

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 5

Baptism, Circumcision, and Biblical Theology

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Getting the Baptism-Circumcision Relationship Right

In the last few episodes, we saw how some of Christianity's historic creeds made statements about baptism (particularly infant baptism) that muddles an otherwise clear gospel presentation. The problem is a failure to say only about baptism what one can say about circumcision. Getting that relationship right is the key to articulating a biblically defensible doctrine of infant baptism, and has implications for believers baptism as well.

Transcript

Welcome back once again to the Naked Bible Podcast. In a series of previous podcasts, we looked at several well-known creeds and how they articulate the doctrine of infant baptism and juxtaposed what we found with how the same creeds describe salvation by grace alone through faith. We saw pretty quickly that there are significant internal contradictions when those two items are compared. The language is, honestly, muddled and confusing. Additionally, we saw how the creeds failed to think through the fundamental link struck by Paul in Colossians 2:11-12 between baptism and circumcision. I noted at the beginning of our series that if the two rites are theologically linked, then what you can or cannot say about one ought to be consistent with what you can and cannot say about the other. The creeds never seem to have thought about the importance of that balance.

Having shown you the confusion, it's time for some solutions. Let not your heart be troubled or your mind confused any longer! The difficulties evaporate with some simple, straightforward adjustments in thinking—adjustments that I think are no more magical than being consistent with what is said and not said on both sides of the baptism and circumcision tandem.

Let's look first at circumcision. What did it actually do, and what *didn't* it do? Let's start with the latter: what circumcision did not do for its recipients. First, circumcision neither provided nor ensured salvation, nor did it lessen anyone's sinful impulse. The Old Testament story is dramatically clear that most circumcised Israelites apostasized, turning to idolatry and prompting the curse of Yahweh in the form of the exile. The fact that Israelite men were circumcised meant nothing with respect to their spiritual inclination or destiny. In fact, Paul

specifically denies such an equation in Romans 4, where he labors to make the point that Abraham was justified prior to circumcision because he believed.

Second, circumcision was not practiced on women. This may seem obvious, but female genital circumcision was (and still is) practiced among some cultures and religions in the Middle East. The fact that circumcision was only practiced on men in Israel should inform us that the cutting rite itself did nothing with respect to one's ultimate spiritual destiny. Otherwise, women would have been excluded. Circumcision did mean something to Israelite women, though—the same thing that it meant for men. We'll get to that in a moment.

Third, circumcision for men was practiced in other cultures besides Israel. Other ancient people (such as the Egyptians) practiced male circumcision. This tells us, again, that the rite itself had no efficacy in regard to salvation. Rather, its importance was in what the rite signified in conjunction with the promises God gave to Abraham and his descendants. And, of course, those promises had to be believed. The actual rite of circumcision, therefore, had nothing to do with salvation or one's propensity to seek the God of Israel. It also did not guarantee that the recipient was elect with respect to eventually expressing a steadfast faith in the God of Israel. If these presumed connections were valid, there's no explanation for Israel's national apostasy. Likewise, we would have no explanation for how women were drawn to God or made part of the covenant. And we would expect Gentiles to become worshipers of Yahweh, the God of Israel, if they were circumcised. None of that makes much sense in light of what you read in the Old Testament.

5:00

What about the meaning of circumcision? What did it accomplish? What was the point? First, for both male and female Israelites, the sign of circumcision was a physical, visible reminder that their race—their very lives and the lives of their children—began as a supernatural act of God on behalf of Abraham and Sarah. Circumcision was a constant reminder of God's grace to that original couple and to their posterity. Undergoing circumcision did not bestow salvation. It was a reminder of the supernatural grace of God—in this case, directed at a people whom God had chosen in love to give them the revelation of who he was and how to be rightly related to him.

Second, for males, circumcision granted the recipient admission into the community of Israel—the community that had the exclusive truth of the true God. This truth included Yahweh's covenant relationship with Israel and their need to have circumcised hearts (in other words, to believe in Yahweh's promises and worship him alone). In ancient patriarchal Israel, women were members of the community through marriage to a circumcised man or by being born to Israelite parents. Intermarriage with foreign men (in other words, those not circumcised and thus not part of Yahweh's covenant community) was forbidden. This was a prohibition that maintained the purity of the membership, and that purity was directly related to the spiritual significance of circumcision.

To summarize, membership in the community was important for a specific reason: only this community had the truth—what Paul calls "the oracles of God" in Romans 3:2. Only Israel had the truth in regard to the nature of the true God among all gods and how one could be rightly related to him. In other words, only Israel knew about the way of salvation. Yahweh had created this human community with the goal of giving Israel truth—the way of salvation. This exclusivity is what it meant in Old Testament theology to be elect or chosen. Election was not equated with salvation, since again, vast multitudes of elect Israelites were not saved from God's curse in response to their unfaithfulness. Every Israelite member of the exclusive community had to believe in the covenant promises and worship only Yahweh, trusting that relationship to result in an afterlife with their God. Circumcision merely meant access to these truths.

Now let's apply this to baptism. It's easy to see how the meaning and significance of circumcision connects to baptism, whether one's position includes baptism of infants or not. Baptism of an infant makes that infant a member in the believing community—a local church. Hopefully, that church will teach the oracles of God—the way of salvation—so that the child will hear the gospel at one point and believe. The hope would be the same for an adult recipient. When Abraham and his entire household (even his servants) were circumcised, the account does not tell us who believed in Abraham's God and who didn't. The assumption was that as the members of his household observed God's blessing on Abraham and Abraham's faithfulness, then they, too, would believe in what was going on. Membership in the family of God would both foster and sustain faith. These were God's goals for the Old Testament people of God—the nation of Israel. The same is true of the people of God today known as the Church. The sign and rite have changed, but the theological point is the same.

So by way of conclusion, taking the meaning of both circumcision and baptism as basically doing one thing for recipients and one thing only (that is, putting them in the community of faith so that they hear the truth) divorces both circumcision and baptism from salvation, immediately solving the problems we noted in the creeds in earlier podcasts. This perspective simply looks at the text for what circumcision meant in the lives of Israelites, regardless of gender. It isn't terribly complicated once we tear ourselves away from the creedal confusion and insist on the consistency of saying only about baptism what we can say about circumcision. That is how biblical theology of baptism ought to be framed and articulated.

10:00

In the next episode, we'll put infant baptism aside and look at some other aspects of the doctrine.