

Sermon 26: Romans 4:9-12: Circumcision and Baptism

OUTLINE

Circumcision and justification by faith

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INTRODUCTION

'What if you die before you get baptised, will you still go to heaven?' I have heard this question many times. I remember when I encountered the International Church of Christ, which at the time believed that you could not get into heaven unless you entered into the Kingdom, in this instance it was their organization and that by baptism. My friend and I were young Christians who didn't know much had the wool pulled over our eyes. We asked them to be baptised immediately so that we could be saved, but they said, 'No, you first have to do the 12 Bible studies.' We asked, 'But what if we die before we are baptised?' The young man who had brought us to their bible studies said, 'We will pray that you do not die.' They believed that baptism was fundamental to salvation and that you could not be saved without it. In the early church we also see this same belief that baptism is somehow crucial to salvation. So when they were confronted with the martyrdom of their catechumens who were made to wait three years before their baptisms, they claimed that their martyr's death was a 'baptism in blood.' But of course the bible teaches us that we are saved by faith in Christ not by faith plus baptism. We have the example of the thief on the cross and even Paul's own words in 1 Cor. 1:17, 'For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power,' indicating to us that the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation not baptism.

It was this way of thinking that the Jew could not shake that Paul was addressing in Romans 4:9-12. The Jewish religious mind was hooked on the idea that you could not be saved apart from the nation of Israel, in part because of the covenant sign of circumcision. In these verses Paul moves on in his discussion of Abraham's justification by faith to address the issue of circumcision and the part that it played in Abraham's justification, and then draws out the implications in terms of the Gentiles. Our concern in this message is twofold. On the one hand we want to examine how Paul defends justification by faith and draw out the implication of the inclusion of the Gentiles in the family of faith. But secondly, we want to address the issue of circumcision and its relationship to baptism. Romans 4:11 is an important verse, for some the most important verse in establishing a theological basis for justifying the baptism of infants as covenant children.

Circumcision and justification by faith

Paul having established that righteousness is gifted to us apart from works, and our sins are not counted to us apart from works wants to shake any vestiges of the idea that circumcision is necessary to having rightstanding with God. V9 opens with a question that

would really put the whole issue forward in a forceful manner, 'Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised?' The blessing of sins forgiven, is it only for those who have also been circumcised, or is it also for those who have never been circumcised who have believed? Paul is forcing a choice on his hearers, and he tightens the knot with a further statement in v9 reminding them of the already established truth, 'We say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness.' Feel the force of this argument for a moment. Paul has proven that Abraham was justified by faith not by any works, that it was a gift not a wage. By asking the question about whether the uncircumcised can also be forgiven, one begins to sense that there is no way out of this except to say that the uncircumcised also receive forgiveness apart from works, even circumcision. Paul moves in for the kill in v10, 'How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after but before he was circumcised.' If Abraham was justified by faith without circumcision, then the Gentiles can also be saved by faith without circumcision. All of this argumentation was simply a case of answering the question, is salvation by faith alone or faith and circumcision? Once again Paul demonstrates that it is by faith alone.

You can almost hear the Jewish response, 'But if circumcision did not save Abraham what purpose does it serve why was Abraham circumcised?' Paul answers in 4:11, 'He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while uncircumcised.' Paul highlights for us that the purpose of circumcision was never to point to itself as something that saves us, but rather it is a sign/pointer that acts as a seal/authenticating mark of justification by faith while uncircumcised. In other words, the sign of the covenant of circumcision did not save Abraham but rather it is an authenticating/ratifying seal that Abraham was already saved by faith. It was the confirming seal of an already existing justification not the instrument by which he was justified. In drawing a quick parallel to baptism we would say that Abraham was baptised to show he was saved not as a means of saving him.

The second part of v11 would have been like a ton of bricks falling on the Jewish mindset, 'The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well.' Non-Jews righteous, uncircumcised calling Abraham father! This would have been astounding to the Jew, even the Gentiles proselytes who converted to Judaism and submitted to circumcision were not allowed to call Abraham 'father.' This was reserved for the physical Jew alone. But Paul continues to overturn the Jewish illusion in v12, 'and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.' Firstly, notice that Abraham was saying that those who are circumcised who do not live out an obedient faith are not children of Abraham leaving many Jews out of the family of faith and not entitled to call Abraham father. Secondly, notice that Paul is calling the circumcised Jews to imitate the faith of an uncircumcised man.

Although the primary purpose in making this point is to dismantle the Jewish views of salvation, Paul also applies this truth to undo prejudice in Gal. 3:28-9, 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in

Christ Jesus. 29 And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.' In application we could make the point that the age old distinctions between upper and lower classes do not exclude anyone from the family of God; that being a man or a woman does not exclude one from the family, slave or free, black or white, baptised or unbaptized, tea-totaller or alcohol consumer, if anyone has put their faith in Christ, they are a Christian, we cannot bar the way by adding something to the gospel that they have to do first.

Circumcision and baptism

We want to come now to the second issue, the issue of baptism. As you will know there are various views of baptism. We have the sacramental view of baptism which sees baptism as the instrumental cause of salvation. The Roman Catholic Church would hold to this view believing that baptism washes away original sin and fills the baby with grace with which they can cooperate with by faith and produce works of love which add to their justification. Luther too had the view that baptism saves in that the Word of God unites with the water and the baby is regenerated, God supplying faith as well. Luther was not able to totally disentangle himself from the Roman Catholic Church altogether. The other Reformers like Calvin and Zwingli also taught infant baptism but not in accordance with the RCC. Calvin for example taught that baptism did not forgive sins but was a promise given to the children that if they believed they would be forgiven. Although in the break away from Rome there arose various groups that rejected infant baptism—Anabaptists; the Reformers continued to practice it, one of the main pillars in their argument was that baptism replaces circumcision. So that just as the children of the Jews were circumcised and seen and treated as members of the covenant, so the children of believers should be baptized and seen as members of the visible church. Romans 4:11 is seen to be a pivotal verse in their argument in this regard: Since circumcision is a sign and seal of justifying faith in the case of Abraham, yet it was applied to unbelieving children in Israel; baptism which replaces circumcision should be applied in the same way. Although baptism represents spiritual realities that are not true of the child, just as the covenant sign was applied to unsaved children in the OT who did not have the reality, so it should be applied to believer's children in the NT. This argument you can see is not insipid or foolish, it is weighty and needs to be considered seriously.

Our response will be in 2 parts, we will show the wrong thinking in linking circumcision and baptism, and then we will state some of the teaching about baptism positively.

Firstly, the seal of the old covenant was circumcision, the seal in the NT is not baptism but circumcision of the heart of which baptism is an outward indicator. It is wrong to apply baptism like circumcision was applied because the seal is not baptism but regeneration in the NT. The application of the seal of the NT has been taken out of human hands and is applied by God Himself, Paul calls it a Spirit wrought circumcision in heart, Rom. 2:29, 'But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.' Or a circumcision made without hands. Col. 2:11, '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.' And so now if we analyse

the NT data on the question what is the seal of salvation in the NT, the answer that comes up over and over again is the Spirit not baptism. Baptism is nowhere called the seal of the New Covenant, but the Spirit is identified as the seal. This is indicated in several verses: Eph. 1:13, 'In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit.'

Eph. 4:30, 'And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.'

2 Cor. 1:21-2, 'And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, 22 and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.'

And how do we receive the Spirit, is it by baptism or by faith? We see the answer in Gal. 3:2-6, 'Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? 3 Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? 4 Did you suffer so many things in vain---if indeed it was in vain? 5 Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith--- 6 just as Abraham "believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"?' The conclusion is obvious, we do not apply baptism like circumcision was applied because baptism is not the replacement of circumcision, the seal of the Spirit is.

Secondly, the nature of the new covenant confirms that every member will be born again.

Heb 8:10-12, 'For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel

after those days, declares the Lord:

I will put my laws into their minds,

and write them on their hearts,

and I will be their God,

and they shall be my people.

11 And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor

and each one his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,'

for they shall all know me,

from the least of them to the greatest.

12 For I will be merciful toward their iniquities,

and I will remember their sins no more."

Here we see that in the New Covenant the covenant members will have the law written on their hearts, we will be taught by the Spirit, each one knowing God, and their sins will be forgiven. This is not true of every infant born to believing parents, this is true of those who have put their faith in Christ. And so in the OT you would be called a child of Abraham if you were not born again but merely descended from Abraham, but in the NT you are a child of Abraham if you have believed and have the Spirit (Gal 3:1-5, 25-29). Paul confirms that what matters is not external ceremonies but inward reality, Gal. 6:15, 'For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.' We only become part of the new creation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). It is only those who have the Holy Spirit who are the children of God, either you are adopted or not (Romans 8:9).

There is not one instance in the NT where you will find the mention of an infant being baptised. There is no clear command to elders, or Christian parents to baptise their babies,

in the book of Acts or the letters, where Paul, John, James, and Peter all deal with issues of Church order and practice. Nor will you find in the Gospels, in the ministry of John the Baptist or Jesus and His disciples the baptism of one infant. The practice to baptise infants is an argument from silence, they claim that in light of the OT practice of including infants in the covenant through circumcision that we should expect it to continue, and would need clear indication that baptism should not be applied to the children of believers/covenant children (a phrase not found in the NT). Before we look at the evidence for the biblical view of the baptism of disciples alone, let's look at the instance of the household baptisms to see if they support the view that infants, or disciples were baptised.

Firstly, Cornelius's household, is there any indication of who was baptised? I argue that those who were baptised were those who repented and believed, not infants. In Acts 10:2 (ESV) "a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God." We see that those of his household are described as God fearing, hardly a description given to infants. Next in Acts 10:33 (ESV) "So I sent for you at once, and you have been kind enough to come. Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord." Here we see Cornelius describing everyone who was present as, 'all here in the presence of God to hear', not exactly something required of infants. Next we see that the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard (10:44). And they spoke in tongues, and as a result were baptised (10:46-48). Those present would have included the two servants and attendant who went to initially go and get Peter (10:7), as well as other friends and relatives (10:24). There is no mention made of infants anywhere. Only those who heard, believed, received the Spirit, and were baptised as disciples.

Secondly, Lydia's household is mentioned as being baptised in Acts 16:15, let's look at the context and see if we can't see more about who was baptised. Firstly, Paul and Silas went to the ladies prayer meeting by the river (16:13). There Paul and Silas preached and one of the ladies Lydia believed (16:14). It appears that before she left home from the prayer meeting, she and her household were baptised (16:15). Then she invited Paul and Silas to her home. Once again there is no mention of children, only a household, who are they? Firstly, at the ladies prayer meeting all who were baptised were already present, this along with the fact that she invited these men into her home without any mention of a husband paints the picture of either a widow, or a single woman, with servants, cousins, sisters, etc making up her household. The picture of Lydia as an independent woman, who is at liberty to run her own business and attend prayer meetings hardly paints the picture of a breast feeding mother. If any argument could be put from the silence it should be that those who believed at the prayer meeting were baptised, in harmony with other household baptisms, and of disciples alone.

Thirdly, we have the household of the Philippian Jailer. In Acts 16:31 we read, "And they said, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.'" How is this possible, will a whole household be saved because the father is saved? Let's look at the text to see how it happened. Acts 16:32 (ESV) "And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house." Paul and Silas preached to them, they were not

saved by association, but by hearing and believing, and then as a result of that they were all baptised and rejoiced, Acts 16:33-34 "And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. [34] Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God." (ESV). They were saved not by being baptised because of another's faith, but by hearing and believing themselves.

Fourthly, the household of Stephanas is mentioned by Paul in 1 Cor. 1:16 (ESV) (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) However, Paul sheds light on why this household was baptised, 1 Cor. 16:15 (ESV) Now I urge you, brothers—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—" They were all converted and devoted, once again believer's baptism is assumed, not baby baptism.

So far the silence has yielded nothing for the infant Baptist view, only more evidence for the believer's Baptist view. This squares with what we find about baptism in the rest of the NT. As Baptists we believe that the Bible puts forward the teaching of a disciple's baptism not family baptism. If you look at the baptising ministry of John the Baptist, you will see that he called people to repent and be baptised, Mark 1:4 (ESV) "John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." There were no babies involved, as babies cannot repent. John 3:22 tells us that Jesus and His disciples had a baptising ministry as well, and we also know that He preached the same message of repentance (Mark 1:15). Both Jesus and John had a baptism of repentance. Then Jesus gave the great commission, Matthew 28:18-20 (ESV) "And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. [19] Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, [20] teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." What sort of a baptism is this? Is this a different one to John's, and Jesus baptism, a baptism of repentance, where babies were not baptised. Lets look at the book of Acts to answer, Acts 2:38 (ESV) "And Peter said to them, "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." It is the same, a baptism of repentance.

And if we turn to church history (which is often appealed to to prove the practice of infant baptism being handed down from the earliest days) to see how infant baptism was practiced we find that it is not mentioned in the earliest church manuals. Infant baptism is only mentioned in the 3rd century. Before this we have evidence which only points to the practice of believer's baptism. In the *Didache* a very early church manual which outlined some of the present practices in the 2nd Century we find various directions about using the Trinitarian formula when baptizing; the use of rivers being preferable to pools; immersion as the normal mode; pouring 3 times only being allowed if there was not enough water for immersion; fasting on the part of the one being baptised, yet no mention of infants, and no mention of a ceremony for infants. Another early document, Justin Martyr's *Apology* speaks

about those being baptised as those who are persuaded and repent, as those who choose and are illuminated, and those who fast and pray before their baptism, once again no mention of infants, only those who are believers. Aristides *Apology* is another 2nd Century document that is very interesting for it speaks about children and slaves becoming Christians and then being called brothers and sisters. We have no evidence of household baptisms where children are baptised on account of their parent's faith. In the 3rd century we have our first mention of infant baptism when Tertullian is arguing against the practice, and it is only here that we have our first indication of the practice, and even then it is not universally accepted. As the practice increased in popularity we see 2 reasons why it was adopted, firstly for the forgiveness of original sin, babies dying in infancy forcing the question upon the early church. And secondly, the view that baptism imparted grace that enabled the infant to grow up and live a holy life. Both of these reasons have no foundations in the Scriptures. So what we are seeing is the adoption of a practice for wrong reasons to save the child from sin and give it grace to live a good life.¹

What is baptism then? Baptism is the sign but it is not the seal of the New Covenant. It shows outwardly what God has done invisibly by His Son through the Spirit.

Firstly, it is a type of funeral which speaks to us of our dying and resurrection with Christ (Rom. 6:1-4). But not only do we get to attend our own funerals, it also pictures our resurrection from the dead with Christ. We see the old man going into the grave. We see our death penalty enacted in Christ's dying, our sins being fully paid for by what He has done in dying as our substitute; and then we see our new life and the promised glorified body pictured to us in the coming out of the water. The action of full immersion is to portray a death by drowning, that as Peter tells us that the flood waters of Noah and baptism hold a similar significance (1 Peter 3:18-22), immersion portrays judgement by drowning. Only those who have believed can claim this meaning for themselves and should go through the waters of baptism.

Secondly, it pictures a washing. Please appreciate that in bible times washing was not connected with squeegees, buffers, nail brushes, gels, soaps, body washes, conditioners, shampoos, bubble baths, bath salts, bath oils, etc. The main ingredient in washing was water (Acts 22:16).

Thirdly, it signifies being grafted into the body of Christ by the Holy Spirit, a mystical union by the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13). This means that baptism is a sign of joining the body and should not be done in private away from the family you are being initiated into. It is a public church ordinance.

Finally it portrays our receiving of the Spirit. Since our baptism speaks of a resurrection from the dead into the new creation of God, we also receive the Spirit of the New Creation of God who takes all that Christ has done in His resurrection and applies it to us.

¹ Steven A. Mckinion, *Baptism in the Patristic Writings, in Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner & Shawn D. Wright, (Nashville, Tennessee, B&H Academic:2006), p163-188.

There is much more that I would like to say but our time is up. Let me end by saying that justification is by faith apart from circumcision and even apart from baptism. You do not need to be baptized for salvation, however Jesus commanded us to be baptised and all true faith is an obedient faith. Many people are too embarrassed to be baptised, let me tell you about one bishop of Jerusalem who used to make the baptismal candidates go through their baptisms naked, because Christ was crucified naked. That is embarrassing, identifying yourself with Christ, and speaking about what He has done for you in the sign of baptism is a privilege. If you have been baptised as a baby we are not asking you to be rebaptised, but to be baptised for the first time your first baby baptism is not a biblical baptism and does not count. You did not have any of the realities symbolized by it and it was therefore a sham, no matter how sincerely your parents wanted the best for you.