

Baptism and Circumcision

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Includes

Appendix: Observing the Elements (page 7)

This is a short, to-the-point study on the meaning and place of baptism and circumcision for the Christian today.

Water Baptism

The Greek word for baptism is *baptisma* and it literally means 'to dip into' and it was often used in the sense of dipping a piece of cloth into some dye, resulting in the cloth being identified with the dye.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, water baptism was an integral part of the ceremonial law, and it primarily symbolised ritual cleansing and consecration to God. It was usually performed by the individual in a deep bath or pool known as a Mikvah by immersing themselves in the water. Other forms of ceremonial cleansing involved washing various parts of the body with water by sprinkling, pouring or dipping. (See Exodus 30:17-21; Leviticus 14:7; 16:4; Numbers 19:18-19; 2 Kings 3:11; 5:14; Mark 7:3-4; John 5:1-2; 9:6-7).

John the Baptist

The special prophet and forerunner of the Messiah was John, son of Zechariah the priest. He was commissioned by God to baptise the people of Israel in water as a special baptism of repentance to prepare the people for the arrival of the Messiah and His promised kingdom – hence he became known as John the Baptist. He ministered in the local desert and baptised the people in the Jordan River. But this was only a preparatory step in leading them to faith in Jesus. This baptism identified the individual with John as God's prophet and it also symbolised the cleansing of the act of repentance (that is, a change of mind to return to God's way). (See Matthew 3:1-6, 13-17; Mark 1:4-5; Luke 1:13-17, 76-80; John 1:24-31; 3:22-30; Acts 13:24; 18:24-25; 19:4-5).

When Jesus began His ministry, His disciples also baptised the people in water under His authority while John was still baptising and preaching (John 3:22-24 and 4:1-2). This was the ultimate ceremonial act of water baptism for those amongst the people who believed in, and followed, Jesus as the Messiah. The Twelve

Apostles were subsequently commissioned by Christ to baptise believers in water in His Name. This act symbolises cleansing and consecration, as well as identity with, and submission to, Jesus as Lord and Messiah. This baptism was primarily for the people of Israel who accepted Jesus, and also believing proselytes of the nations, to prepare them for the coming of the kingdom. (See Mark 16:15-16; Acts 2:36-41; 8:12, 35-38; 9:18-19; 10:47-48; 16:14-15, 29-34; 18:8; 19:4-5).

The Twelve Apostles were commissioned by Christ to disciple, baptise and teach *all* the nations, not just Israel, during His absence to prepare them all for His return (Matthew 28:18-20). The apostles began to do this in the first century AD, although it was the apostle Paul who was later sent to the nations in a special sense.

On the other hand, the Apostle Paul, as the apostle and teacher of the nations, was **not** commissioned to baptise *in water* (1 Corinthians 1:14-17). His evangel to the nations gave less and less place to rituals such as water baptism. These 'elements' became secondary, as we shall see. Through Paul's evangel, all rituals, including water baptism, are not necessary for salvation today, in this administration of grace. Nevertheless, these elements were originally an integral part of the message of the kingdom proclaimed through the Twelve, but it was always God's intention to supercede water baptism with Spirit baptism.

Baptism of the Holy Spirit

Two of the most misused phrases in Christianity today are 'Born Again' and 'Baptism of the Holy Spirit.' The biblical thought behind both of these scriptural phrases are rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures, being a part of the New Covenant promised to Israel and Judah (Jeremiah 31:31-34). The phrase 'Born Again,' used by Jesus when He spoke with Nicodemus (John 3:3-8), is describing the spiritual regeneration or rebirthing promised to Israel in the New Covenant. Although it is true to say that this regeneration or spiritual renewing process is still applicable for us today while we are in our mortal bodies, nevertheless, Paul takes this thought much further and talks about the New Creation and immortality, which is far greater than regeneration or restoration alone.

Nevertheless, the Baptism of the Holy Spirit is what I wish to focus on here. John the Baptist prophesied that Jesus would baptise the people with the Holy Spirit, and Jesus Himself also confirmed this word (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:7-8; John 1:32-33; Acts 1:4-5). This spiritual baptism by God's Spirit was prophesied by the Hebrew prophets as part of the New Covenant in the Messiah (Joel 2:28-29; Ezekiel 36:24-28). After Jesus had fulfilled His first mission in His death and resurrection, He returned to His Father in the heavens and then the Spirit was poured out on the Jewish believers in the temple courts in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-39).

This was further proof that Jesus was the Messiah, the promised Anointed One of God, and that His sacrifice had been accepted by God. The result was the baptism of the Holy Spirit. This was a fulfillment of the promised gift of the Spirit for Israel's regeneration, which would also spread out to the whole world.

On that special Day, the Spirit not only **baptised** the believers for cleansing and unity, but it also **came on them** for power, giving them spiritual gifts, and also **filled them** for anointed speech. The appearance of the tongues of fire resting on

each one of them was symbolic of the Glory of Yahweh appearing as fire, for now all the people were to be the living stones in the spiritual Temple of God (1 Peter 2:4-5). This was also a baptism of cleansing fire, for the judgment begins from the House of God (1 Peter 4:17).

It is not a coincidence that it states that there were 120 believers gathered together on that day, for when the Temple of Solomon was dedicated, there were 120 priests blowing trumpets when the Glory and Fire of God filled the Temple (compare 2 Chronicles 5:12-14 and 7:1-3). The spiritual anointing oil was being poured down from the Head onto the rest of the Body.

The Baptism of the Spirit is the inward reality of being cleansed and consecrated to God, becoming identified with Christ's spirit, of which the outward ritual of water baptism, which was an essential part of the original commission of the Twelve, is, nevertheless, the mere symbol.(1 Peter 3:21-22; 1 Corinthians 12:13). This outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost was the fulfillment of the promise of regeneration in the New Covenant, as well as the fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel. This was the early rains.

Yet in accord with the prophetic patterns, there is another, more ultimate, fulfillment of the outpouring of the Spirit before the Day of the Lord comes, which is already underway. This is the latter rains, when the Gideon Remnant shall arise with an Elijah type anointing to proclaim the evangel of the kingdom to the whole world in preparation for Christ's return.

Be that as it may, Paul takes this figure of water baptism and virtually does away with it, superseding it with Spirit baptism. There is now only One Baptism – and that's the baptism of the One Spirit by which all believers of the nations are baptised into Christ and become One Body (Ephesians 4:3-6; Romans 6:1-4; 8:9; Galatians 3:26-29; 1 Corinthians 12:12-13).

This is not to be confused with the giving of spiritual gifts and power, or of being filled by the Spirit for anointed speech. The real Baptism of the Holy Spirit does not have any outward manifestation in and of itself. It is a once and for all action of God's Spirit which places the believer in Christ; that is, the individual becomes spiritually one with Jesus Christ and is therefore viewed by the Father as a son of God and is therefore part of the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 6:17, 19-20).

Baptism with Fire

John the Baptist also prophesied that Jesus would not only baptise with the Holy Spirit, but with cleansing fire as well (Matthew 3:11; Luke 3:16-17). This primarily has to do with the Second Coming of the Messiah in power and judgment, when He will separate the wheat from the chaff with His winnowing fork of fiery judgment in the Day of the Lord (2 Thessalonians 1:6-10). He will gather the chosen Overcomers into the kingdom (the fruitful wheat), but the unbelievers and religious hypocrites (the useless chaff) will face death and they shall not be allowed into the eonian kingdom of God. This is the Gehenna of fire that Jesus often warned them about in relation to His return. But this fire was not kindled at Christ's first coming, as He first had to undergo the baptism of death and entombment, and drink the cup of sacrifice (Luke 12:49-51; Mark 10:38-39). But at His return, there shall be

fiery judgment and division, a baptism of flaming fire and vengeance poured out on all wickedness and lawlessness.

The Four Elements

We can see here that there are four baptisms that are represented in the four elements of earth, wind, fire and water.

Earth - The Baptism of the death of Christ's earthly body; death of the Old Humanity

Wind - The Baptism of the Holy Spirit (John 3:6-8); the spiritual New Humanity in Christ

Fire - The Baptism of Fire at Christ's return; the purifying judgments of God

Water - The Baptism in Water; outward cleansing and consecration

Circumcision

Circumcision was the ancient ritual that God gave to Abraham as a physical sign of the covenant He had made with him and his descendants, Israel, through Isaac and Jacob (Genesis 17:1-27). It later became a part of the Law of Moses and was strictly observed by the people in the land as a sign of their covenant relationship to Yahweh (Joshua 5:1-9). The nation of Israel became known as the Circumcision.

So why did God choose the cutting off of a portion of the male penis as a sign of His covenant with His people? Well, let's not be shy or embarrassed here. After all, God created male and female, including the sexual organs.

Since the beginning of civilisation, humanity has glorified the male phallus. It was often worshipped as the organ of fertile seed for producing further offspring, as well as the organ of pleasure. Even in Scripture, a man's strength is seen in how many sons he has. The nations even built pillars representing the mighty phallus! Of course, as a result, sexual immorality and temple prostitution became an important part of their religious worship.

So God decides to strike at the heart of man's pride by commanding all the males among His people to cut off a portion of their foreskin. For those who were born into the nation, they were circumcised on the eighth day after their birth. That way they wouldn't remember the pain so much! This ancient ritual of stripping away the flesh was not as severe as more modern circumcisions tend to be. They only cut off a small portion of the foreskin, without mutilating the penis too much.

This was to be a symbol of the inability of the flesh to do anything for God, in and of itself. At the source of all life-seed, only God is the true Giver of Life, and only He can change the heart of man to so as to empower us to conquer the lusts of the flesh. But the Jewish people used circumcision as a means of boasting in their God-given privileges and their self-righteousness. Through the prophets, God made it

very clear to them that real circumcision is spiritual circumcision of the heart (Jeremiah 4:4).

Paul makes it clear that a true Jew or Israelite is not only one outwardly but is one inwardly as well, through the Spirit; that is, one who has real faith and lives by the Spirit by walking in love and righteousness, and not just in the way of the written code of the Law, is a spiritual Israelite and belongs to the Israel of God (Romans 2:25-29; Galatians 6:16).

Even believers of the nations, who are uncircumcised in flesh, can belong to the real circumcision in spirit, those who are circumcised in the heart and offer divine service to God in spirit (Philippians 3:3). In Philippians, Paul goes so far as to call the religious circumcisionists, who boast in the act of circumcision and demand that it be observed even by Gentile Christians, the Maimcision! All they do is maim the penis and that's it! Elsewhere, in Galatians 5:12, Paul says that these rebellious religionists should go further and cut themselves off (that is, emasculate themselves; become eunuchs)!

The fundamental truth that Paul reveals is that, in Christ, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything, but what counts is a new creation, with faith operating through love (Galatians 5:6; 6:15). The cross of Christ cancels out all vain attempts of the flesh to boast before God – it's either law or grace. Likewise, he who boasts in circumcision and the law, in effect, nullifies the cross of Christ (Galatians 5:2-6, 11; 6:12-16; Philippians 3:4-11).

Yet Paul doesn't do away with all of the scriptural elements or observances of Messianic Judaism. He states a number of times that these elements can still be observed by those who are Jewish Christians (or Messianic Jews), as well as believers of the nations if they so wish, as long as they are aware that the elements themselves are only *symbolic of the greater reality of Christ within* (Galatians 5:25; 6:15-16; Romans 4:12; Philippians 3:16).

He also taught that believers of the nations (or Gentiles) shouldn't become Jewish, as each one should remain as they are, and they shouldn't be forced to keep the law of Moses (Acts 15:1-2; 1 Corinthians 7:17-24). During the transitional Acts period, Paul still involved himself in the rituals of the law and the New Covenant, including water baptism (1 Corinthians 1:13-17), circumcision (Acts 16:1-3), and observing the Feasts of the Lord, and he even made sacrifices at the temple in Jerusalem, as he sought to be a Jew to the Jews and to be as one under law to those under law, so as to save some of them (Acts 18:18; 21:17-29; 1 Corinthians 9:19-23).

The reality for Paul, though, was that he was free from the law, yet he was a servant of Christ. He was not actually under law, but neither was he lawless. He was a servant of Christ Jesus. [Since the era of transition was brought to an end, recorded in the book of Acts, when the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 AD, the elements no longer include animal sacrifices and the Levitical system of Temple worship].

Complete and Free In Christ

In concluding, Paul reveals in his letter to the Colossians that all believers in Christ are now free from the rituals of the Law and they are complete in Christ and lack nothing. He shows that the ultimate meaning of baptism and circumcision is revealed in Christ's death, entombment and resurrection, and that every believer in Him is so identified with Him in His death, entombment and resurrection, that what is true of Christ, is true of the believer also! He makes it clear that all religious works of the flesh cannot save us from death and the power of the flesh, and therefore they cannot make us righteous before God.

Our flesh, the Old Humanity, has been stripped off in the circumcision of Christ when He died on the cross. We were then entombed together with Him in baptism into death, and roused from among the dead to a new life, the New Humanity of Christ. He is now the Head of a New Order of human beings who are freed from the old, condemned humanity of corrupt sinful flesh. At the present time, we await our expectation of immortality with faith and endurance, knowing that the day of deliverance and justification is coming. Yet one glorious day, ALL those in the old humanity of Adam will be transferred into the New Humanity of the Second and Last Adam, Christ Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:22-28, 45-49).

"Beware that no one shall be **despoiling you through philosophy and empty seduction, in accord with the elements of the world**, and not in accord with Christ, for in Him the entire complement of the Deity is dwelling bodily. **And you are complete in Him**, Who is the Head of every sovereignty and authority, **in Whom you were circumcised also with a circumcision not made by hands, in the stripping off of the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ.**

Being entombed together with Him in baptism, in Whom you were roused together also through faith in the operation of God, Who rouses Him from among the dead, you also being dead to the offences and **the uncircumcision of your flesh**, He vivifies us together jointly with Him, dealing graciously with all our offences, **erasing the handwriting of the decrees against us, which was hostile to us**, and has taken it away out of the midst, nailing it to the cross, **stripping off the sovereignties and authorities**, with boldness He makes a show of them, triumphing over them in it.

Let no one, then, be judging you in food or in drink or in the particulars of a festival, or of a new moon, or of Sabbaths, which are a shadow of those things which are impending – yet the body is the Christ's. Let no one be arbitrating against you, who wants, in humility and the ritual of the messengers, to parade what he has seen, feignedly, puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding the Head, out of Whom the entire body, being supplied and united through the assimilation and ligaments, is growing in the growth of God.

If, then, **you died together with Christ from the elements of the world**, why, as living in the world, are you subject to decrees: "You should not be touching, nor yet tasting, not yet coming into contact," (which things are all for corruption from use), in accord with the directions and teachings of men? – which are (having, indeed, an expression of wisdom in a willful ritual and humility and asceticism) not of any value toward the surfeiting (*or excesses*) of the flesh.

If, then, **you were roused together with Christ**, be seeking that which is above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Be disposed to that which is above, not to that on the earth, for you died, and **your life is hid**

together with Christ in God. Whenever Christ, our Life, should be manifested, **then you also shall be manifested together with Him in glory."**

(Colossians 2:8-3:4 CV)

ALL religion is meaningless and counts for nothing without real faith and love given by God's Spirit through Christ. Every religious ritual, every ceremonial law (even the Biblical ones), every act of penance or asceticism (being a monk, enduring pain for the sake of holiness), every prayer formula, every human philosophy, even acts of martyrdom - all of these things are impotent and valueless when it comes to pleasing God, defeating death, controlling the flesh (including pride), and experiencing real life as God intended.

Only through Christ can we escape from all of these things and be transported into a realm of true power, freedom, life and love - a New, Spiritually Rejuvenated Humanity.

Appendix: Observing the Elements

In these final days, when the focus of God's plan and purpose for His people is returning to Israel and the Jewish people, there are many Christians who are being led to observe the Jewish rituals or elements of the law. For the most, this is not necessarily a return to Old Covenant Judaism, but a return to the observances of New Covenant Judaism or Messianic Judaism, with a view to rebuilding the Hebrew roots of the Faith. There are many other Christians who are directly opposed to this movement, yet they emphasise the Christian observances instead. Others believe that we should not observe any kind of ritual at all.

As usual, the answer lies in between these various viewpoints. Paul makes it clear in Romans 11 that, before the end of this age, God will graft a remnant of His people Israel, according to the flesh, into their original Olive Tree, while the nations at large will be hewn out due to unbelief and apostasy. This indicates that the focus will return to Israel and Jerusalem again, as it was in the first century. Events which occurred at the beginning, in the first century AD, are to be mirrored at the conclusion of this age as well. As the gospel of the kingdom went out from Jerusalem and Israel to the ends of the earth, so now the gospel is returning from the nations to Israel and Jerusalem in preparation for the return of Jesus the Messiah/Christ. There is a spiritual awakening in 'the fig tree and all the trees.'

So in light of this, a return to the Hebrew roots of the Faith is a good and necessary thing, but we must also bear in mind that we are warned of a mass Apostasy during these last days (2 Thessalonians 2:1-12; Revelation 11; Matthew

24:15-25). This means that there will be a mass falling away or departure from the truths of the Bible, specifically a falling away from the gospel of God's grace, along with an increase in lawlessness, that is, disobedience to God's commands. Religion, human tradition and philosophy will be the driving force, and not God's truth. This includes the Rabbinic Judaism which Jesus and the apostles were up against.

Even though it is evident that this apostasy has already occurred in church history through the rise of Christendom and the Holy Roman Empire, as well as Islam and many other sects joining the ranks, nevertheless, it is also evident that it will continue to the very end of this age. Satan is having his last fling at seeking to deceive the nations again, causing moral degradation and ancient occult and idolatrous practices to resurface in a big way. These are days of seduction and deception, and we must be aware that lawlessness and injustice and error can be disguised as righteousness and godliness and Biblical truth!

Therefore, I believe that we should be extremely careful as to what or who we support in these days, especially in relation to the State of Israel and the rebuilding of the temple, for there is only One Master Who is over the One Faith and the One Body, and the One Truth and the One Spirit of the New Humanity is primarily focused on the New Creation, in which there is no Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free. Yes, God has a plan for all mankind in the coming kingdom, but it is only achieved in and through Christ Jesus, the true Lord and King of Israel and the whole world when He returns in the Day of the Lord.

In the meantime, He is calling out a special people for His Name from amongst Israel (the Israel of God, the remnant of grace, the natural olive branches) and the nations (the complement of the nations, the wild olive branches) to be a heavenly Israel, the Bride and Wife of the Lamb, co-ruling the heavens and the earth as the sons of God, as the royal priests after the order of Melchizedek. These are the Overcomers who obey the commandments of their Lord. This is the Joint-Body of Christ, the complete Israel of God.

Five Scriptures

Paul makes it very clear that there is nothing wrong with observing the Jewish elements of the Faith, for even the Lord's Supper is included in this, and it was originally instituted at the Lord's Passover meal. There are also important spiritual principles that are learned from the eastern custom of head covering, and concerning this custom, Paul does not forbid it, but on the contrary, encourages it, though He makes some important changes to it so that it accords with the teaching of the gospel (1 Corinthians 11).

The apostles passed on to the ecclesias certain traditions of the Faith, which are clearly from God (1 Corinthians 11:2; 2 Thessalonians 2:15; 3:6), and Paul would often appear as a Jew under law so as to save his brother Jews, though he himself was under Christ's law - the law of love (1 Corinthians 9:19-23).

Nevertheless, Paul makes it equally clear that the rule of faith and of the Spirit is what really counts. The elements of this world, that is, the physical things of this Old Creation, the flesh, religious rituals and ceremonies; these things in themselves mean nothing. They cannot change a person, and they cannot save anyone. Only the spiritual rebirthing of Christ within can change or save anyone. This is the way

of faith and living by the Spirit that puts no confidence in the flesh or material things. It is the way of the New Humanity, the New Creation, which is spiritual and not fleshly. The way of the flesh and the world is immaturity, whereas the way of the Spirit leads to maturity - and true freedom.

Here are the five texts that use the phrase *observing the elements* in the original Greek. Sadly, most versions, including the KJV, virtually omit this phrase altogether, or they paraphrase it to mean something quite different. The NIV doesn't use the word **elements** at all in these five texts! In the NIV, Philippians 3:16 reads completely different compared to a more literal translation like the CV.

A careful observation of these texts will reveal important truths about how we are to be observing the elements, if we are led to do so. In every instance, the context makes it evident that the elements are referring to original Jewish observances (and by extension, true Christian or Messianic observances), and it also places faith and spirit in contrast to the flesh and the world. The elements are to be viewed as symbols and shadows that speak to us of spiritual realities. On their own, they mean nothing and are of no value at all. In Philippians 3, Paul even rejects all his religious achievements as a Hebrew and Rabbi for the sake of knowing Christ Jesus his Lord. Now that's sobering!

"Taking these along, be purified together with them, and bear their expenses, that they should be shaving their heads, and all will know that what they have been instructed concerning you is nothing, but **you also are observing the elements** and you yourself are maintaining the law."

(Acts 21:24)

"...for him (*Abraham*) to be the father of all those who are believing through uncircumcision (*the nations*)...and the father of the Circumcision (*Israel*), not to those of the Circumcision only (*fleshly Israel*), but to those also **who are observing the elements of the faith** in the footsteps of our father Abraham, (while he was) in uncircumcision."

(Romans 4:12)

"If we may be living in spirit, in spirit we may be observing the elements also.

(Galatians 5:25)

"For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything, but a new creation. And whoever shall **observe the elements by this rule**, peace be on them, and mercy, also on the Israel of God."

(Galatians 6:16)

"Moreover, in what we outstrip others, there is to be a mutual disposition to **be observing the elements by the same rule.**"

(Philippians 3:16)

In this last text, Paul is saying that those of us who are outrunning others in relation to spiritual things, that is, those of us who are more mature, we should still make it our aim to teach the younger ones in the faith to have the same attitude and thinking in relation to observing the elements by the same rule of faith, and the spirit of the New Humanity. No one is to look down on anyone else for observing the elements. Even Jesus humbled Himself and came under law to redeem those under the curse of the law. We should all have the same attitude.

All scripture quotations are from the Concordant Version unless stated otherwise.

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