

J. KYLE PAISLEY MEMORIAL FREE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Lord's Day Morning Sermon Notes

30th April 2006

Read: Colossians 2: 6-15

Text: v.v. 11, 12

The Subjects of Baptism

These two verses are of great value and importance in any study of the ordinance of *Christian Baptism*, especially on the issue of 'the subjects of baptism'; that is, the issue of those to whom baptism should be administered. Already, I have addressed you on the issues of *the significance of baptism* and *the mode of baptism*; and now we come to this matter of *the subjects of baptism*.

At this point may I remind you that according to our Church's policy on baptism liberty of conscience is also granted on this matter of the subjects of baptism. With respect to the issue good and godly men have ranged on both sides of the matter. For example, C.H. Spurgeon stands as an avowed proponent of the baptism of believers only; while on the other hand stands that saintly and mighty man of God, Robert Murray McCheyne. A Baptist pastor named Peter Edwards once set out to write a work in defence of the Baptist position but became a paedobaptist through his study & research. An Ulster Presbyterian minister, Alexander Carson, had the opposite experience – through his study he abandoned the paedobaptist position and became an avowed proponent of the Baptist position. I mention these men from Church history to remind to us all that the debate on the issue of the subjects of baptism is never going to be resolved this side of eternity.

Nonetheless, God's word teaches the administration of water baptism, meaning that we must give some attention to this matter of who should be baptised, thus I purpose by the Lord's help to consider the subject today.

I. FIRST, NOTICE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE OT ORDINANCE OF CIRCUMCISION AND THE NT ORDINANCE OF BAPTISM

That there is a relationship between circumcision and baptism is a fact clearly seen in Col 2: 11 & 12. Indeed all orthodox Bible teachers from both sides of the issue of 'the subjects of baptism' agree that there is such a relationship. Thus, these verses are very important in this matter of the subjects of baptism, and we should endeavour to understand them. There are some points to note in the light of these two verses.

(a) **Paul speaks of circumcision in v.11 and in v.12 of baptism in such a fashion as to show the connection between the two.** In these verses the Apostle is speaking of a certain spiritual experience in the life of the believer but does so in terms of circumcision and baptism both. Thus, the Spirit of God actually brings the old ordinance and the new together, showing that there is a connection between them. Thus, we must recognise that there is such a relationship between circumcision & baptism, just as there is between the Passover and the Lord's Supper.

The Passover and the Lord's Supper are both memorial feasts relating to redemption; the Passover pointing forward to Christ's redemptive work and the Lord's Supper pointing back to it. But just as clearly, there is a relationship between Circumcision and Baptism, and God's people have always recognised this relationship and still do, irrespective of which position they adopt with regard to baptism. Circumcision was the sign of the covenant, Gen 17: 11, Acts 7: 8; Rom 4: 11. The covenant in view is the covenant of grace that the Lord has made with His people; and since water baptism has replaced circumcision then baptism is the NT sign of the covenant. On these truths believers from both sides of the issue of the subjects of baptism agree. Thus, in essence this is why there is this relationship between circumcision and baptism – each is the sign of the covenant in its own era.

(b) **Moreover, note that the experience of which Paul speaks he essentially describes as spiritual circumcision and spiritual baptism.** The experience of which Paul speaks is *union with Christ*; and he refers to it in terms of its being a circumcision and a baptism but in a spiritual sense. In v.11 Paul refers to a spiritual circumcision, for he refers to "*the circumcision made without hands.*" There is no knife in this verse; it is not physical circumcision but spiritual, wrought by Christ Himself, indicated by the words "*the circumcision of Christ.*" Then, note in v.12 that Paul refers to a spiritual baptism. Again I state it as I did with other verses – there is actually no water in this verse, just as there is no knife in v.11. It is describing union with Christ denoted by the words "buried with Him..." and "risen with Him." Thus, in using the word *baptism* in this connection Paul is obviously referring to that spiritual baptism that unites a sinner with Christ and is symbolised by water baptism.

(c) **Thus, in these verses the Apostle is showing that both the OT rite of circumcision and the NT rite of baptism were symbolic of the new birth.** How vitally important this point is in any study of the OT rite of circumcision – it clearly had a spiritual significance in that it was a symbol of the new birth or regeneration just as baptism is. See Deut 10: 16 – note here how Moses speaks of circumcision with regard to its spiritual significance in that he urges upon Israel the circumcising of their hearts. There is something remarkable here in this setting. Deuteronomy was written after the 40 years wandering in the wilderness, during which the rite of physical circumcision had never been practised in Israel, see Josh 5: 5 & 7. But instead of urging on them obedience to the physical rite Moses urged on them their need for spiritual circumcision – that is, regeneration.

See also Deut 30: 4-6 – in these verses Moses gives a prophetic preview of times when Israel would be scattered because of sin but would be gathered again into their own land under God's blessing. But note in v.6 the terms that are used – terms that depict spiritual circumcision: the hearts of Israelites, parents & children both, being "circumcised" – i.e. essentially experiencing the new birth. See Ezekiel 36: 26-27 – here is the same experience; the new birth. But note v.25 – it is depicted under the symbolism of baptism!

(d) **In this connection between OT circumcision and NT baptism the focus is on Christ Himself as the Saviour.** As noted already in Col 2: 11 & 12 our union with Christ is clearly in view, the language signifying that both OT circumcision & NT baptism symbolise this union with Him as Saviour. Consequently, we would expect to find the focus on Christ as Saviour in the OT Scriptures that record the institution of circumcision – and we do.

The institution of circumcision is recorded in Gen 17 where God told Abraham that circumcision was “*a token of the covenant.*” In the Gen 17 setting, circumcision was given as a token of the covenant with respect to Abraham’s promised seed, not only Isaac and his descendants but someone far greater – Christ Himself. Dr. Robert Candlish, minister of the Free Church of Scotland in the 19th century had this to say about Gen 17: “*Circumcision pointed to the future birth of Christ – His assumption of our nature, pure and perfect. That birth being accomplished, the propriety of circumcision as a sacrament ceases. Any corresponding rite now must be not prospective but retrospective...Such a rite accordingly is baptism...Our baptism signifies our ingrafting into Christ, as not merely born, but buried and risen again. Abraham and the faithful of old were circumcised into His birth, the redemption being yet future; we are baptised into His death, the redemption being now past.*” Thus, circumcision pointed forward to Christ’s coming to accomplish redemption, while baptism points back to Christ’s having come so that redemption is complete. *It is this aspect of the two ordinances that is most important with regard to the relationship between them – both point to the accomplishment of redemption by Christ.*

II. SECOND, THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CIRCUMCISION AND BAPTISM DETERMINES WHO SHOULD BE BAPTISED

Since circumcision in the OT era was the sign of the covenant and baptism in the NT era is the sign of the covenant, then baptism should only be administered to those within the visible company of the covenant people of God. That is the basic premise on this issue of the subjects of baptism, seen in part 1 of the answer to Q.95 in the Shorter Catechism. Again there would be agreement on this point by all believers who espouse the Reformed & Biblical position on salvation. But then there arises the question of whether baptism should be limited to those who have made a conscious profession of faith in Christ or is it also to be applied to the children of believers. Thus, there are essentially two positions with respect to the subjects of baptism:

(a) **There is the position generally known as Believers’ Baptism** – this is the position that baptism should be administered only to those who have professed faith in Christ, basing this belief on those many NT Scriptures where examples are clearly in view. John the Baptist, the Lord’s disciples, the Apostles after Pentecost – all of them administered baptism on the basis of a profession of faith & repentance from sin. Thus, on the basis of their example and the statements of Scripture in a variety of passages the position of believer’s baptism is held.

(b) **Then there is the position known as Paedobaptism** – this word is what might be called the technical term for the baptism of children, the first part of the word coming from the Greek word for child. Based on this matter of the connection between the symbols of circumcision and baptism, paedobaptism is the position that baptism should also be administered to the children of believing parents. Since circumcision was administered to OT believers and their seed, and since baptism has replaced circumcision, then baptism should be administered to NT believers and their seed. Paedobaptist brethren also believe in the baptism of adults in the case of the conversion of the heathen in adulthood, see Rom 4: 11 – which shows that Abraham received the sign of the covenant after he was justified. But thereafter the sign was administered to his Isaac as a child.

Paedobaptism also places much emphasis, and rightly so, on the promises that God has given to believers about their children. In actual fact, those who hold the position of believers’ baptism also recognise that there is something special about the children of believers, as is seen in the practice of child dedication. Bring the child before the congregation; confess their faith; vow to bring up the child in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Why? Because they know & believe that the Lord has given promises to His people about their children.

See Gen 33: 5; Psalms 127: 3; Isaiah 8: 18; 44: 3; 54: 13; Luke 18: 15, 16; Acts 2: 39 – the covenant promise is what is in view; 1 Cor 7: 13 & 14 – important verses with respect to the family unit & the position of children. Paul teaches that even if there is only one parent saved the children are “holy” – not in the internal sense but in the sense of the spiritual benefits & privileges under which they are born, placed & reared; which the children of the ungodly do not have. The children of believers are part of the visible church. And it is in view of this Biblical teaching that some of God’s people believe that the NT sign of the covenant, i.e. the ordinance of baptism should be administered to their children since they are born into the visible company of the covenant people of God -- thus the paedobaptist position is not the same as Rome’s heresy of baptismal regeneration.

Thus, these are the two positions on the question of who should be baptised. The positions are different obviously and debate on them continues. Consequently, our own denomination from its inception has adopted the policy that liberty of conscience should be granted to each communicant member with respect to the subjects of baptism as well as the mode. As was noted last week, our church’s policy on baptism as a whole is to promote and maintain Christian charity and unity and not have baptism become a matter of rancorous debate and division. With that policy and its objective I as your minister am in full agreement. I believe it to be both wise and fair, allowing our members the freedom to hold to their particular positions on these issues concerning baptism; thus creating a framework where controversy is avoided so that we can get on with the work of God. In keeping with our policy, communicant members are not only free to form & hold their particular position on the subjects of baptism but they must also respect the right of their brethren & sisters to do likewise.