

Baptism (part 4 of 6): Biblical Illustrations 2 By Alan Hitchen

By God's decree, baptism was introduced to Israel by John the Baptist and also used by Jesus to prepare Israel for the kingdom of heaven. After the resurrection when he had been given all authority in heaven and on earth, he kept the basics of baptism as John revealed them. Baptism is still in water, makes disciples, and gives remission of sins (Mt 28:18; Acts 2:38; 10:47-48). After ascending to the right hand of God, he revealed through his apostles many new unique powers given to baptism. First and foremost, baptism follows the pattern of the gospel: "*Christ died for our sins... was buried, and ... rose again*" (1 Cor 15:3-4). In one simple immersion we are buried with him in baptism, die with him and raised to walk in a new life. Through water, all the benefits of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection are bestowed (Rom 6:3-8; Col 2:12-13).

If any affirm baptism is an insignificant command, the Spirit revealed baptism saved us as the ark did Noah and his family (1Pet 3:21-22). Who would say the ark was unimportant? Since the ark and baptism both used water to bring salvation, both are equally essential. In addition, who could deny Israel's salvation from Egypt came after passing through the Red Sea? Entering into and coming out of that water was as essential for their salvation as ours. Since they were baptized into Moses and we were baptized into Christ we are saved as they were saved (1Cor 10:1-3). With these two illustrations, the power and importance of baptism are beyond argument. As the death, burial, and resurrection was for Jesus, the ark was for Noah, and entering the Red Sea was to Israel, so baptism is to us.

Baptism - Circumcised Without Hands

In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, (Col 2:11-13)

This is clearly the most complicated of all the illustrations. Think about it. What does this mean to you? How would you explain this verse? Before you were baptized you were "*dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh,*" After, baptism you were "*circumcised with circumcision made without hands,*" and "*made alive.*" Why does the Holy Spirit use uncircumcision and circumcision to describe the difference between those who are baptized and those who are not? The only way to answer is to understand the initial purpose of circumcision.

The Origin and Purpose of Circumcision

God appeared to Abram in Haran at the age of 75 and gave him "*the promise.*" He was to "*get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you*" (Gen 12:1). If he did this God promised to "*make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*" (Gen 12:1-3). Abram was faithful in all these things for 24 years and at 99, God prepared Abram for the promised son necessary to become "*a great nation*" (Gen 17:1-16).

The name change revealed the transition from Abram the individual to Abraham the father of a great nation. With this transition God gave a new covenant. "*I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant... be God to you and your descendants after you... give to you and your descendants ... all the land of Canaan*" (Gen 17:7-8). God's promised fellowship and the gift of the land of Canaan were conditional: "*My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and your descendants*

after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised" (17:10). In this covenant God forced each descendant of Abraham to make a choice. Their faith and submission to this covenant and not simply their fleshly relationship to Abraham would bring God's blessings. Only those who kept this covenant could be in spiritual fellowship with Abraham and with God. This was a vital command: *"the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant"* (17:14). Only *after* circumcision were the blessings and benefits of Abraham bestowed. No matter the lineage of the flesh, all uncircumcised children were cut off from fellowship with God and Abraham. Circumcision was the difference between faithfulness and unfaithfulness for Israel.

Baptism - The Circumcision of Christ

The Holy Spirit used baptism as the difference between uncircumcision and circumcision for the Christian. So in some way the covenant of circumcision is directly tied to baptism. Why use these terms unless there is a connection? When we were *"buried with him in baptism"* we received *"a circumcision made without hands."* In baptism the *"uncircumcision of our flesh"* was removed, and the *"circumcision of Christ"* was completed. What happened to Israel in fleshly circumcision now happens spiritually in the circumcision of Christ for each Christian.

Just as circumcision sealed their spiritual fellowship with Abraham, baptism seals it for us: *"For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ... you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise"* (Gal 3:26-29). From the moment of baptism we too *"as Isaac was, are children of promise"* (Gal 4:28). Baptism does for the Christian what circumcision did for the Jew. After we are baptized we are truly Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise.

But there is a much more complicated element of the *circumcision of Christ*. Abraham's circumcision only removed a foreskin, but Christ's circumcision was a *"removal of the body of the flesh."* In the parallel passage *we were buried with him through baptism ... that the body of sin might be done away with"* (Rom 6:3-6). So, *without hands*, our *body of flesh* and *body of sin* were removed. We went from the *"uncircumcision of your flesh"* (no covenant with God and no tie to Abraham) to *Abraham's seed, heirs according to the promise* in *Christ's circumcision!*

This is exactly what Moses prophesied would happen! After being cast off and scattered among the nations, God promised to bring them back. This was fulfilled in the preaching of the gospel and at that time, *"the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart"* (Deut 30:6). Circumcision made without hands is baptism! It circumcises our hearts so we can love the Lord. Ezekiel added *"I will ... gather you out of all countries ... I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes and you will keep My judgments and do them"* (Ezek 36:24-27).

When we are baptized, God circumcised our heart, gave us a new heart, and put a new spirit within us. He removed the heart of stone and gave us a heart of flesh. So just as circumcision changed Abraham's fleshly children into spiritual children, baptism changes those who are not even fleshly children into his spiritual children. Truly, all who *"were baptized into Christ ... are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."* and *"as Isaac was, are children of promise"* (Gal 3:27-29; 4:28).

Who can deny that baptism is not an amazing and exceedingly powerful ordinance? Making us Abraham's children, circumcising our heart and cutting out our heart of stone. Removing the fleshly body of sin and replacing it was a living heart of spiritual devotion to God. Fulfilling God's promise to Abraham to "*be a father of many nations.*" (Gen 17:4; Rom 4:16-18). So when Peter saw that "*in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him... he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord*" (Acts 10:35, 48).

Only the circumcision of Christ (baptism) can make Abraham the father of many nations. "*For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God, and glory in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh*" (Phil 3:3).

In Part 5 of this series, we will examine the "new birth" of John 3.