

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "Baptism: What About the Children?" (Colossians 2:9-13, Acts 2:38-41)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 8/21/2011

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We have reached a point in our series of messages on Colossians chapter two, where we are considering the issues that stem from the Apostle Paul's use of the words "circumcision" and "baptism" in a section that begins at verse nine. Let me read this passage for you once again as we begin today. Colossians chapter two, beginning at verse nine:

For in Him [that is, in Christ] dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power. 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, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. (Colossians 2:9-12)

Let me begin today by summarizing the main points we have seen thus far in our study.

First of all, the words that we have just read are part of Paul's warning to the Colossian church to guard themselves against being drawn into the sin of legalism. One of the kinds of legalism he is warning them against is Jewish legalism. There were those in Colosse and in other early churches who promoted the false teaching that you had to keep the Jewish law, in addition to believing on Christ, in order to be saved.

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The great badge of Jewish law-keeping was the practice of circumcision. But Paul is telling the Colossian believers that they do not need to do this, that they – every one of them, male and female – have received a different kind of circumcision, “the circumcision made without hands,” the crucifixion of the old sin nature that was accomplished through the death of Christ on the cross. This is not physical circumcision, it is spiritual circumcision. It is not circumcision of the flesh, but of the heart.

Secondly, we saw that the baptism that Paul speaks of in verse twelve is not physical baptism with water. Verses eleven and twelve speak of the fact that in the eyes of God the Father, every believer in Christ was crucified with Christ, every believer in Christ was placed in the tomb with Christ, and every believer in Christ was raised from the dead with Christ. The use of the Greek word *baptisma* in verse twelve speaks of our being placed in the tomb with Christ. That is the intimate nature of the believer’s identification with Christ.

Thirdly, we saw that Scripture makes a clear distinction between Spirit baptism and water baptism. Water baptism has never saved anyone. Water baptism cannot save anyone. Salvation involves Spirit baptism – the indwelling of God the Holy Spirit, which all of us as believers receive when we are saved.

The Vital Question

Now with these things in mind, in our last message, we began to focus upon a very important question: According to the Bible, who is qualified to receive water

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baptism, and why? Every Christian needs to be able to answer this question. Every Bible-believing church must take a position on this question. We have now reached a point in our study of the book of Colossians where we have come face to face with this question, and so in our last message we began to deal with it. What does Scripture say? Who is qualified to receive water baptism, and why?

Now first of all, we noted that there is one position on water baptism that we can immediately reject. We can reject the position that is taught by the Roman Catholic church, by most Lutheran churches, by most Anglican churches, and by most liberal Presbyterian and Reformed churches. These churches all teach various forms of the heresy of baptismal regeneration. They teach that water baptism saves the soul. They replace the blood of Christ with the water of baptism. Clearly, we must reject that position because the Bible clearly condemns it. Salvation is only, and always has been only, and always will be only, through the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But we noted that there are two other positions on water baptism that we find among Bible-believing Christians, in Bible-believing churches, in churches that preach the one true Gospel, churches that preach and teach that salvation is by God's grace alone, by faith alone, in the shed blood of Jesus Christ alone, apart from any works, and apart from water baptism.

The key difference in the two positions on water baptism that are held by true Bible-believers has to do not with any idea that water baptism saves the soul. All truly born-again Christians and all truly Bible-believing churches reject any idea that

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baptism saves or that baptism contributes in any way to salvation. The key difference in the two positions that are held by Bible-believing Christians about water baptism has to do with how they view the *significance* of water baptism.

The credobaptist or believer's baptism position is that the significance of water baptism is testimony to saving faith in Jesus Christ. In other words, baptism with water is a testimony to the fact that an individual has already received Spirit baptism. The individual has already believed on the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation from sin, and God the Holy Spirit has taken up residence within that individual, and therefore that individual is qualified to be baptized with water as a public testimony of that fact. That is the credobaptist position, and as I have told you, this is the position that I hold.

Now in contrast to this, the paedobaptist or infant baptism position says that the significance of water baptism is not primarily testimony to saving faith in Christ. The paedobaptist position says that the great significance of water baptism is that it has replaced Old Testament circumcision.

The paedobaptists believe that as Old Testament circumcision was to be administered to both adult Israelites and adult proselytes and also to their children as the sign of membership in the covenant with God, therefore under the New Testament adults who come to saving faith in Christ and the infant children of believing parents should be baptized with water, because the paedobaptists believe

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that both the believing adults and the infant children who have not come to saving faith in Christ are members of what they refer to as the Covenant of Grace.

Our Approach to the Question

Obviously both of these positions cannot be correct. And on this question, as on all questions, we must go to Scripture to understand what we are to believe and what we are to teach. And so in our last message we began to search the Scriptures together, to see what Scripture actually says about this question: Who is qualified to be baptized with water, and why?

The approach we have taken in answering that question is to examine two key passages that paedobaptists use to support their position. One of those is in Acts chapter two, and the other is in Colossians chapter two.

And so in our last message we began with the passage in the book of Acts, which is found in chapter 2, verses 38-41. Let me read that passage for you once again:

Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for [or because of] the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call." And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation." Then those who gladly

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received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.

Now as we noted last time, the paedobaptists focus on the words, "the promise is to you and to your children" in verse 39.

Now some of you may be wondering who holds the paedobaptist position among Bible believers. Let me quote for you one of the many noteworthy Bible commentators who expressed this position. That man is the great scholar and Bible commentator Matthew Henry. Now just about every Bible-believing pastor has Matthew Henry's *Commentary on the Whole Bible* in his library. Many church members have it as well. But here is what Matthew Henry says about this passage in Acts chapter two. He says this, and I am quoting him now:

[Peter] gives them [that is, his hearers on the Day of Pentecost] encouragement to take this course... "It shall be for the remission of sins. Repent of your sin, and it shall not be your ruin; be baptized into the faith of Christ, and in truth you shall be justified, which you could never be by the law of Moses. Aim at this, and depend upon Christ for it, and this you shall have. As the cup in the Lord's supper is the New Testament in the blood of Christ for the remission of sins, so baptism is in the name of Christ for the remission of sins. Be washed, and you shall be washed."

And then he goes on to say that Peter is telling them that:

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Your children shall still have, as they have had, an interest in the covenant, and a title to the external seal of it [and he is speaking here of the Old Testament rite of circumcision]. Come over to Christ, to receive those inestimable benefits; for the promise of the remission of sins, and the gift of the Holy Ghost, is to you and to your children...

And continuing to quote Matthew Henry:

... Now it is proper for an Israelite, when he is by baptism to come into a new dispensation of this covenant, to ask, "What must be done with my children? Must they be thrown out, or taken in with me?" "Taken in" (says Peter) "by all means; for the promise, that great promise of God's being to you a God, is as much to you and to your children now as ever it was."

Now dear friends, I have great respect for Matthew Henry, and I have found his *Commentary* to be a blessing and a help on many occasions. But in this particular case, on his analysis of Acts chapter two, verses 38 and 39, I must tell you that I very much disagree with Matthew Henry, and I want to explain why.

This disagreement is not an arbitrary disagreement. It is a disagreement based upon Scripture – based upon the entire scope of Scripture, rather than a focus on one or two passages. Let me make a very important point: The credobaptist disagreement with Matthew Henry, and with all those who hold the paedobaptist position, is based upon the fact that we must always interpret what we find in the Old Testament in the light of what the New Testament has to say about it.

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Who Was Baptized in Acts 2?

Let me remind you of what we saw as we looked at this passage in Acts chapter two in our last message. And I also want to remind you that we looked at a related passage in Galatians chapter three. And we were very careful to look at this passage in Acts chapter two in its full context, and not just focus on one phrase in one verse. And as we searched the Scriptures together, we saw several things.

First, we saw that that the promise of which Peter speaks is the promise of the Holy Spirit, the promise of salvation to all who believe.

Secondly, we saw that the promise of the Holy Spirit is God's promise to give His indwelling Holy Spirit only to those who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and are saved.

Thirdly, we saw that the Greek words that are used in Acts chapter two, verse 39 literally read like this. Peter is saying that the promise of the indwelling Holy Spirit is, number one, to as many of you, my adult hearers, as the Lord may call to Himself in salvation; the promise of the indwelling Holy Spirit is, number two, also to as many of your children as the Lord may call to Himself in salvation; and the promise of the indwelling Holy Spirit is, number three, to as many people who are at a distance, both Jew and Gentile, as the Lord may call unto Himself in salvation.

In other words, in Acts 2:39, Peter is telling us that the condition for water baptism, the condition for a covenant relationship with God, is not family

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relationship but salvation. It is not a matter of who your earthly parents are. The condition for water baptism is a matter of whether or not you have been reconciled to God. The condition for water baptism is not, "Who is my earthly father?" The condition for water baptism is not even, "Is my earthly father a believer in Christ?" No, the condition for water baptism is this: "*Is God my heavenly Father? Have I been reconciled to God by the blood of Christ? Can I truly approach Him through the intercession of Christ as 'Our Father, Who art in heaven'?*" That is the issue. Individual salvation is the issue, not parentage.

And once, again, as we look at the context, we find confirmation of this. Look at Acts chapter two, verse 41. What happened when Peter preached these things to the people? Verse 41 tells us that "those who gladly received his word were baptized." Literally, the Greek text reads like this: "Then those who gladly and warmly accepted the word that was offered were baptized." Once again, the text is telling us that repentance and belief in the Gospel, not a parent-child relationship, is the deciding factor on the question of who is qualified for baptism.

Viewing Acts 2 Through the Right Lens

Now, perhaps at this point some of you have a question in your minds that goes like this: "Why then did Peter mention the children? Why did he say, 'to you and to your children'? Why did he mention the children of these people as a separate class of individuals? Does that not prove, or at least indicate, that the children were to be included in baptism?"

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The answer is that once again we need to be very careful about the way in which we interpret Scripture. We need to let Scripture be its own interpreter. And we need to understand how that works. We need to understand that God's revelation in the Bible is a progressive revelation. We need to understand that things that were types and shadows and symbols in the Old Testament are explained to us in the light of the fulfillment of those things in the New Testament. As Paul tells us in Colossians chapter two, verse seventeen, those things were a shadow of things to come, but the substance, the reality, the fulfillment, is in Christ.

And here is a key problem of the paedobaptist position. The paedobaptist position requires that you read Acts chapter two through the lens of the Old Testament rather than the New Testament. And the leading paedobaptist scholars and commentators confirm that this is the case.

Let me give you two examples. The Presbyterian scholar B. B. Warfield said (and I'm quoting him now) that, "The warrant for infant baptism is not to be found in the New Testament, but in the Old Testament." Likewise, the Dutch Reformed scholar Louis Berkhof said this (and I'm quoting him now as well). Berkhof said that "all these statements [in support of infant baptism] are based on the commandment of God to circumcise the children of the covenant, for in the last analysis that [Old Testament] command is the ground of infant baptism."

Now friends, these statements go against the essential principle of Biblical interpretation that says that we must look at the Old Testament in the light of further

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revelation in the New Testament. New Testament Christians must not stay under the Old Covenant. We must employ the principle that the New Testament revelation tells us how the Old Testament revelation is fulfilled.

Dear friends, we must view passages such as Acts 2:38-41 and Colossians 2:9-11 through the New Testament lens. What is Peter emphasizing in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost? He is emphasizing the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy in New Testament terms. The emphasis of his message is not on keeping the law or keeping a ritual. His emphasis is on repentance from sin, on faith in Christ, on the effectual calling of God in salvation.

As we view what Peter is saying through the New Testament lens, this becomes clear: Peter was making certain that his Jewish hearers on the Day of Pentecost understood that the New Covenant sign of baptism was not for their infant children, as circumcision had been. The New Covenant sign of baptism is only for their children who would come to a point where they could personally understand the Gospel, and personally repent from their own sins, and personally believe on Christ for themselves, as the result of the effectual calling of God.

To Whom Was Peter Preaching?

We also need to consider something else. Peter is not preaching to Christian parents on the Day of Pentecost. He is preaching to unbelieving sinners. He is preaching to people who only a few weeks before had shouted out, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" when Jesus stood before Pontius Pilate. Peter is not telling Christian

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parents that their unsaved children are in a special covenant relationship with God. Peter is telling convicted sinners how to be saved. When Peter says, "Repent and be baptized" he is answering the question of convicted sinners. He is answering people who were responding to the Gospel message, people who were cut to the heart, people who were saying, "What must we do?" And what does Peter say to them? Does he give them a word of comfort about covenant membership? No. He tells them that they are in danger of eternal damnation, and that they need to trust Christ.

This is the promise of the Holy Spirit, Peter says back in Acts chapter two, verse 21: "Whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved." And here again, Peter is quoting the prophet Joel, and he is telling them that this prophecy is being fulfilled today.

The Apostle Paul also quotes this promise of God through the prophet Joel when he sets forth the Gospel in Romans chapter ten, beginning at verse eight. Paul says this:

"The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith which we preach): that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over

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all is rich to all who call upon Him. For [notice] “whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” (Romans 10:8-13)

And in that last phrase Paul quotes the prophet Joel, just as Peter did in Acts chapter two. “For ‘whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.’ ” That, dear friends, is the qualification for water baptism. That is the answer to our question, “Who is qualified for water baptism, and why?”

About the Broadcast

The Scripture-Driven Church airs each week across the United States and around the world. Our goal is that of the Great Commission: to preach the Gospel to the world, and to equip believers to stand upon and live by the sole authority of God’s Word, to the glory of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

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