the flesh, and (5.) natural birth. According to Paul, circumcision and baptism signify opposite truths.

Circumcision Signified Ethnic Israel, Not Spiritual Israel

First, Paul contrasts circumcision with Abraham's *spiritual* children. According to Paul, circumcision identifies Abraham's *fleshly* seed. When speaking of "the circumcised," it is evident that Paul is referring to ethnic Israel. Likewise, when speaking of "the uncircumcised," it is evident that Paul is referring to the Gentiles. For instance, Paul said: "I had been entrusted with the gospel *to the uncircumcised*, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel *to the circumcised*" (Gal. 2:7). This is made clear afterward when he said, "for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised also worked through me for mine to the Gentiles" (Gal. 2:8).

God's Old Covenant people consisted of the children of Abraham according to the flesh. A Jewish child became a member of ethnic Israel not by faith but by natural birth (Gal. 2:15). On the other hand, the spiritual children of Abraham are members of the New Covenant not by natural birth but by the new birth. New Covenant membership comes not by genetics but by faith. Because the New Covenant consists of a spiritual people, there is no Jew or Gentile distinction (Gal. 3:28). The wall of separation has been broken down.

The New Covenant is not propagated by natural birth but by spiritual birth. Abraham's physical offspring are children born according to the flesh, while his spiritual offspring are born according to the Spirit (Gal. 4:28-29).

This is a profound difference that should not be overlooked. And when we keep this difference in mind, it does not make sense to baptize unbelieving children any more than to circumcise believers. If circumcision represents Abraham's physical children and baptism represents Abraham's spiritual children, then why would we knowingly baptize someone who has not been spiritually baptized into Christ? Though unbelieving Jews were commanded to be circumcised, they were not permitted to be baptized. The sign of the flesh (circumcision) does not belong to the spiritual children of Abraham any more than the sign of the Spirit (baptism) belongs to the fleshly children of Abraham.

Circumcision Signified Works, Not Grace

Second, Paul contrasted circumcision with grace. This contrast is seen when Paul linked the "ethnic identity" of Israel with the works of the law—as opposed to the "spirit identity" of those justified by faith. "We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified" (Gal. 2:15-16).

In other words, if we think we must be united to physical Israel through some fleshly means, such as natural birth or circumcision, then we obligate ourselves to obtain the blessings of Abraham in the same way Christ Jesus obtained the inheritance—by perfect obedience. Christ Jesus is the sole heir of Abraham, for He is the only physical child of Abraham who kept all the conditions of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 18:19).

If we seek God’s blessings through the flesh, then circumcision is not sufficient. If we desire life in the flesh, then perfection of the flesh is required. If we go this route, then we must be justified, sanctified, and glorified on our own. “If you accept circumcision,” Paul said, “Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law” (Gal. 5:2-3). But since none, besides Christ, are righteous, none can be justified by the works of the law.

By linking the condition of the Abrahamic Covenant (circumcision) to the works of the law, Paul contrasted circumcision with grace: “You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace” (Gal. 5:4). If circumcision signified the covenant of grace, why did Paul link it to the covenant of works? According to Paul, Abraham’s physical children are born into slavery while his spiritual children are born free (Gal. 4:22-27). Paul connected circumcision with the law because circumcision and Jewish identity cannot save in the same way our good works cannot save us (Gal. 3:11). No one can perfect the flesh in their flesh. But salvation is not by the works of the flesh but by grace alone in Christ alone. Consequently, circumcision reminds Israel of what they must do (Gen. 17:10; Gen. 18:19), while baptism reminds believers of what Christ has already done.

Circumcision Signified Law, Not Faith

Third, Paul contrasted circumcision with faith. According to Paul, it is not circumcision that matters but faith: “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6).

In natural birth, our children don’t inherit our faith but our sin. They are not born saved and under grace but born lost and under the law. Only in the new birth do they inherit Christ’s faith and righteousness (Gal. 2:20). For Jesus said, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6).

One might be tempted to argue that Paul claims circumcision was a sign and seal of the covenant of grace in Romans 4. But if we read Romans 4 in context, we see a crucial detail—Paul was not speaking of paedo-circumcision but the credo-circumcision of Abraham. Paul was pointing out that Abraham was circumcised after he believed. Abraham was justified not by his flesh but by

his faith. Being circumcised after he was justified, according to Paul, was not a minor historical detail but an essential point to his argument. In Romans 4, Paul shows how Abraham, by faith alone, can be the father of his spiritual children (both Jew and Gentile) without them needing to be circumcised. Therefore, the significance of Abraham's circumcision (credo-circumcision) is not the same as the fleshly circumcision of his physical children (paedo-circumcision). Abraham's circumcision (post-faith) shows how Abraham can be the spiritual father of all who have faith (regardless of genetics or circumcision).

Circumcision was administered to Abraham's physical children regardless of faith. In contrast, baptism is administered to believers irrespective of their ethnicity. The point is baptism cannot be said to have replaced circumcision because fleshly circumcision signifies the law rather than faith.

Circumcision Signified the Flesh, Not the Spirit

Fourth, Paul linked circumcision to the flesh rather than the Spirit. Rather than connecting circumcision of the flesh to the spiritual realities of the covenant of grace, he connected it to the physical and fleshly realities of the covenant of works. Referring to the Judaizers, he said: "It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may *boast in your flesh*" (Gal. 6:12-13).

In contrast, baptism does not signify fleshly realities. Those who become members of the New Covenant, though they are baptized, cannot boast in their flesh, genetics, or their good works. Baptism signifies that we are saved by grace and faith alone in Christ alone through the Spirit alone. For this reason, Paul did not boast that he was Abraham's physical child. "But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal. 6:14).

Circumcision Signified the Natural Birth, Not the New Birth

Fifth, Paul linked circumcision to the natural birth by contrasting it with the new birth: "For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation" (Gal. 6:15). Seeing that circumcision was legally required for all Abraham's natural offspring (Gen. 17:10), it was natural for circumcision to be administered at birth (without faith or the new birth). Baptism, on the other hand, represents the new birth. By faith, we enter the New Covenant not by natural birth but by the new birth. By faith, we are buried into Christ and raised in the newness of life. "For as many as you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ...and if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring" (Gal. 3:27).

The new birth, which is represented by baptism, comes not by the power of the flesh but by the power of the Spirit. What matters is not being united to Abraham's physical offspring via natural birth or circumcision but being united to Abraham's spiritual offspring via the new birth. Only by the new birth do Jews or Gentiles become members of Abraham's spiritual offspring and are given entrance into the kingdom of God (John 3:3). This is the only thing that matters. And this, according to Paul, is what makes up "the (true and spiritual) Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16).

Conclusion

In conclusion, if circumcision signifies the covenant of grace, as our Presbyterian friends claim, then Paul's arguments against the Judaizers are not what we would expect. In fact, it is the exact opposite. Instead of comparing circumcision with baptism and explaining how the Judaizers had turned the sign of grace into a legalistic work, Paul argued that circumcision was indeed a part of the work of the law because it signified those who were seeking to be united to Abraham's fleshly offspring (who are born into slavery under the law) by a fleshly and outward means.

It is clear that Paul was not comparing circumcision to baptism. In Paul's mind, because there is a vast difference between the fleshly and spiritual seed of Abraham, circumcision and baptism are vastly different. The application of circumcision does not transfer to the application of baptism. Circumcision signifies the fleshly realities of ethnic Israel and the works of the law, while baptism signifies the spiritual realities of grace, faith, and the new birth. Because of these essential differences, only those born again by grace and united to Abraham by faith should be baptized.

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TOM NETTLES

The True Circumcision – Philippians 3:1-3

True circumcision, performed by the Spirit of God, fits us for citizenship in the Kingdom of God, driving us to the hope of the resurrection from the dead. Paul encourages the church to “Rejoice in the Lord,” and assures them that discussion of the gospel in all its angles and connections does not weary him in the least—“no trouble to me.” It is a joy for him and a faith-securing privilege for them.

How often we need to be reminded of the perfection, completeness of effectuality of God’s work. Paul was painfully aware of the attempts of false teachers to infiltrate the churches and win followers to themselves by their strange doctrine, so he does not mind sticking with this historically accomplished, revealed truth. He found it necessary to reiterate his teaching—the true gospel revealed to the apostles—in order to protect both the faith and the faithful. So, Paul found it no trouble to “write the same things” for it was a “safeguard” for the church (1). Peter had this same purpose in mind (2 Peter 1:12-15) when he reminded the churches within his sphere of influence of the truth he had taught them—“I will not be negligent to remind you always of these things.”

Paul issued a strong warning against false teaching, because false teaching, purposefully erroneous content, produces false faith and deluded followers. He calls these heresy-mongers “dogs, . . . evil workers, . . . the false circumcision” (2 NASB). Their performance is a mere “mutilation of the flesh” (NKJV combined with ESV). Evidently some of the same group that challenged the

Galatian churches had also made their way to Philippi (Gal. 5:1-11). Throughout the letter to the Galatians, Paul warned against embracing this false gospel. He warned against a yoke of slavery, that Christ would be of “no benefit” and that they would be “severed from Christ” and “fallen from grace” if they adopted the ceremony of circumcision as a qualification for the gospel. Instead, Paul urged that they continue in their obedience to the truth, to follow no other persuasion, and adopt no other view (Galatians 5:1-10).

The gospel has a particular content, nothing superfluous, all vital. True faith includes a persuasion of both its truthfulness and its necessity. We confess, therefore, that not only was Jesus born of a virgin as a matter of fact, but we concede that such an event was necessary for the demands of salvation. So too do we confess the fact of Jesus’ sinless and positively righteous life, but we embrace its necessity for our right standing before God. Not only do we see the crucifixion of Christ as a historical reality, but we believe its substitutionary, propitiatory, expiatory character to be essential if sinners are to be saved. We point to the resurrection as a demonstrable and certain historical fact and also embrace its power over death as an inextricable component of the gift of eternal life.

Paul issued a theological statement about the true meaning of circumcision (3). This could have been dispensed with quickly and clearly had he written, “Don’t you know that Circumcision has now been replaced with the baptism of your children? The old covenant for membership in the covenantal people of Israel required circumcision of all male progeny. That rite is now replaced by the baptism of all children—male as well as female. Baptism of children is now the true circumcision.” Paul did not write that. Instead, he gave concise discussion of the work of the Spirit in his work of calling and transformation of heart.

Circumcision was a ceremony that prefigured the work of the Spirit in removing a sinner’s hardness of heart. The Spirit would create a free flow of trust and love from a sinner to Christ. The true circumcision of regeneration establishes three things, at least, in the spiritual response of a believer.

First, the one who has true circumcision worships by the Spirit of God, that is, according to the work of the Spirit in the new covenant. The law is written on his heart (Jeremiah 31:33), the heart of stone has been removed, the Spirit of God has been put within us to cause us to walk in God’s statutes (Ezekiel 36:26, 27). This circumcision is evidenced in true and observable moral change and spiritual perception. The “circumcised” person worships “in the Spirit of God.”

Second, the true believer, the person who has entered the fellowship of the covenant people, glories in Christ Jesus. The person has a conscious awareness of those objective gospel facts discussed above and has assented to them and consented to their eternal relevance in his

standing before God. The participant in this covenant has forgiveness of sins, iniquities no longer remembered against them (Jeremiah 31:34) for the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from all sin (1 John 1:5). In Christ alone he trusts, for Christ has accomplished all righteousness.

Third, the true believer puts no confidence in the flesh. “Flesh” refers to any status that we may claim from natural relations or from accomplishments from any talents or attempts at personal virtue. All that we are and do is so interpenetrated by the principle of the “flesh” that wars against the Spirit (Galatians 5:17) that it can avail nothing before God, can accomplish no reconciliation, no righteousness. Paul never misses an opportunity to seal this truth: “not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his own mercy” (Titus 3:5); “not of works, lest any man should boast” (Ephesians 2:9); “not because of our works, but because of his own purpose and grace” (2 Timothy 1:9); “To the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly” (Romans 4:5). Worshipping by the Spirit and taking part in the work of Christ through faith is the true circumcision. Are you circumcised?

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JOHN CARPENTER

Colossians 2:11-12 and Kevin DeYoung's Case for Covenant Baptism

At a recent conference, John Piper and Kevin DeYoung (KDY) were asked about infant baptism. [1] KDY, the host, allowed Dr. Piper to respond first. Anticipating the go-to verse for covenant-pedobaptism, Piper cited Colossians 2:12, emphasizing that it teaches credobaptism. “What happens in baptism is that we die and rise again through faith, my faith, not the pastor’s faith, not my parents’ faith, but my faith.” Colossians 2:11-12’s baptism is believers’ baptism.

KDY then succinctly presented the traditional covenant baptism interpretation of Colossians 2:11-12, one he felt so confident in, he posted it on X.[2] His fellow pedobaptists praised it as an exemplary articulation of covenant baptism. Let’s examine it.

First, KDY asserts, “Paul is comparing the spiritual import of circumcision with the spiritual import of baptism.” However, Colossians 2:11 does not mention physical circumcision. It states, “in him you were circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands . . . in the circumcision of Christ.”[3] N. T. Wright, a pedobaptist, notes that this refers to “metaphorical” circumcision consistent with such OT passages as Leviticus 26:41, Deuteronomy 10:16, 30:6, etc.[4] That Paul is referring to that metaphorical circumcision in Col. 2:11 is evident by describing it as “made without hands” and “of Christ.” It speaks of a new heart, thus of regeneration. Since Colossians

2:11 does not describe physical circumcision, it cannot be used to establish any relationship between it and baptism or to describe “the spiritual import of circumcision.” Contrary to the oft-repeated claim, Col. 2:11-12 does not draw a parallel between circumcision and baptism.

Wright argues that Paul’s fore-fronting of “the circumcision of Christ” is targeted at Judaizers. [5] That being the case, if Paul believed in covenant baptism, the easiest way to rebuke Judaizers would have been to insist that physical circumcision is unnecessary, as it has been replaced by baptism. But Paul does not do this. He, rather, points to regeneration as the fulfillment of circumcision.

It is true, as Wright notes, “Christian circumcision” is “the point of entry into the community of Christ’s people” just “as physical circumcision was the point of entry into the community of Israel.”[6] But what Wright calls “Christian circumcision” is not baptism; it is regeneration. The OT itself shows that circumcision is a type of regeneration, rather than a type of baptism. Regeneration is the antitype, not baptism. We enter “the community of Christ’s people” by being born again (John 3:3).

Regeneration is, therefore, the sign of the new covenant. “Be baptized” is directed toward those who have received that sign, specifically to “disciples” in the Lord Jesus’ mandate to baptize (Mt 28:19). Baptism follows regeneration (the anti-type of circumcision). Baptism is, then, a sign *of the sign* of the covenant. That is, God makes a covenant with the elect; He regenerates them in due time, thereby granting them the sign of His covenant, which they then signify by being baptized. Thus, we Baptists, in addition to presenting alternative covenant theologies, should also simply insist that baptism is not comparable to circumcision. It is not a covenant sign.

Nevertheless, KDY proceeds to the second step. He claims, “Romans 4:11 says circumcision signified” everything that baptism signifies. Thus, by the principle of transfer, Romans 4:11 describes baptism (even though it doesn’t mention it). Hence, after (incorrectly) asserting that Colossians 2:11 describes the “spiritual import of circumcision,” he then says Romans 4:11 describes that “spiritual import” in a manner that is similar, if not identical, to the description of baptism. But this, too, is untrue. Circumcision is described as a “sign of the covenant” and a “seal of the righteousness that he had by faith” (Rom. 4:11). Despite the also oft-repeated claims otherwise, scripture never refers to baptism like that. A doctrine as fundamental as a sign of the covenant cannot be left up to being deduced by subjective “good and necessary consequences.”

Colossians 2:11-12 mentions baptism following a series of descriptions of believers. “In him” — actually in Greek “in whom” referring back to “Christ” in 2:8 — “you were circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands.” You were regenerated by God’s sovereign work (John 1:13) “in the stripping off of the body of the flesh.” This phrase is enigmatic. It may refer to the

crucifying of the flesh in Christ (Galatians 2:24). Wright suggests that it could also pertain to removing “family solidarity,” how being identified with Christ transcends other identifiers like ethnicity or family ties.[7] If so, it would be ironic that this verse is employed, along with what KDY calls “the family principle,” to argue for the baptism of infants because of their family identity.

The “stripping” or removal of “the body of the flesh” occurs in “the circumcision of Christ,” i.e., in regeneration. This is not a second experience. It is one aspect of metaphorical circumcision.

Then, in Colossians 2:12, Paul begins with an aorist, passive participle, a divine passive implying God as the subject acting upon the believer. “Having been buried.” A key question: does this describe the cause of the “circumcision of Christ”? That is, is Paul suggesting that baptism caused “Christian circumcision” (regeneration) or is he providing a series of descriptions with no causal relationship between them? The participle may indicate that Paul is returning to the “you are” (2:10), which began “you are made complete in him,” also a participle. This could be interpreted as saying (in rough English to reflect the Greek), “You are having been made complete . . . you also were circumcised with the circumcision made without hands . . . ; [you are] having been buried with him in baptism. . . .” Even if this is incorrect, and Paul is revealing that baptism causes the “circumcision of Christ” (i.e., the causal interpretation), it could, then, be interpreted to support baptismal regeneration (of believers), but not covenant baptism. The Reformed tradition does not believe in baptismal regeneration.[8]

Further, Paul writes that we have been “buried” and “raised” with Christ in baptism, which suggests the mode of baptism: immersion (the literal definition of the Greek word “*baptism*”).

Finally, KDY’s additional points regarding “whether that sign can be applied before the known exercise of faith” and whether “the family principle is no longer operative” are moot. KDY has not demonstrated that baptism is a sign of the covenant. Circumcision could be applied before faith because it was a sign of the covenant, but baptism is “through faith,” as Piper observed. Regarding the “family principle,” the very first public teaching in the NT, John the Baptist’s, rejects it. “God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham” (Mt 3:9).

Speaking of “the family principle,” this issue is an intra-family debate. Pastor DeYoung has made many valuable contributions to nurturing and defending the faith, even if his handling of Col. 2:11 may not be one of them. He’s an able communicator. I even like to say, with a wry smile, that Dr. DeYoung is such a talented writer that he actually won second place in the 2000 Acton Essay Contest![9] (Look it up to get the joke.) We pray for God’s continued blessings on him.

NOTES:

[1] Coram Deo Pastors Workshop, February 13, 2025.

[2] Kevin DeYoung, X, April 9, 2025, <https://x.com/RevKevDeYoung/status/1910003655207444901>.

[3] NT Wright, *Colossians and Philippians: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1986), 109.

[4] Wright, 109.

[5] Wright, 109.

[6] Wright, 109.

[7] Wright, 111.

[8] John B. Carpenter, "The Catholicity of Regenerate Church Membership," *Themelios* (50,2, 2025).

[9] <https://www.acton.org/press/release/2001/acton-institute-announces-essay-contest-winners>.

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BRANDON RHEA

Book Review: *Equipped to Evangelize: A Biblical Foundation*

By Rob Ventura. 104pp. Fern, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Focus, 2025. 9781527113220

In the Reformed community, current discussions and books on evangelism focus on apologetic methodology. Recently, a resurgence of classical apologetics has reignited a critical examination and subsequent defense of presuppositional apologetics. While these debates act as “iron sharpens iron” when done in charity, it has overshadowed a larger concern—evangelism itself. A Christian’s main task is to share the gospel with the lost rather than engaging fervently with one another about the right apologetic approach. To that end, Charles Spurgeon wrote, “Soul-winning is the chief business of the Christian minister; indeed, it should be the main pursuit of every true believer.” [1]

To fill this needed void for a Reformed book on evangelism, Christian Focus has published Rob Ventura’s *Equipped to Evangelize: A Biblical Foundation*. He serves as a pastor at Grace Community Baptist Church in North Providence, Rhode Island and has written many books on Reformed doctrine and practice. This work grew out of a sermon series to train his congregation on evangelism.

Why did he write this book? Throughout his decades of pastoral experience, he has “encountered individuals who felt hesitant to speak about their faith.” Considering his audience is for the person in the pew, Ventura organized his book into seven chapters with questions for reflection

and discussion at the end of each one. It covers the need, scope, motive, agents, message, results, and power of biblical evangelism. He writes in a lucid style appropriate for his audience. This book has accomplished his objective and will be useful in helping any believer learn the scriptural view of evangelism and spot the false views which have become embedded in the broader church.

I will highlight four strengths in this book. First, Ventura does not assume the gospel. In Chapter 5, he goes through the four elements of the good news. His approach mirrors Greg Gilbert's book, *What is the Gospel?* [2] Elementary instruction requires knowing the basic definitions. Many Christians use the word gospel, but they turn into a deer looking into the headlights when you ask them to define the word. According to Spurgeon, the gospel "is not a magical incantation, or a charm, whose force consists in a collection of sounds; it is a revelation of facts and truths which require knowledge and belief."

Ventura also makes the distinction between the gospel and sharing one's testimony [3]. They are not synonymous. Explaining how a person came to know the Lord is not the same thing as telling individuals to repent and believe in the crucified and resurrected Christ.

Second, having grounded the reader in the gospel, Ventura challenges him to share it with everyone including homosexuals, transgenders, liberals, Muslims, etc. Like Jonah who ran away from Ninevah, Christians have prejudices which cause us to flee from handing a tract or asking a person about his soul. Thus this book exhorts believers to evangelize for two motives—the glory of God and the love of neighbor. For Christians to have the glorious gospel of grace, which saved

Paul the great persecutor of the church, and not share it with all types of people is hatred, not love. Ventura makes love the passion for sharing with the lost.

Third, this book sets reasonable expectations for believers who begin evangelizing. Ventura pastorally instructs them to anticipate two responses, either acceptance or rejection. In zeal, a new follower of the Lord may be blindsided when an evangelistic effort turns into a heated argument. At the same time, the mature believer may need to be awakened out of any calloused cynicism and be reminded that God still saves sinners. Ventura's teaching addresses both groups.

Fourth, while being a Reformed book that discusses God's sovereign grace in predestining and saving the elect, it also emphasizes the power of the Holy Spirit to save. So often the Holy Spirit is forgotten in books on preaching and evangelism. Ventura offers a succinct systematic overview on the person and ministry of the Holy Spirit. The One who saves sinners matters as much as the practical steps to evangelize. Ventura's contribution, therefore, counteracts evangelistic strategies that flow from Arminianism like the altar call and the sinner's prayer. Hence, Christians, even young ones in the faith, should evangelize, because the power lies in God and not in themselves.

Even though Ventura's work should be used for evangelism training in Reformed churches, he could improve the book in two ways [*churches could expand the training by considering two additional points.*] First, he did not address when a person should stop evangelizing specific individuals. Jesus taught in Matthew 7:6, "Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you (ESV)." When does a wife stop trying to evangelize her unbelieving husband? When does an open-air preacher stop conversing with a hostile mocker? When does a Christian stop talking about Christ to his homosexual neighbor? Should you evangelize to someone who is drunk or high on drugs? At some point, a Christian has to determine if his efforts to share the gospel with someone is making it worse. In those circumstances, he must pray for God to plow the unbeliever's heart and produce soil ready to hear and believe the gospel. To that end, the book could have had [*Ventura could add*] two to three pages explaining and applying Matthew 7:6.

Second, one of the main reasons Christians are hesitant to share the gospel is they do not know how to practically steer the conversation to spiritual matters. To be fair, Ventura did not attempt to write a system of evangelism like Ray Comfort or James D. Kennedy. In fact, he eschews a cookie cutter approach and assures readers that you can talk about one or all four aspects of the gospel with a person. The believer's conversation depends on the one to whom he is witnessing. Yet this short work would not be made into a tome if he provided illustrations and common questions to ask unbelievers to help the reader move from being established in the theology of evangelism to engaging in it.

Despite these suggestions, Ventura has created a book—which has long been needed—to train the saints to engage in the Great Commission. By grounding witnessing in the Bible, he proves Calvinism fuels evangelism instead of them being adversaries. The missionary movement began with 18th century Baptists who believed in predestination and the power of the Holy Spirit to save the elect through the preaching of gospel. Our churches, however, will become the stereotypes which we abhor—the frozen chosen—if we do not teach every generation to love the lost and to pursue the perishing. To that end, this book is a tool to keep evangelism as a main pillar in the work of our churches.

NOTES:

- [1] C.H. Spurgeon, *The Soul-Winner; or, How to Lead Sinners to the Saviour* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1895), 9

[2] Greg Gilbert, *What is the Gospel?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010).

[3] Spurgeon, *The Soul-Winner*, 15.

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