

## From Circumcision to Baptism

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When we think of the biblical topics and theological issues that are most relevant to the Christian life and the modern church, the Old Testament practice of circumcision probably does not even make the list. It may seem to us irrelevant at best, or perhaps even ominous, as we hear Paul say that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing, and you will become a debtor to keep the whole law (Gal. 5:2-3). But the same apostle thought it vital, in Romans 4, to explain the meaning of Abraham's circumcision to us, saying that it was "a seal of the righteousness of faith," to the end that Abraham might become "the father of all who believe." While the practice of circumcision has expired under the New Covenant, the significance of it has everything to do with our identity as children of Abraham who are reckoned as righteous in the eyes of God through faith. This essay will explore the significance of circumcision, how it anticipates and prefigures the work of Christ, and how it was given as a means of grace in a similar way to the sacrament of baptism.

### Circumcision as a Sign

When God commands Abraham and his seed to be circumcised in Genesis 17, there is no explanation of why, or what it means. Calvin believed it symbolized the pruning away of the corrupt nature of man,<sup>1</sup> and Meredith Kline's influential opinion was that it was a judicial symbol of the death of the old man, dying to the dominion of sin.<sup>2</sup> These views are predominant and certainly not without merit, but if we look more closely at the biblical-theological context of antecedent Scripture, we can perhaps answer the question in a different way—in a way that directly foreshadows the work of Christ.

The biblical-theological solution begins in Genesis 3:15, where, in response to the fall of man into sin, God says to the serpent, "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel" (NKJV). The promise is of a single male descendant, or "seed" (referred to by the singular pronoun "he"), who would come to rectify the problem of sin and crush the head of the tempter. "The Seed of the woman" is a curious phrase, since women do not have seed. It seems to indicate that this promised one would come through a natural human line of descent and be born of a woman, but that his birth would not be by ordinary generation (i.e., not by the seed of the man).

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<sup>1</sup> "For the Jews, circumcision was the symbol by which they were admonished that whatever comes forth from man's seed, that is, the whole nature of mankind, is corrupt and needs pruning." John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 4.14.21, 1297.

<sup>2</sup> Meredith Kline, *By Oath Consigned* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 46-49.

As a sign of this promise, God replaced the fig leaves, with which Adam and Eve tried to cover their nakedness, with tunics of skin, symbolizing God's provision of that which they could not provide for themselves. The symbolism is that of atonement, the idea of which is contained in the Hebrew verb כָּפַר, which means "to cover." This symbolic covering of our first parent's sin and shame required the shedding of blood by the death of an animal to provide the tunics of skin. Thus, the first example of animal sacrifice, provided by God Himself, can be seen as a sign of the promise of the Seed of the woman who would likewise be bruised and also bloodied in His work to provide the covering of atonement.

From Genesis 3 onward, every reiteration and expression of the Covenant of Grace to the patriarchs includes the promise of the seed. The term "seed," or זָרַע in Hebrew, is used 48 times in Genesis to refer to descendants. As a collective singular noun, it sometimes refers to many descendants of promise, while other times it clearly refers to the one who would fulfill the promise. Together with its genealogies and its narratives that focus on a single branch in an ever-widening family tree, Genesis becomes the story of the promised seed, which was a genealogical line of many through which a promised one would come.

In Genesis 12 the promise of the seed was passed to and through Abraham, who obeyed God's call to leave his country and to go to a land that God would show him. But it is not until Genesis 15 that we find that critical point at which we are told, "Abraham believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness." Surely Abraham believed God enough to obey Him a few chapters earlier, so why do we find this all-important affirmation of righteousness imputed by faith in Genesis 15:6? The context tells us everything. In the previous verse, God brings Abraham outside and says, "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them. So shall your *seed* be." Then we are told, "He believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness." Abraham's justification by faith is explicitly tied to the promise of the seed, the ultimate object of which is Christ. It is noteworthy, too, that Genesis 15:6 does not say that Abraham trusted God's word or believed God's promise; it says, "He believed *in the LORD*, and He accounted it to him for righteousness." Abraham believing the promise of the seed, and believing *in the LORD*, are presented to us as one and the same, because it is the LORD Himself who would come to fulfill the promise.

It is in this context that God commands the covenant sign of circumcision in Genesis 17, which begins by repeating the promise of the seed. We can see how the nature of the sign relates to the all-important promise of the seed, since circumcision is applied to the very place where the seed issues forth.<sup>3</sup> As a covenant sign that draws blood when applied, circumcision also reflects the promise of Genesis 3 that the seed would suffer violence. This sign signifies the reality that the seed would be bruised. It is noteworthy, too, that unlike other signs of the covenant, this one was not meant to be seen. A man's circumcision would remain covered of course, which perhaps reflects the symbolism of atonement seen in Genesis 3, or more likely, it reflects the fact that the promised seed remained hidden, as yet unrevealed in the types and shadows of the Old Covenant. The promised seed, bruised by the serpent, would not be revealed to the world until our savior went to his cross. Thus, it was fitting that the sign of circumcision was a hidden sign, as God's people awaited the advent of the promised seed.

Abraham was a grown man exercising faith when God commanded him to be circumcised. Therefore, the sign of circumcision became a seal of the righteousness imputed to him by faith in the promised seed (Genesis 15). But receiving the sign as an adult would be the exception; God

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<sup>3</sup> Karl Deenick, *Righteous by Promise*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 5 (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2018), 49.

commanded that Abraham's children be circumcised on the eighth day after birth, which decisively demonstrates that the sign signifies a sovereign promise of God rather than anything arising from the will of man. The subsequent circumcision of Ishmael and Esau shows that the sign does not guarantee the application of the promise.

On the other hand, women are excluded from the sign, but not the promise, which demonstrates that the blessing is not dependent on the sign. But the matriarchs and the women of the covenant would receive their own sign by bearing the promised seed, which is indicated, in part, by the naming of Eve and the renaming of Sarah. Immediately after the seed promise in Genesis 3, Eve was given her name because she would be the mother of all living. Likewise, in Genesis 17, immediately after God commanded circumcision, Sarah was given her name because, we are told, she would be a mother of nations. What is envisioned is their blessing of bearing the seed of promise which would lead to Christ? Because the line of Christ would go through them, they would be, in a very real way, "saved through childbearing," to borrow a phrase from Paul. But that blessing would have its cost. It is noteworthy that, right after the promise of the seed in Genesis 3:15, the very next verse announces the pain the woman will feel in childbirth. The seed would come as promised, but not without travail and the shedding of blood. Circumcision signifies this very same reality as a sign of the promise.

Thus, circumcision was a sign of the *protoevangelium* in Genesis 3:15. It was the promise of a line of many through which a promised one would come, one who was hidden but would be revealed, one who would be bruised, but be triumphant. Circumcision was the sign that God had not forgotten this promise. It reminded each generation of God's people in the Old Covenant that the promise of the seed was still coursing through history.

### **Circumcision as a Seal**

Paul says in Romans 4 that Abraham's circumcision was "a seal of the righteousness of faith" which he had while still uncircumcised. Abraham's faith in the promised seed is narrated in Genesis 15, *before* he was circumcised in Genesis 17. In Abraham's experience, the sign was given to him as a seal of the spiritual reality already within him by grace, and it was by grace through faith that he received the promise, not by the mere outward act of circumcision. One can have the sign without the reality of the blessing, and one can have the reality of the blessing without the sign, but the ideal, of course, is to have both the sign and the reality.

In Abraham's experience, the reality of conscious, saving faith came before the sign circumcision, and circumcision became a seal of the grace already given and the faith already exhibited. But Abraham was an exception; the vast majority of those who received the sign were circumcised on the eighth day, at a point in life when they did not understand and could not express the saving faith circumcision was meant to seal. In other words, the sign was almost always given before it became a "seal of the righteousness of faith," if it did indeed become such. This understanding opens up a whole different view into the purpose of circumcision. Only in Abraham did circumcision seal the reality of saving faith already present; for all those born into the covenant after him, it functioned as God's appeal to embrace the same faith that Abraham had in the promised seed. Circumcision was a gospel call of sorts; a bodily sign meant to operate in the conscience, calling everyone who was circumcised to walk in the faith of their father Abraham. This explains why, outside of the book of Genesis, circumcision is almost always spoken of as something to be applied to the heart, as a metaphor for saving faith.

God said in Deuteronomy 10:16, "Circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer." The imagery of circumcision applied to the heart is a call to humble, repentant faith. With

the imagery of circumcision, God was calling his people to embrace the reality that the sign was meant to seal. He calls them, on the basis of their circumcision, to live up to its meaning by walking in faith. At the same time, circumcision of the heart is seen as a sovereign act of God. Moses said in Deuteronomy 30:6, “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.” Putting these two verses together, saving faith becomes both a command and a promise; a command they were called to do, but a promise that only God could give. This gospel call for them to believe, and the sovereign work of God bestowing saving faith, is all cast in the imagery of the seed promise, symbolized in circumcision, and finally fulfilled in Christ.

It is noteworthy, too, that Moses’ audience in Deuteronomy was the uncircumcised generation born in the wilderness, who were not circumcised in the flesh until Joshua chapter 5, *after* they entered the promised land. The generation before them, who were notoriously unfaithful and died in the wilderness, had been circumcised in the flesh. These two generations of Israel demonstrate that one could have the sign without the reality of saving faith, and one could have the reality of saving faith without the sign, but the physical sign of circumcision itself always stood as an outward calling to embrace the inward reality, which is true faith in God and the promised seed. In other words, circumcision was a sign meant not so much to modify an organ of the body as it was to work upon the conscience. Circumcision was something to be responded to, and improved upon, by a sincere and growing faith.<sup>4</sup>

To summarize this overview, circumcision was a sign of the seed of promise, which was always at the heart of the gospel since Genesis 3:15. It was further meant to be a seal of true faith in the God who made that promise and in the Seed that He promised to send. Receiving this sign was normative as an infant, thus, the sign functioned as a call to embrace and nurture the saving faith it was meant to seal, as in the case of Abraham.

### **Baptism**

Turning to the New Testament, many texts are possible to examine. However, one text highlights the transition between circumcision and baptism, and another highlights a point of continuity between them. The first text is Colossians 2:11-14:

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. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having 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.

In this passage Paul says that we have been circumcised in Christ, not outwardly, but according to the true meaning of circumcision, a circumcision made without hands. Those in Christ are said to be circumcised “in Him,” that is, through His experience the true meaning of circumcision is sealed for all those who believe. Paul explains how this has taken place with two parallel prepositional phrases that focus on the substitutionary death of Christ. The first is, “by putting off the body of flesh.” This phrase is found within Paul’s unfolding emphasis on the physical incarnation of Christ and His bodily death. In the previous chapter Paul had said in verses 21 and 22 that “He has reconciled us in the body of His flesh through death.” When we come to this very

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<sup>4</sup> Deenick, *Righteous by Promise*, 95-96.

similar phrase in Colossians 2:11, clearly “putting off of the body of flesh” is a reference to the bodily death of Christ on the cross on our behalf. The second parallel phrase is, “by the circumcision of Christ,” which expands on the previous phrase, and is again a reference to Christ’s bodily death on the cross. Paul confirms this fact by immediately going from there to the sequence of Christ’s burial and resurrection.

Why use circumcision language at all to describe the death of Christ? As seen from the Old Testament, circumcision was a sign of the promised seed who would suffer violence. Everything that circumcision pointed to came to full display on the cross of Christ. The line of promise had been preserved for many centuries, and the seed of the woman then suffered the bruise of the serpent. The hidden sign of circumcision finally came to its reality and was displayed for the world to see, as our Savior put off the body of his flesh for us. At that moment, the sign of circumcision went from being hidden to fully revealed, and it did not pass away; instead, it was kept once and for all, so we are all truly circumcised in Him. As Paul says succinctly in Philippians 3:3, “we are the circumcision.”

In Colossians 2, Paul ends his circumcision imagery with the death of Christ because in His death the sign of circumcision was kept and fulfilled, once and for all. Immediately his imagery changes to baptism at the moment he begins to speak about the New Covenant realities of being buried with Him, raised up with Him, and made alive together with Him. Baptism symbolizes unity with Christ—being “in Him,” in the new life that the Father granted Him. The prophets foresaw the imagery of being cleansed with water as a sign of this new life affected by the Holy Spirit. Speaking of the New Covenant, God said in Ezekiel 36:25-27,

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. 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.

In John chapter 3, Nicodemus missed this connection in Ezekiel between water, new life, and the work of the Spirit. As our Savior pointed out, this imagery should not have been lost on a teacher of Israel. Ezekiel escalates the imagery of circumcision. God does not say that He will circumcise their hearts; He says that He will sprinkle water on them and give them entirely new hearts. In Colossians 2, Paul connects the same imagery and sees it fulfilled with baptism being a sign of new life in union with Christ. He juxtaposes circumcision and baptism at the very point at which his narration of our union with Christ transitions from His death to His new life. So, circumcision was a sign of the anticipated death of Christ and a seal of true faith for all who believed in that seed who was promised. Baptism is a sign of the new life given to Christ and all who are in Him, and a seal of that new life to those who truly believe. Circumcision anticipated His death while baptism signifies new life, but both signs point to the work of Christ.

Regarding how God has used these signs as a means of Grace in people’s lives, circumcision and baptism are, in one way, more alike than different. The signs of the covenant are intended to make the gospel call personal and passionate; they are a constant reminder of who we are and who we are called to be. As noted above, in the Old Covenant, the sign of circumcision was most often given before the reality of faith ever came to expression, so the sign became a call to embrace the reality: to believe in the Lord and His word, and to walk with Him in faith (that is, to be circumcised in heart). Under the New Covenant, as the gospel is preached throughout the world, many will come to faith and then receive the sign of baptism as a seal of that faith.

But the covenant is still to believers and their children, as Peter made clear in Acts 2:39. When adults came to faith, their households were baptized in the book of Acts just as Abraham was commanded to circumcise his household. Our gracious God delights to work this way, through families, to build His church. So, many under the New Covenant have been and will be baptized as infants. As expected under the better things of the New Covenant, the sign is not now restricted to exclude the children of believers; it is instead expanded to include boys and girls born to believing parents.

In this connection we can think of another New Testament text, 1 Peter 3:21, where the apostle characterizes baptism as “the answer of a good conscience toward God.” While this has always been a difficult verse to interpret, and plenty of different views on what it means and how best to translate it exist, one simple conclusion can be drawn: that the outward sign of baptism was meant to operate upon the conscience of those who received it. Peter pictures a good conscience, inquiring after God, as a baptismal obligation. When covenant children are baptized, they are especially called to believe in Christ as their consciences develop, because the claim of Christ has already been placed on them through baptism. Just as the circumcised men of Israel were called by God to circumcise their hearts, covenant children today are called to be baptized in their conscience before God—to not merely trust in the outward sign of the sacrament, but to seek and nurture the reality of saving faith with a good conscience. This is the baptismal obligation of everyone who has received the sign, whether as an infant or an adult. But the point, once again, is that the sign is meant to operate upon the heart and mind through the work of the Holy Spirit, and this is one way in which it is called a “means of grace.”

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, amazingly since the time of Abraham to the end of this age, God has always appointed a sign of the covenant for His people and their children. The signs are not for His sake, but for ours. It is for our comfort and assurance to have the work of Christ and its blessings signified and sealed to us in such a visible way. But the signs of the covenant are also for our admonition, meant to work in a gracious way upon the conscience before God. Whether baptized as an infant or an adult, every believer should often and prayerfully reflect on his or her baptism, because it was not just a moment in the past, but a means of grace for life, and a lifelong calling to walk with the Lord in faith and with a good conscience.

J. G. Vos described baptism as “an obligation to progressive Christian experience and service.”<sup>5</sup> He went on to say, “We are born into this world only once, but we celebrate our birthday year after year throughout life; we are baptized only once, but are to remember our baptism and experience its meaning, and work out its implications, year after year throughout life.”<sup>6</sup> In the words of the Larger Catechism, our baptism is something to “improve,” that is, to respond to and act upon in our lives. The Catechism says that we improve our baptism, in part, “by drawing strength from the death and resurrection of Christ, into whom we were baptized, for the mortifying of sin, and the quickening of grace; and by endeavoring to live by faith, to have our conversation in holiness and righteousness, as those who have therein given up their names to Christ.”<sup>7</sup> Perhaps that last phrase is the best description of what our baptism means to us, and how we should apply it and improve upon it every day of our lives. We have given up our names to Christ. By being baptized into Him, it is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives in us.

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<sup>5</sup> Johannes G. Vos, *The Westminster Larger Catechism: A Commentary*, ed. G.I. Williamson (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2002), 480.

<sup>6</sup> Vos, *The Westminster Larger Catechism: A Commentary*, 480-481.

<sup>7</sup> Westminster Assembly, *Westminster Larger Catechism* (1647), Question 167.