

## Did Water Baptism Replace Circumcision as the "Sign of the Covenant"?

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October, 2014

There are numerous problems with the view that water baptism has replaced circumcision as the "sign of the covenant of grace." Here are some of them:

1. The phrase "covenant of grace" is never used in the Scriptures. The Hebrew *berith* always refers to one of the specific, historical covenants: Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and new covenants. Circumcision was the sign given for the Abrahamic covenant, not some "covenant of grace" which is never mentioned in Scripture.
2. If it then be argued that circumcision was the sign of the Abrahamic covenant while baptism has become the sign of the new covenant, then the following problem must be faced. Circumcision was instituted during Abraham's time as the sign of the covenant God made with him and his "seed" (Gen. 17:9-14). Did this, then, do away with the rainbow as the sign of the Noahic covenant (Gen. 9:12-13)? The Sabbath was instituted at Mt. Sinai as the sign of the covenant God made with with Israel there (Exod. 31:12-17), a covenant clearly distinguished from the Abrahamic covenant (Deut. 5:1-3). Did this mean that circumcision was then no longer to be practiced as a sign of the Abrahamic covenant? When God made his covenant with David (2 Sam. 7), did this do away with the rainbow, circumcision, and the Sabbath as signs of previous covenants? The point is that the inauguration of the "next" covenant in God's program never in the history of redemption has meant the cessation of any signs of previous covenants. Why do some suppose that with the institution of the new covenant (Jer. 31; Matt. 26), circumcision had to be "replaced"? There is no precedent.
3. Not only is there no historical precedent, there is certainly no passage which develops the idea of replacement. Some theologians find themselves in a contradictory position here. In order to argue to the baptism of *infants*, they insist that we cannot presume an OT law is no longer in force without clear NT exegetical evidence. Yet without such a didactic passage, they insist that circumcision ceased and baptism replaced it.
4. Not only is there no historical precedent and no exegetical evidence for the idea of "replacement," every sign of a covenant has been declared to be everlasting. Consider the rainbow (Gen. 9:8-16) and, more to the point, circumcision (Gen. 17:10-14). These two passages do not admit the idea of replacement.
5. There is another problem along these same lines. Acts 21:15-26 is an extremely important passage. There Paul agrees to do something which James asked him to do. James wanted Paul to demonstrate something. What? In Acts 15 and the book of Galatians, Paul had argued strongly that Gentiles need not be circumcised. A rumor had started among believing Jews that Paul also taught that Jewish believers should no longer circumcise their children. Paul was to do what James asked (pay the expenses of the men under a vow and also purify himself in the Temple) in order to show that he, Paul, never taught nor believed any such thing. Jewish believers should continue to circumcise, and

Paul by his agreement shows that he never taught or intended otherwise. Circumcision was an everlasting sign to be practiced by Abraham's seed forever (Gen. 17). This passage represents a very serious problem to those who say that baptism replaced circumcision.

6. It should also be observed that every "sign" of an OT covenant is explicitly called a "sign" in Scripture. There is no guesswork involved, no elaborate arguments based on analogies. Circumcision is called the sign of the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 17:9-14), the rainbow the sign of the Noahic covenant (Gen. 9:12-13), and the Sabbath the sign of the Mosaic covenant (Exod. 31:12-17). Where is baptism ever called the sign of any covenant? Signs of covenants are no insignificant matters. They are spelled out in clear, explicit, and didactic passages. Yet theologians have the presumption to assert dogmatically that baptism is the sign of the new covenant or covenant of grace!

7. But if baptism is not the sign of the new covenant, what is? Did the Davidic covenant have a sign? None is mentioned. Can we not leave the new covenant where God has left it? The central new covenant passages are Jeremiah 31, Matthew 26 (and parallels), and Hebrews 8-10. Is there any "sign" mentioned anywhere? Then is it not great presumption to assert that baptism is that sign? The presumption is exacerbated in that we do have historical precedent for a major covenant which was not given a "sign"--the Davidic covenant in 2 Samuel 7.

8. But then what sign do believers receive today? Jewish believers still should receive the sign of physical circumcision. As Paul attempted to demonstrate in Acts 21, he never taught otherwise. Gentiles, on the other hand, did not need the physical sign. We became the spiritual seed of Abraham through our union with Christ (Gal. 3), and through that union we do receive the sign of the covenant. We indeed have been circumcised, but it was a spiritual circumcision. This is the point of Colossians 2:11-12 (cf. also Phil. 3:3). The teaching of this passage is quite simple: through our spiritual baptism (cf. 1 Cor. 12:13), we have been united with Christ. Paul stresses that this union or identification involved two things: spiritual circumcision and participation with Christ in his death and resurrection. Nowhere is it even implied in this passage that water baptism (which is not under discussion in the passage) "replaced" physical circumcision (which is also not under discussion in the passage).

9. Another serious problem with the "replacement" theory is that the epistle to the Galatians never develops this idea. Here is an argument from silence; but it is a good one. The Gentile Galatians wanted to be physically circumcised. Paul argued no. What more appropriate place to explain that water baptism, which they had received, replaced circumcision as the sign of the covenant? Such a statement would certainly have put an abrupt end to the Galatian error. Since this error centered on circumcision, is it not singularly strange that Paul does not explain how baptism is the sign, not circumcision?

10. Finally, there is an embarrassing overlap to face. John baptized with water. The formulas in Mark 1:4 and Luke 3:3 are almost identical with the formula in Acts 2:38. In the great commission in Matthew 28, Christ never explained any new meaning for water baptism (nor does this occur anywhere else in the NT). The water baptism in the Gospels and in Acts, therefore, was essentially the same. It symbolized repentance and washing (purification) from sin. But while much baptism was going on by both John and Jesus' disciples, circumcision was obviously still quite legitimately the sign of the covenant.