

# Does Baptism Replace Circumcision?

One of the things that Baptists and Presbyterians have debated over the centuries is how closely baptism and circumcision are related and in what ways they are connected. Sadly, I have heard far too many Baptists claim that circumcision has absolutely no connection to baptism. And I have heard a few Presbyterians claim that baptism is the exact equivalent to circumcision. Both views seem to be born out of a theological bias more than rigorous Scriptural and theological study. To be fair, I have heard some Baptists admit that there are some similarities between the two signs and I've heard even more Presbyterians agree that there some dissimilarities between the two signs. But the question remains: Does baptism replace circumcision?

I want to offer here not only my answer to the question, but perhaps also some illumination on this issue that I have recently been given. The following two points show us that while baptism does not replace circumcision in *every* sense, there is, however, at least one sense (and it is a significant sense) in which baptism *does* replace circumcision.

1. The sign of entering into the visible covenant community of God during the Old Covenant era was circumcision.
2. The sign of entering into the visible covenant community of God during the New Covenant era is baptism.

And there are many more ways that baptism and circumcision are connected (expression of faith, sign of unity with God as Savior and Lord, symbol of regeneration, etc). I can just hear my Presbyterian friends shouting for victory at these statements, and yet their shouts are being drowned out by the lamenting and possibly the crying out for my blood by my Baptist friends. However, this is neither a cause for rejoicing nor mourning over the issue of baptizing believers only or also infants of believers. For this does not answer any debate about the issue of who should be baptized (hint: it ain't babies : ). That issue is solved more by answering what the difference is between the visible covenant communities in the Old and New Covenants and what is fulfilled in the New which was pointed to in the Old. A full explanation of this will have to wait for another blog post, but for now...

One way to help us get a better grasp on the baptism/circumcision issue is not simply to answer what replaces circumcision, but perhaps more so what fulfills it. Interestingly enough, as I was reading this morning something from one of my Presbyterian heroes, R. C. Sproul, I was helped in making this even more clear:

“The sign of the old covenant was circumcision. In one sense it was a primitive and obscene sign. Why did the Jews cut off the foreskin of the flesh? This rite had two meanings--a positive and a negative meaning--representing the two sanctions of the covenant. The positive meaning of cutting the foreskin was that God was cutting out this group of people from the rest, separating them, setting them apart to be a holy nation, to be a blessing. The negative was that the Jew was saying, 'Oh, God, if I fail to

keep every one of the terms of this covenant, may I be cut off from you, cut off from your presence, cut off from the light of your countenance, cut off from your blessedness just as I have ritually cut off the foreskin of my flesh.' As a reflection of this sign, the cross represented the supreme act of circumcision."

Later Sproul says,

"When Christ was hanging on the cross, the Father, as it were, turned his back on Christ. He removed his face. He turned out the lights. He cut off his Son. ... he hung in darkness, isolated from the Father, cut off from fellowship--fully receiving in himself the curse of God--not for his own sin but for the sin he willingly bore by imputation for our sake."

Do you see what Sproul is saying? He is saying that more important than circumcision being replaced by baptism, is that circumcision has been fulfilled by the death of Christ on the cross, being cut off from God in our place because of our sin! This is the Good News of great joy for all the peoples!

And in this gospel, we therefore see that baptism indeed does replace the positive meaning of circumcision. Similar to circumcision, by being baptized we are saying that we are called to walk in a new way of life because of what Jesus has done (Romans 6). Baptism is meant to set us apart from the rest of the world who does not want to identify with Jesus or His Bride. In baptism we are claiming unity with Christ and His covenant people by faith in His life, death, burial, and resurrection.

And yet, in the gospel, we also see that the cross of Christ has fulfilled the negative meaning of circumcision. In the Old Covenant, the people were called to be separate from sin and holy unto the Lord from a heart of sincerity and faith. Yet there was also a curse (being cut off, not only from the visible covenant community, but even from God Himself in all of His grace) that would fall on all who failed to keep this covenant. Jesus came to fulfill the terms of this covenant and to bear the curse for us not keeping this covenant. This is the simple message of the gospel!

So, now being baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit is not only an expression that the LORD is our God and that we will walk by faith in and obedience to Him, but also that we rest fully by faith in the substitutionary death/circumcision of Jesus on the cross in our place.

*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us--for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'--" (Galatians 3:13)*