

The Rites of Initiation: Circumcision and Baptism

By Peter Barnes

God has left His new covenant people with two visible signs of His invisible grace: baptism and the Lord's Supper. Down through the ages, Christians have differed in their understanding of these signs, but we do well to seek to understand them as well – that is, as biblically – as possible. This study will be on baptism.

THE COVENANT IS EVERLASTING

In the Old Testament, the rite of initiation was circumcision, and it was only given to boys, eight days after they were born (Gen.17:9-14; Lev.12:3). The point for now is that this covenant is described as 'everlasting' (Gen.17:13, 19). In the New Testament, however, circumcision is treated as neither here nor there (1 Cor.7:19; Gal.5:6; 6:15) unless one regarded it as a way of being justified before God in which case it was an indicator that one had fallen from grace (Gal.5:2-4). So the covenant is everlasting, but clearly the sign is not. The covenant with Abraham is fulfilled in Christ (Gal.3:29), and baptism is the new sign (Gal.3:27-29).

THE COVENANTS IN THE BIBLE INCLUDED CHILDREN

In fact, biblical covenants included entire households (Gen.17:12-13). Circumcision was not a sign of the child's faith, but of God's covenant. All and sundry were included in the covenant with Israel, and all males received the sign and seal of that covenant (Deut.29:10-12; Isa.59:21). The covenants with Adam and with Noah affected the whole world (Gen.2-3; Rom.5:12-21; Gen.9), while the covenants with Abraham (Gen.12, 15, 17) and Moses (Ex.24) included all Israel. The covenant with David included his descendants and culminated in the coming of the Messiah (2 Sam.7:12-16).

With the coming of the Messiah, there is the new covenant in

His blood (Luke 22:20). Given the Old Testament background, the logic would be that children would still be included in the covenant, and so baptism would go to children. Luke points out that baptism did indeed go to males and females (Acts 8:12). The gospel promises are presented in terms of 'to you and your children' (Acts 2:38-39; 16:31). Covenant children are in a sense holy, or set apart, even if only one parent is a Christian (1 Cor.7:14). As a result, there are household baptisms in the New Testament just as there were household circumcisions in the Old Testament (Acts 16:14-15, 33-34; 1 Cor.1:16).

BAPTISM HAS A SPIRITUAL MEANING, BUT SO DID CIRCUMCISION

It is often pointed out that the biblical order is 'Repent and be baptized', and this precludes infant baptism as an infant is unable to repent. This line of thinking is behind Charles Spurgeon's comment: 'I consider the "baptism" of an unconscious infant is just as foolish as the "baptism" of a ship or a bell'. However, circumcision had a spiritual meaning, yet it was still given to infant boys who, at the time, obviously had no idea of what it was all about (see Deut.10:16; 30:6; Jer.4:4; 9:25-26; Rom.2:29). Circumcising the foreskin was a sign of circumcising the heart. Similarly, baptism washes the body, but it points to a washing of the soul (1 Peter 3:21). The infant does not understand this at the time, but that is clearly the Old Testament order of things.

To the first generation – to Abraham as the father of faith (Rom.4:11) – there was faith first (Gen.15:6), then circumcision (Gen.17:24). For all succeeding generations, the usual order was circumcision first, then faith. It is the same with baptism. The spiritual meaning of baptism is substantially the same as the spiritual meaning of circumcision (Col.2:11-12).

Of itself, circumcision never saved any Israelite, and it was given to thousands, even millions of Hebrew men who do not appear to have been true believers (Gen.17:25; 25:19-34; Rom.9:13; 1 Kings 19:9-18). Circumcision was compulsory, and not just a reasonable suggestion, as Moses found out (Ex.4:24-26), but those who rested on their circumcision found it saved no one. Similarly, with baptism, it is commanded (e.g. Luke 7:29-30; Acts 10:47-48), but that does not at all mean that every baptized person is right with God (e.g. Acts 8:9-24). Baptism ought to culminate in what it signifies: repentance (Mark 1:4); union with Christ (Gal.3:27); spiritual rebirth (Tit.3:5); newness of life (Rom.6:1-4); and membership in the body of Christ (1 Cor.12:12-13).

Whereas circumcision could only be administered once, baptism should only be ministered once. The children of believers ought to be baptized. The fact that such children do not understand baptism is not the key point. Neither did old covenant sons understand circumcision. All objections to covenant infant baptism turn out to be objections to infant circumcision – which God commanded! Baptism is not the gospel, but if you are a Christian, your children are not saved by your faith but they are children of the covenant. As such, they have covenant privileges (Rom.9:1-5), which we trust that God will crown with salvation.

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