

Baptism & Circumcision

Colossians 2:11-13

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Colossians 2:11-13 (NKJV)

11 *"In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ,*

12 *buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.*

13 *And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses."*

This passage is one of the most misunderstood Scriptures related to baptism. It is used by both sides of the baptism debate. Paul equated "baptism" with "*the circumcision of Christ*" in this passage. Some who teach that baptism follows salvation point out that "circumcision" in the Old Testament was given to Abraham after he was justified by faith. Paul made that point quite clear in Romans 4:1-12. The inference is then drawn that "baptism" in the New Testament is a similar sign, given after the sinner has been justified by faith alone. In other words, Paul used "circumcision" in this passage as a parallel to Christian baptism.

"Circumcision" does not refer to the Abrahamic Covenant

The problem with the above argument is that Paul nowhere in this context refers to Old Testament circumcision. Paul was not drawing a parallel between circumcision of the flesh, given to Abraham as a sign, and Christian baptism. Paul had a completely different kind of "circumcision" in view. What Paul called "*the circumcision of Christ*" and "*the circumcision made without hands,*" was **not** his way of allegorizing (or "spiritualizing") the physical circumcision given to Abraham by God. It was a direct reference to the Old Testament promise by God to "*circumcise the hearts*" of His people Israel, in conjunction with the promised New Covenant. There are several references to the "*circumcision of the heart*" in the Old Testament. In some passages, God reminded Israel that they were "*uncircumcised in heart*" (e.g., Deut. 10:15-16, Jer. 4:4, Jer. 9:26). This was a metaphor meant to point out their hardness of heart, and their need for salvation. That is, while they were indeed circumcised in their flesh (the outward sign of the Abrahamic Covenant), they were still far from the kind of close communion with God that is evident in the Abrahamic Covenant -- the kind of communion Abraham had with God, and the kind of communion necessary to inherit the promises to Abraham.

But, associated with Israel's "uncircumcision of the heart," we find clear promises of God to "circumcise their hearts" in anticipation of the fulfillment of the promises to Abraham. As you read the following passages, pay particular attention to the common prophetic themes which we have color coded as follows:

- **circumcision of the heart; put His laws in their hearts** (regeneration)
- **putting His Spirit within them** (baptism with the Holy Spirit)
- **they will walk in His statutes and judgments** (willing obedience to Christ)
- **He will forgive their sins** (remission of sins)
- **They will all know the Lord, and love Him alone** (agape)

Deut 30:6

6 "And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, **to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul**, that you may live.

Ezek 11:19-20

19 "Then I will **give them one heart**, and I will put a new spirit within them, and take the stony heart out of their flesh, and **give them a heart of flesh**,
20 "that they may walk in My statutes and keep My judgments and do them; **and they shall be My people, and I will be their God.**

Ezek 36:26-27

26 "I will **give you a new heart** and **put a new spirit within you**; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and **give you a heart of flesh.**
27 "I will put My Spirit within you and **cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.**

These promises are related to the coming of the New Covenant prophesied by Jeremiah (Jer. 31:31-34), in which God would put His laws in their hearts, and remove their sins.

Jer 31:31-34

31 "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make **a new covenant** with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—

32 "not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD.

33 "But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: **I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.**

34 "No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' **for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,** says the LORD. For **I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.**"

Paul was quite familiar with the Old Testament promises to circumcise the hearts of God's people. In Romans 2, he wrote to counter the idea that a Jew was guaranteed an inheritance merely on the grounds of his outward symbol of the covenant, circumcision.

Rom 2:28-29

28 For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh;

29 **but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit,** not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.

Paul indicated that for a Jew to inherit the promises associated with the Abrahamic and New Covenants, he needed the promised "circumcision of the heart," something completely distinct from the "circumcision of the flesh." The "circumcision of the heart" is simply the "new birth."

When Peter preached his Pentecostal sermon, he had in view this promised regeneration, the *circumcision of the heart*, the *new birth*, promised to Israel throughout the Old Testament.

Acts 2:37-39

37 Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?"

38 Then Peter said to them, "**Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins;** and you shall **receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.**

39 "For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call."

In effect, Peter was telling this multitude of Jews how they might receive the fulfillment of the promise to circumcise their hearts. It was through repentance and baptism in water in the name of Jesus Christ. And in doing so, they had the clear promise of God, to them, their children, and even those afar off (Jews of the Diaspora), that God would

take care of the "circumcision of the heart," the forgiveness of sins, and put His Spirit within them.

With this background, let's look again at Col. 2:10-13. This time, compare the color coded concepts with the previous passages.

Col 2:11-13

11 and in Him **you were also circumcised** with a **circumcision made without hands**, in **the removal of the body of the flesh** by **the circumcision of Christ**;

12 **having been buried with Him in baptism**, in which **you were also raised up with Him** through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.

13 And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, **He made you alive together with Him**, **having forgiven us all our transgressions**, (NASB)

We used the NASB here because it correctly renders the participle "having been buried" in verse 12, and the participle "having forgiven" in verse 13. The KJV & NKJV wrongly translate the participle in verse 12 as though it was a simple verb, "buried." This difference does not appear in the Greek text, but is strictly an error in translation on the part of the KJV and NKJV. Interestingly, both the KJV and NKJV correctly translate the participle "having forgiven" in verse 13.

There is no question that the "circumcision of Christ" (the circumcision performed by Christ), and the "circumcision made without hands," both refer to the new birth. In association with this "circumcision," we are "forgiven all trespasses," and put off "the body of the sins of the flesh." These expressions refer to the "remission of sins," the same as in Acts 2:38.

Circumcision of the Heart coincides with Baptism in Time

Having established that "circumcision of Christ" is in fact the very act of conversion and regeneration, we can now show that Paul placed this transformation squarely **DURING** one's baptism.

In verse 11, the word "circumcised" (which refers to the conversion of the heart) is an aorist indicative verb. It points to an event in the past. The verb "buried" in verse 12, (which refers to one being plunged beneath the water of baptism), is an aorist participle. The time of the participle (buried) is relative to the time of the main verb (circumcised). Literally, the text says, "In Him you were circumcised ... having been buried in baptism." What is abundantly clear from the grammar is that being "buried" in baptism (plunged beneath the water) cannot follow the "circumcision of Christ," but immediately precedes

it, or is virtually coincident with it. The action of the "*circumcision of Christ*" occurs immediately upon the "burial" in baptism. We can illustrate the time relationship between the verb and participle as follows:

"I drove home, having left the store." The verb "drove" in our example is a simple past tense (as the aorist indicative is in Greek). The time implied in the participle "having left" is relative to the verb "drove." That is, it is past tense from the point in time when the action of the past tense verb occurred. In other words, leaving the store was prior to driving home. But the relationship is so closely associated, that the two actions (leaving the store and driving home) are contiguous. The same principle applies to the Greek grammar in Col. 2:11. Compare:

- "I drove home, having left the store."
- "You were circumcised ... having been buried ... in baptism."

This construction means, the "*circumcision of Christ*" (conversion of the heart) occurs immediately upon or after one's being plunged beneath the water of baptism. He is regenerated IN the water, while he is completely submerged. There is simply no other way to understand the grammar of this passage. Paul's language simply will not permit the idea of being "*buried in baptism*" AFTER being "*circumcised*." The grammar demands just the reverse.

In verse 13, notice the clause "*He has made us alive together with Him*." This is also connected with the act of baptism in Rom. 6:4 "*Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life*." This refers to our coming up out of the water, symbolizing the resurrection of Christ, and a new life. Once again, Paul uses a grammatical construction that links this event with the "*forgiveness of sins*." The word translated "*made alive together*" is an aorist indicative verb. And the word translated "*having forgiven*" is an aorist participle. Literally, "*He made us alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses*." The act of "making alive" occurs immediately upon or after His forgiving our sins. These two verses lay out the order of these four things in the following pairs grammatically:

- Having been buried in baptism (plunging into the water - union with Christ's death & burial)
- we immediately received the "*circumcision of Christ*" (conversion)
- Having forgiven us our trespasses (remission of sins)
- we were then raised from the water (in an act of union with His resurrection)

There is simply no question about it. Paul viewed baptism as the point in time when one enters into this new relationship with God, when He removes our sins, and regenerates the heart — the "new birth." **All of the spiritual action on God's part, the forgiveness of sins and circumcision of the heart, takes place between the two bookends of baptism — being plunged beneath the water, and being raised up again out of the water.** This is precisely what Paul also taught in Romans 6.

Paul did not draw a parallel between physical circumcision and baptism. He indicated that baptism was the means of entering into the "circumcision of the heart" promised by God to Israel via the New Covenant. This is in fact the "new birth." This passage of Scripture simply will not permit the view that baptism follows the new birth.