

*Buried with Him in Baptism:*¹ Colossians 2:11-14
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We're taking a few weeks to ponder the ordinances which Christ has given to His church: baptism and the Lord's Supper. Our passage last week was Romans 6:1-4, and we saw there the profound meaning that baptism portrays. Being immersed in water symbolizes burial in the tomb. It symbolizes our death with Christ, our death to sin. And then coming up out of the water symbolizes being raised to walk in newness of life. This is the profound drama of baptism. There's nothing magical about the water. There's nothing about baptism, in and of itself, which saves. But, like a wedding ring, it is a powerful picture and symbol of an inner reality. It portrays our death to sin and our new life in Christ.

I also made the point last week that immersion is the proper mode of baptism. The word *baptizō* means immerse. It doesn't mean sprinkle or pour. Also, the baptisms we see in the New Testament seem to indicate pretty clearly that it was always by immersion. They went down into the water. They came up out of the water. And then what we saw in Romans 6 is that immersion best captures the significance of baptism. Sprinkling and pouring may symbolize purification and the washing away of our sins which happens in salvation, but the emphasis given to baptism both in Romans 6 and in Colossians 2 is our death and resurrection with Christ. And immersion in water captures that symbolism.

This morning I want to turn to the question of who should be baptized? Who are the proper subjects of baptism? Should infants be baptized, or should we baptize only those individuals who are old enough to understand the Gospel and come to saving faith? My aim in this sermon is to show you that the biblical teaching is believer's baptism, not infant baptism.

As we discuss the position of infant baptism, also known as paedobaptism (from the Greek word for child), we need to distinguish between two very different ideas of infant baptism. The first is the view of the Roman Catholic Church, which views baptism as something that actually conveys grace in and of itself. They teach that baptism itself brings about regeneration. The Latin phrase that is used is "ex opera operato" which means "by work performed." What they mean is that the act of baptism itself, the sacrament, saves. Baptism regenerates. And it does this regardless

¹ For many of the points made in this sermon, and for further discussion of these issues, see Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 966-987. Also the volume *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas Schreiner and Shawn Wright, especially the chapter by Stephen Wellum entitled "Baptism and the Relationship between the Covenants."

of the condition of the person's heart. It doesn't matter if there's faith in the person's heart, the sacrament will convey grace. This is a deeply flawed belief, and it is contrary to the Gospel. Salvation is by faith alone. Outward actions or rituals cannot save. What matters is the heart. God must change the heart, and grant saving faith, and only then will baptism have its proper significance as a symbol of what has happened in the person's heart.

Last week I pointed out how Romans 6:4 can be taken to mean that baptism saves. It says, "We were buried therefore with him *by baptism* into death . . ." But Paul is clear that our salvation comes by faith, and therefore we have to understand Romans 6:4 in a symbolic way, like the wedding ring. Baptism is a symbol of our salvation.

Another passage that comes into the discussion is 1 Peter 3:21, which says, "Baptism, which corresponds to this, *now saves you*, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ . . ." On the surface that may seem to support the idea that baptism itself saves. But if you look at what Peter is saying here, it becomes clear that he is using the word baptism to refer to the reality that baptism represents, just like Paul in Romans 6. Peter signals this by saying, "Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, *not* as a removal of dirt from the body [in other words, *not* the physical immersion in water] but as an appeal to God for a good conscience [in other words, repentance and faith], through the resurrection of Jesus Christ . . ."

Wayne Grudem paraphrases the verse in this way, "Baptism now saves you—not the outward physical ceremony of baptism but the inward spiritual reality which baptism represents." What we're seeing here is how the sign of baptism in the New Testament is sometimes so closely tied to the reality that it represents, that the wording can almost sound like baptism itself saves. When in reality, we are saved only by faith, and then baptism is an outward sign of that.

The New Testament does not support the idea that baptism saves. Faith alone saves. There isn't anything we can *do* to be saved. There aren't any rituals or deeds that a person can do that will result in forgiveness. God is the One who works. He is the One who has acted on behalf of His people. He sent His Son to die for us, and our response is to trust in Him. God designed it this way so that He gets all the glory for saving sinners. We don't get any glory, because we don't do any of the work. We get the benefit of forgiveness and the delight of being with Christ forever in heaven. But we don't get any of the credit. This is the beauty of the Gospel and how God has ordained to save sinners.

Therefore the view that adds baptism as an instrument by which we are saved is not just a minor exegetical error. It undermines the very essence of the Gospel. Because it is no longer faith alone by which we are saved, but faith plus works. And thus it is like the false teachers in Galatia who added circumcision as a requirement for salvation. And Paul called that “a different gospel.”

So I want to be very clear in distinguishing that view of infant baptism from the Protestant view of infant baptism. There are many Protestant denominations who teach and practice infant baptism, but they do *not* believe that baptism saves. And now we’re talking about people who, in many cases, are very similar to us theologically. In fact, in the Reformed tradition, most of our heroes in the faith who exalted God’s sovereignty in all things and loved the doctrines of grace, were paedobaptists. So I want you to understand this issue in its proper context. Within the body of Christ, and even among those who closely identify themselves with the Reformed tradition, there is an honest disagreement between the position of infant baptism and the position of believer’s baptism. And we have many like-minded brothers and sisters in the faith who disagree with us on this particular issue. Our disagreements over baptism should not diminish our love for one another or keep us from cooperating in Gospel efforts. We must still realize, though, that this is an important issue, and our understanding of baptism is tied together with other issues which affect how we view the church. So there’s an interesting tension here. We can have a unity around the Gospel in spite of our different views on baptism, but that doesn’t mean that one’s view of baptism is unimportant. It is very important, and there are significant ramifications, as we’ll see.

Let me say again that the view I’m going to interact with now is the Protestant view of infant baptism—the practice of baptizing infants, but acknowledging that baptism does *not* save. So throughout the rest of the sermon when I refer to infant baptism or paedobaptism, I’m referring to the Protestant position on this.

On one level, the debate between infant baptism and believer’s baptism deals with the specific instances of baptism that we see in the New Testament. On the side of believer’s baptism, we can point to Acts 2:41, following Peter’s sermon at Pentecost, where it says, “So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.” Just a few verses earlier Peter said, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” We see there that those who were baptized were those who received the message. They believed, and *then* they were baptized.

Also in Acts 8 Philip was preaching in Samaria, and verse 12 says, “when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip.” Again, those who believed were baptized. This is the New Testament pattern: a person believes in Christ, and then is baptized.

Paedobaptists, on the other hand, would respond to those passages by saying that they’re examples of first generation believers. As the Gospel first went forth these individuals obviously didn’t have parents who were believers. They were hearing the Gospel for the first time, and they believed and were baptized. The infant baptism position would deny that this pattern applies to the following generations of believers. They would say that these passages are *descriptive* of what happened among the first generation of believers, but should not be taken as *prescriptive* for how the church should continue to practice baptism.

They would also point to the household baptisms in the New Testament. In Acts 16 Lydia is converted, and it says that she was baptized, “and her household as well.” Then later in that same chapter the Philippian jailer is converted, “and he was baptized at once, he and all his family.” Then in 1 Cor 1:16 Paul says, “I did baptize also the household of Stephanas.” And the assumption by those who hold to infant baptism is that there must have been infants in these households. And so when it says the whole household was baptized, that must mean that the infants were baptized as well.

It’s a plausible argument. However, it by no means proves the case for paedobaptism. It’s not a very strong argument because it rests on the assumption that a reference to a household must mean it included infants. There’s no evidence that that was the case. And, in fact, there are some indications that it was *not* the case. With the Philippian jailer, Paul and Silas “spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.” Then, after the jailer and all his family were baptized, the text says, “he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.” An argument could be made that since the entire household heard the word of the Lord, and the entire household rejoiced together, it seems that every person in the household individually came to faith in Christ.

In reference to the household of Stephanas, at the end of 1 Corinthians Paul tells his readers, “you know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints.” Again, the household baptism seems to be accompanied by household conversion and household Christian service. There’s no evidence

that these household baptisms included the baptism of individuals who had not yet come to faith. In the end, the household baptisms do not give clear support for one position or the other.

So on one level the debate can go back and forth over these examples of baptism in the New Testament. But the divide between the two positions is much deeper than this. It's much deeper than simply looking at the way baptism was practiced in the New Testament and seeking to emulate that. The issue has to do with the relationship between the Old Testament people of God and the New Testament people of God. The paedobaptist position is built on the understanding that there is a great deal of continuity between two. The people of Israel in the Old Testament, and God's covenant with them, is very similar to the new covenant people of God, they would say. Israel is very much like the church.

For Israel, the covenant sign was circumcision. Circumcision was administered to infant boys when they were 8 days old. God made a covenant with Abraham, and then He instructed Abraham to be circumcised, and to circumcise everyone in his household (Genesis 17). And it continued on that way throughout the Old Testament. Every male child was circumcised, if they were born into the covenant community.

In the church circumcision is no longer the covenant sign, and it has been replaced by baptism. And the paedobaptist position says that it should be administered to the children of believing parents just like circumcision in the Old Testament was administered to the children of those who were part of the covenant community. This is the logic of paedobaptism, and it rests on the assumption that there is much continuity between Israel and the church.

Now let me explain how this affects our understanding of the church. The people of God in the Old Testament was a mixed people. There was always a remnant of those who trusted in the Lord, but there were also the reprobate who remained hard-hearted. They were part of the covenant community, but they were not believers. They had no true faith in God, even though they were part of the nation of Israel.

The people of God in the Old Testament was a mixture of believers and unbelievers. There were those who truly trusted in the One true God, and then there were those who were just part of the nation because of their physical lineage. They were born into it. Romans 9:6 shows the difference between Israel and Israel, where Paul writes, "not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel." There was always a distinction between the physical nation of Israel, and the spiritual remnant within Israel.

Paedobaptists believe that this characteristic of the people of God in the Old Testament is also true of the people of God today. The people of God today is still a mixed group. There are those who are believers, but then there are also the children of believers who are not yet converted but are still rightfully considered part of the covenant community. In the Old Testament every infant born into the covenant community received circumcision as the sign of being part of God's people. Today, every infant born into the church should be baptized as the sign of being part of God's people.

In response to this view we must realize that while there are similarities between the people of God in the Old Testament and the people of God in the New Testament, there are also some significant differences. And one of the key differences is that the new covenant people of God is *not* a mixed group. Listen to what the Bible says about the new covenant, in Jeremiah 31:31-34.

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

Notice that in verse 34 it says “they shall *all* know me, from the least of them to the greatest.” Under the new covenant the people of God is no longer a mixed group of believers and unbelievers. Rather, the church is defined by those who are regenerate. It's not a mixed covenant community. It is the community of the redeemed. And this is an extremely important difference between the old and the new, and a reason why babies should not be baptized.

The way a person became part of the covenant community in the Old Testament was by being born physically into that community. But the way a person becomes part of the church of Jesus Christ is by being born again. It's not physical or external, but it's spiritual and internal.

This brings us, finally, to our passage in Colossians 2. What makes these verses so significant is that there is definitely a connection between circumcision and baptism. Look at verses 11-12, “In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made

without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.”

Do you see the clear connection between circumcision and baptism? Circumcision in verse 11 and baptism in verse 12. In verse 11, “you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ . . .” Those last two phrases could be taken in a couple of different ways. Putting off the body of the flesh could refer to *our* death to sin—our death to the old self. In this case the circumcision of Christ would be Christ circumcising us in this spiritual sense. He cuts away our sinful flesh. And certain translations and paraphrases take it that way. It’s possible, though, that this is referring to Christ’s death, because the previous chapter refers to Christ’s “body of flesh” in connection with His death (Colossians 1:22). So it could be that the circumcision of Christ is a vivid way of describing His death on the cross, that His physical body was cut away.

Either way, whether the verse is describing the circumcision of our sinful flesh or the death of Christ, the first part of the verse is clear that we have been circumcised in some sense. And this circumcision has taken place “in him,” that is, in Christ. Notice how this circumcision is described. It is “a circumcision made without hands.” This is not physical circumcision. This is not cutting the foreskin of 8 day old male infants. That was a circumcision made *with* hands. But Paul is writing about something different here—a circumcision made *without* hands. He’s writing about spiritual circumcision. This is circumcision of the heart, which is what physical circumcision pointed to. In this verse the mention of circumcision is an illustration of what happens in a person’s heart when he or she is converted. It’s circumcision of the heart, which is mentioned in the Old Testament in Deuteronomy 10 and 30 and Jeremiah 4, and Paul also refers to it in Romans 2:29. Circumcision of the heart points to the truth that God regenerates us. He cuts away the old heart, and gives us a new heart.

This is important for the discussion of baptism because the connection between circumcision and baptism in Colossians 2 is *not* a connection between *physical* circumcision and baptism. The connection is between *spiritual* circumcision and baptism. Therefore, the point is not that baptism in the new covenant replaces physical circumcision in the old covenant. That’s what paedobaptists would argue. But this verse is talking about a circumcision made without hands, and therefore the parallel is

between *spiritual* circumcision and baptism. The point is that baptism is the outward symbol of heart circumcision.

Look at the wording of verse 12, “having been buried with him in baptism, in which [that is, in baptism] you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.” This is very similar to what we saw last week in Romans 6, except here Paul says explicitly that it is *through faith*. The great symbolism of immersion in water is that we are buried with Christ and raised with Christ. And it is through faith that we are united to Christ in this way.

So who are the proper subjects of baptism? Those who have put their faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sin, and have been united to Christ, who have died to sin and been raised to walk in newness of life, those who have undergone spiritual circumcision. Believers should be baptized.

I want to close by looking at verses 13-14. This is an amazing passage, and verses 13-14 explain further the things that have happened to bring us into union with Christ. We were dead in our trespasses and the uncircumcision of our flesh. We were completely dead. We had hard hearts that were not inclined toward God in the least. We were completely under the dominion of sin—slaves to unrighteousness. But look at what happened. Look at what God did! He made us alive together with Christ. That’s the sovereign power of God Almighty. He raises people from the dead. He takes hard hearted sinners who are running from Him, rebelling against Him, who are prideful to think they don’t need Him, and He gives them spiritual life. He forgives us all our trespasses (at the end of verse 13). That is a glorious thing! Whatever sins you have committed, if you are in Christ then you are forgiven. What wonderful news this is. And if we don’t see it as wonderful then we don’t grasp the gravity of what had to happen in order to accomplish this forgiveness. Verse 14 tells us how this happened. He has forgiven us all our trespasses, “by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.” You see, there’s a great debt which stands against us because of our sin. But God took that debt and erased it by nailing it to the cross. Someone had to pay the debt, and Jesus Christ has done it. He took our debt upon Himself so that we can be forgiven. Krishna Pal was the first convert in India as a result of William Carey’s work there. And he wrote a hymn in Bengali, which was later translated into English. These lines are a beautiful expression of how Jesus paid our debt.

O thou, my soul, forget no more
The Friend Who all thy misery bore;
Let every idol be forgot,
But, O my soul, forget Him not.

Jesus for thou a body takes,
Thy guilt assumes, thy fetters breaks,
Discharging all thy dreadful debt;
And canst thou e'er such love forget?