

## **Naked Bible Podcast Transcript**

### **Episode 6**

#### **Applying the Baptism-Circumcision Theology to Adult or Believer's Baptism**

**Recorded in 2012**

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### Getting the Baptism-Circumcision Relationship Right: Adult and Believer's Baptism

In the previous episode, we talked about how to articulate a biblically defensible doctrine of infant baptism, one that avoids the theological problems created when one fails to say only about baptism what one can say about circumcision. Getting that relationship right also helps us talk about the baptism of adults.

### **Transcript**

Welcome back to the Naked Bible Podcast.

In the last podcast, I sketched out my view of the meaning of baptism. If you've been following the podcast, you know that it took awhile to get there. I had to set up my own view by outlining the problems that are inherent in the way baptism gets talked about. Now that we've covered that ground and established what we can and cannot say about both circumcision and baptism, I want to shift the focus a bit to applying what we've learned to believer's baptism, or adult baptism. We should note at the outset that those labels certainly have a great deal of overlap, but they are not synonymous. Unlike infants, an adult can believe the gospel prior to baptism, making baptism an outward testimony of their faith. But an adult could be baptized without ever making any profession of faith in Christ at all. It just depends on the circumstances and, really, the teaching of the church that they happen to be in. But even in the case of the former, where a profession of faith is obtained, what's going on at baptism still needs to be clearly understood in relation to the matter of salvation.

So let's jump in. I argued earlier that the meaning of baptism (particularly in light of its link to circumcision) was inclusion in the community of faith and access to the oracles of God—the truth of the true God and how to be rightly related to him for salvation and fellowship. Baptism did not result in salvation or predispose anyone to salvation. Neither of those things can be said of circumcision and both are, frankly, contrary to a gospel where saving grace cannot be merited in any way or by any ritual.

It's easy to see how that helps us avoid doctrinal problems with respect to baptizing infants, but what about baptism of adults? Chances are minimal that an

adult who has already made a faith commitment to Christ is going to attach any saving value to baptism, but that's not a given. The position I'm arguing for (that you shouldn't say about baptism what you cannot say about circumcision) is still important. If that were part of a church's teaching about baptism (even in a church that baptizes only people who confess to believing in Jesus before they are baptized) it would help those getting baptized to think clearly about what *isn't* happening to them when they are baptized—but why they're still doing it.

Baptism, like circumcision, was intended to put the recipient into the believing community that had the truth—a circumstance that would hopefully either lead to acceptance of that truth or, as in the case of Abraham or our person who is already a believer awaiting baptism, it would serve as a sign of faith already exercised. Since some adults who get baptized might not be thinking clearly about what they're doing, either due to their own misunderstanding or perhaps that of the church or the minister, insisting on consistency in the circumcision/baptism analogy is very helpful. If circumcision did nothing to its recipient in terms of securing salvation or instilling some positive spiritual impulse into the heart, then neither does baptism. And so adult baptism that muddles this simple, straightforward element of the baptism/circumcision analogy just gets the doctrine wrong.

In regard to people who are baptized and who have a clear knowledge of the gospel (that baptism is independent of salvation), the meaning of baptism I've argued for is still quite consistent with believer's baptism. New Testament believers who were baptized consequently became members of the believing community. Such membership meant regular hearing of the truth—something that would sustain their faith and help them to be assured of God's promises, or perhaps clarify the gospel if there were any uncertainties in a person's faith understanding. This is equally true today. Membership in the family of God should both foster and sustain faith. These were God's same goals for Old Testament Israel. The sign and the rite have changed, but the theological point is still the same.

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I hope it's clear at this point in the series on baptism that my view on this is workable and important for both adult (or believer's) baptism, as well as infant baptism. Believer's baptism is the type of baptism specifically described in the New Testament. Although some try to argue otherwise, there is no clear instance of infant baptism in the New Testament. That's logical, since the New Testament books are describing a new faith preached to adults who have to make a decision about whether to embrace Jesus as Messiah and leave Judaism, or whether to leave paganism. The apostles were preaching to adults to kick-start the Church, and so adults are the ones hearing and believing. And so they're the ones being baptized. One can only surmise from passages that speak of a person believing and being baptized that there were families involved. And even if there were (there are a couple passages like that), one still has to guess that there were infants in that family.

In short, defending infant baptism on the basis of baptism scenes in the New Testament is nothing but guesswork. However, an argument from silence that fails in one direction also fails in the other direction. It doesn't logically follow that just because the New Testament witnesses to only adult baptism that baptism of infants was disallowed or considered aberrant. Theologically building on the analogy that Paul strikes with circumcision, the idea of infant baptism is coherent so long as it does not violate the gospel. Unfortunately, as we've seen in earlier episodes, failure to take care to say about infant baptism only what can coherently be said about circumcision has created a lot of theological problems in association with infant baptism.

Consequently, what we have in the New Testament simply reflects the historical circumstances, and those circumstances shouldn't be pressed beyond what they can actually reveal. We know who was baptized as the Early Church grew, but we cannot infer with precision whether those examples reflect a prohibition of infant baptism. Arguing that is committing the logical faux pas of trying to prove a negative.

In our next podcast on baptism, we'll take a look at the controversy over the mode of baptism—how it's done.