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Colossians 2:11–12 and the Circumcision-Infant Baptism Analogy

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Most Baptists have heard of Reformed and Presbyterian churches who baptize babies, because “the practice of circumcision in the Old Testament (OT) is replaced by infant baptism in the New.” Verses cited in support of this analogy include Gen. 17:7–8; Gal. 3:9, 14; Col. 2:11–12; Acts 2:38–39; Rom. 4:11–12; 1 Cor. 7:14; Matt. 28:19; Mark 10:13–16; and Luke 18:15.¹ The challenge for those who use this analogy is that these passages either mention circumcision (Gen. 17:7–8; Rom. 4:11–12) or baptism (Acts 2:38–39; Matt. 28:19) or neither circumcision nor

baptism (Gal. 3:9, 14; 1 Cor. 7:14; Mark 10:13–16; and Luke 18:15). What is required for this analogy to work is a link between circumcision and baptism.

There is only one text in the Bible that mentions both. That passage is Col. 2:11–12. Is this the missing link that connects circumcision to baptism and therefore justifies infant baptism? Before addressing this, it remains of vital importance to understand that the analogy has always been and can only be between physical circumcision (involving a literal cutting of the

flesh) and water baptism. Those who use this analogy connect it to Abraham's participation in God's covenant with physical circumcision as the sign of this covenant (Gen. 17:1–16).

My purpose here is to demonstrate that Col. 2:11–12 makes a beautiful analogy between spiritual circumcision and water baptism. This understanding fits within the context of the passage and the New Testament (NT) understanding of baptism. In order to accomplish this, I will examine the nature of circumcision, the nature of baptism, and the context of the passage. Applications abound when the text speaks accurately.

The KJV says:

In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ:

Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead.

What seems obvious at once is the fact that Paul is not talking about normal circumcision as practiced in the OT. How could Abraham (or anyone else) perform a physical circumcision without using hands? However, the alternative view I am suggesting needs biblical corroboration. As a literal interpreter, I do not choose a "spiritual" understanding easily.² Is there an understanding anywhere in the OT or NT

of such an idea? There is, and it appears in both Testaments.

SPIRITUAL CIRCUMCISION
IN THE BIBLE

God spoke through Moses in the book of Deuteronomy some 700 years after the institution of physical circumcision to Abraham and his seed as a mark of their covenant relationship with God. Deut. 30:5–8 says that when they would come into the Promise Land, "the LORD thy God will circumcise thine heart... to love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul." This cannot be physical circumcision, since cutting away part of someone's heart would be fatal. What does it mean? Simply this: to be dedicated to the God who brought them there.

We can see this understanding in Deut. 10:15–17. God warned the people to "Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked." He loved them and chose them as His people. He wanted them pure and dedicated to Him. Lev. 26:40–42 also gives this caution with the same language.

Other OT writers wrote in this same tone. God spoke to Jeremiah pleading with the people to return to their God (Jer. 4:1–4). He asked them to repent and dedicate themselves using the same language as Moses did some 800 years earlier: "Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, and take away the foreskins of your heart, ye men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem." Israel's loving God warned them of the coming

wrath and wished them to avoid it. He wanted them pure and dedicated to Him.

Is this figurative language in Scripture completely distinguishable from physical circumcision? The reality is that there are passages that mention both spiritual and physical circumcision. Jer. 9:25–26 mentions God punishing His people and the Gentiles, both those “circumcised with the uncircumcised” (v.25). Then the prophet lists the nations who have offended God, including Judah in his list: “For all these nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in the heart” (v. 26). The Bible provides a distinction between physical and spiritual circumcision with the corresponding desire to see God’s people repent and be dedicated to God (v. 24). Ezek. 44 also mentions those “uncircumcised in heart, and uncircumcised in flesh” (v. 7, 9).

Spiritual circumcision in the OT is not limited to a symbol of the heart. This helps make the spiritual understanding of circumcision clear. God is weary of the people’s ignoring of His warnings to repent. Jer. 6:10–11 says their ears are uncircumcised. That is hard to picture in a literal way, but God wanted them to return and be dedicated to Him.

Is this spiritual circumcision solely found in the OT? Paul’s discussion in Rom. 2:27–29 gives an answer. There is a contrast mentioned regarding a Jewish person’s standing before

God. Someone can have the physical sign of covenant membership but not have the inward reality of a dedicated life to God, because “...circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God” (v.29). Stephen also mentioned spiritual circumcision (both “in heart and ears”) in his speech before his martyrdom (Acts 7:51).

THE NEW TESTAMENT UNDERSTANDING OF BAPTISM

Therefore, there is a precedent in the Bible (both OT & NT) for a spiritual understanding of circumcision. These passages speak of dedication, repentance, and purity. Col. 2:11–12 fits into this description of circumcision when we examine it closely. The text mentions “...putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ” (v. 11). Then comes the connection to baptism. The words of Col. 2:12 echo those in Rom. 6:4.

Christian baptism is an identification with Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection. Rom. 6 is in a context of why believers should not continue in sin though grace abounds (6:1–2). Part of the answer to that question is a discussion on the meaning of baptism. Because we have pledged ourselves to follow Christ and identify with His death, burial, and resurrection, it should make a difference in our lives. Our pledge is not for salvation,

but rather it is a commitment made before witnesses (note the examples of many baptisms in the book of Acts) that we intend to live for Him. If we have believingly done that, we should no longer continue in sin. We should forsake it and live in newness of life—a life of dedication.

Baptism pictures this burial and resurrection in order that we might live “in newness of life”—a committed, dedicated life. Col. 2:12 reminds us that the element of faith is vitally required. A believing person makes this commitment. That is not something infants can do,³ thereby prohibiting them from baptism. Baptists see several reasons for considering infant baptism to be unbiblical: the absence of clear NT examples and the absence from church history until the 3rd Century,⁴ among others. However, the most powerful reason of all is the fact that infant baptism destroys the biblical meaning of what baptism intends to picture:⁵ a public testimony of faith in Christ and a desire to live dedicated to Him.

THE CONTEXT OF COLOSSIANS 2:11–12

This passage on baptism is part of a context in which the call to dedication was paramount. The Colossian believers had been susceptible to harmful influences (“enticing words,” Col. 2:4). Paul rejoiced at their unwavering faithfulness (v. 5), and he encouraged them to keep their footing in Christ (v. 6–7). The real

concern was the danger of their seeking after worldly, deceitful philosophies that diminished Christ (v. 8). All that was unnecessary, because all believers are complete when they are rooted in Christ (v. 9–10). Christ is sufficient for our needs and worthy of our complete and ultimate dedication.

In the verses that are the focus of this article, Paul reminded these believers that they had at one time been “circumcised in Christ,” resulting in abandonment of sin (v. 11). In other words, they had lived dedicated lives to Christ, which they had pictured when they were publicly baptized. These believers centered their faith on what God accomplished when He raised Christ from the dead. That resurrection power could motivate Colossian believers in Paul’s day to continue the task of forsaking sin (Rom. 6:1–5).

APPLICATIONS:

How does the teaching of Col. 2:11–12 apply to us today?

1. **Are you saved?** What a joy it is to be rooted in Christ as the context of Col. 2:4–10 describes. Though there are many competing self-centered philosophies that appeal for our ultimate loyalty, you can know that Christ can truly satisfy your definitive need for the forgiveness of your sins.

2. **Are you baptized?** This is not a part of

salvation, but it is a public declaration of your intent to follow Christ in everything you do. Through baptism, we picture the fact that we are dead to sins and raised to live a new life (Rom. 6:1–4). Have you taken this natural step of obedience to declare your dedication before the world?

3. Do you understand how your baptism ought to affect your life today? Many people baptized as believers mistakenly assume that since baptism does not secure their salvation and since it happened a long time ago, it does not affect them now. Our

baptism is a great reminder to us today that we committed our lives to Christ, and that should motivate us to live for Him now (Rom. 6:1–5). This is not in regard to our salvation but to our sanctification. A saved person who consciously made the decision to be baptized in front of others ought to use that motivation to abstain from sin (Rom. 6:1–2; Col. 2:11–12).

Rather than making Baptists uncomfortable in regards to infant baptism, Col. 2:11–12 should inspire us to remember what we pledged to God in our baptism and to love and live for our great Savior. Glory to God!

¹ These are all taken from the Westminster Confession of Faith: Baptism, XXVIII:4.

² This is not an uncommon view. Other sources that discuss a similar understanding include: See J.P.T. Hunt, "Colossians 2:11–12, the Circumcision / Baptism Analogy, and Infant Baptism," *Tyndale Bulletin* 41, no. 2 (November 1990): 243-244; Thomas R. Schreiner, "Baptism in the Epistles: An Initiation Rite for Believers," in *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, edited by Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2006), 75–79; Wellum, Stephen J., "Baptism and the Relationship between the Covenants," in *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, edited by Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2006): 119-124; and Shawn D. Wright, "Baptism and the Logic of Reformed Paedobaptists," in *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, edited by Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2006), 239.

³ John Calvin insisted repeatedly that faith is a vital element for receiving the benefits of baptism in his chapter on baptism in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John T. McNeill, ed., translated by Ford Lewis Battles. Vol. 2, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 4.15, "On Baptism." However, the next chapter (4.16) is a justification of infant baptism. Many have wondered, how do infants have faith? In the context of baptizing infants because there is no risk to give them now what they will later be entitled to, Calvin was ambivalent in his answer regarding their faith: "Therefore, if it please him, why may the Lord not shine with a tiny spark at the present time on those whom he will illumine in the future with the full splendor of his light—especially if he has not removed their ignorance before taking them from the prison of the flesh? I would not rashly affirm that they are endowed with the same faith as we experience in ourselves, or have entirely the same knowledge of faith—this I prefer to leave undetermined," *ibid.*, 4.16.19 (page 1342 in this edition). For an excellent scholarly survey of the internal inconsistency of these important chapters in the *Institutes*, see David F. Wright, "Development and Coherence in Calvin's *Institutes*: The Case of Baptism (*Institutes* 4:15–4:16)," chapter 16 in *Infant Baptism in Historical Perspective* (Great Britain: Paternoster, 2007): 226-237. This article can also be found in Mack P. Holt, ed., *Adaptations of Calvinism in Reformation Europe: Essays in Honour of Brian G. Armstrong* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007): 43-54.

- ⁴ 3rd Century writer Tertullian is the first to mention baptism unambiguously for (young) children and infants, though he recommends delaying it until they can understand and ask for it. See Tertullian, *Homily on Baptism*, ed. & trans. by Evans, Ernest (London: SPCK, 1964): 37, 39. It is the document "The Apostolic Tradition," dated around 215 (but elements of it are based on tradition that goes back about a generation earlier) that contains the first baptismal liturgy which mentions "those who cannot speak for themselves," a reference taken to mean infants. See Paul Bradshaw, Maxwell E. Johnson, and L. Edward Phillips, *The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002): 21:4 [text: pages 112-113; commentary: page 130].
- ⁵ If I may borrow from Calvin once again: in his first chapter on baptism (4.15), he makes many statements when writing against the Catholic Church (see Wright, "Development and Coherence in Calvin's Institutes," 230), that Baptists today might very well appreciate, though we do not consider baptism a sacrament. Calvin says the purpose of baptism is to "serve our faith before God and to serve our confession before men" (4.15.1); there is no benefit to baptism until faith appears (4.15.17); baptism "is the mark by which we publicly profess that we wish to be reckoned God's people...by which finally we openly affirm our faith" (4.15.13); and "but from this sacrament, as from all others, we obtain only as much as we receive in faith" (4.15.15). The difficulty comes in the transition into and the content of the next chapter on infant baptism (4.16) where a different focus (writing against Anabaptists) leads him to make statements that do not correspond well to what he said in this earlier chapter. All quotes from the McNeil edition above.

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Dr. Rathbun serves at Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary as Vice President for Academic Services and Dean of the College. He is an adjunct teacher in both the college and seminary. Previously, Dr. Rathbun served as a Baptist Mid-Missions missionary to Jamaica for 14 years, serving at the Fairview Baptist Bible College. He earned his B.A., M.A., and M.Div. degrees from Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary. He also completed an M.A. degree in the History of Religions from the University of Iowa. He received his Ph.D. degree from the University of the West Indies in Kingston, Jamaica. Dr. Rathbun has also taught or preached in Australia, Brazil, England, Guyana, India, Liberia, New Zealand, Peru, Scotland, Thailand, and other locations. His wife, Cléa, received her M.A. at FBTS. They have two young children.