

A Case for Credobaptism

1. Introduction

The New Testament sign of the believer is undoubtedly the sign of baptism. But what exactly does this look like? Some have said that the Old Testament, 8th-day circumcision is what controls our understanding of baptism and would therefore see it as something that is done with babies as a sign of the New Covenant. They would argue that since circumcision was the sign of the Old Covenant, so infant baptism – which seems to be the best possible transition from Old Covenant times to New Covenant Times (New Testament times) – would be the best possible transition from circumcision to baptism.

However, is this a good deduction to make with regards to the church's current obligation to signify salvation through baptism (Matt. 28:19)? Is the church's present-day practice of baptism mainly a vestige of a period in salvific history that, historically speaking, was symbolised by males only? That could hardly be the case in light of New Testament examples of believers, whether male or female, who were baptised after coming to faith in the Lord Jesus.

The argument between infant baptism (paedobaptism) and believer's baptism by immersion (credobaptism) therefore mainly centres around this issue that involves its definition in New Testament times. If we define it in terms of a rehashed, reshuffled, or changed 8th-day circumcision, then it could perhaps make sense that babies should be baptised. But if it can be proven that it became the New Covenant sign of the believer, which is really a sign in its own right, then one could make a strong case for believer's baptism.

2. Does Romans 4:11 teach infant baptism?

Romans 4:11 is one proof text that hardly escapes the paedobaptist argument. Speaking of Abraham and the sign of circumcision, Paul says:

"11 He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well..."

Paedobaptists see this as a Pauline indication that circumcision has been replaced by baptism. For this reason, they would say that baptism in the New Testament was governed by the same stipulations that governed circumcision in the Old Testament. In this way, and specifically as a remainder of *unreformed* Reformed theology, baptism is understood as the sign of the believer done with babies alone. At this stage already, one can ask the obvious question as to why both baby boys and girls are allowed to be baptised, if there is such a direct translation from circumcision to baptism? In other words, the Old Testament saints circumcised their 8-day old boys as the sign of the covenant. If so, and if baptism is merely a kind of repackaged New Testament circumcision, then why would paedobaptists allow both boys and girls to be baptised? Theologian Matt Waymeyer aptly identifies the overarching sentiment that presides

over the adoption of paedobaptism quoting infant baptism advocate, Mark Ross, in the book, *"The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism"*:

"Those who subscribe to covenantal infant baptism maintain that baptism has now replaced circumcision as the mark of covenant membership, and that baptism's meaning and application are essentially the same as circumcision's in the Old Testament period. Included with this is the idea that the children of covenant members today are members of the covenant, as in the Old Testament period."¹

Waymeyer comments,

"In this way, the covenantal view of infant baptism can be summarized very simply – baptism is what circumcision was... This belief that baptism has replaced circumcision as the sign of the covenant is foundational to the case for infant baptism. According to this argument, if the covenant sign of circumcision was given to infants in Israel, how can the covenant sign of baptism be denied them in the church? Baptism is what circumcision was and should therefore be applied to infant children of believers."

For these reasons, the infant Baptist seeks texts to prove this assumption about circumcision. One such one is of course Romans 4:11 which they see as God's promise about justifying the one who would believe, signified in the Old Testament through circumcision and in the New Testament through infant baptism. Again, Waymeyer identifies the paedobaptist argument looking at Ross's interpretation of Roman 4:11:

"Circumcision is not a guarantee that Abraham has faith, nor even that Abraham has righteousness. What circumcision guarantees is the word of God's promise: that righteousness will be given on the basis of faith. In other words, circumcision is the authenticating mark that certifies the truth of God's promise, that he will give righteousness to the one who has faith. What is certified is not so much a truth about Abraham, or any other circumcised person, but a truth about God. In particular, circumcision certifies the truth of God's word in the gospel, namely, that all who believe will be accounted righteous."

This description of the paedobaptist understanding of baptism in light of circumcision might sound plausible in some way or another, however, what seems quite clear is that it misses the New Testament view of baptism entirely. Instead of it being a sign of God's faithfulness to justify those who *"would"* believe, baptism is defined as the sign of those who *"have"* already believed. This is the major point of departure for those who baptise infants. This understanding is both hinted at, and illustrated in the New Testament. We will take a look at some of these examples later.

As it involves Roman 4:11, Waymeyer insists that it does not teach about the significance of circumcision, but that it rather seems to specify the uniqueness of Abraham's circumcision. Abraham stood justified before God based on his faith which subsequently became signified by the seal of circumcision. In other words, even in this context it can be clearly seen that

¹ Matt Waymeyer, *The Master's Seminary Journal*: 29/2, (Fall 2018), 233-55.

circumcision was the sign for the already saved, not the promise of salvation for those who would believe in future. But then why would God eventually command all Jewish boys to be circumcised, believing or not? It can be said that although circumcision was the sign of the saved community in a general sense, not all who were circumcised were saved. This is the very point that Paul makes when he describes circumcision as a symbol of a contrite heart.

“²⁸ For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. ²⁹ But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter.”

Paul is saying here that circumcision is a manifestation of a changed life, not something that promises forgiveness when there is faith.

So looking at Romans 4:11 again, it should be no secret that Paul intends the same meaning for circumcision here. For Abraham, it became the seal of his salvation. As Weymeyer explains:

“According to Romans 4:11, then, Abraham’s circumcision did not seal his need for righteousness; it confirmed the presence of a righteousness he already possessed. For this reason, Romans 4:11 does not say (as many paedobaptists do) that circumcision sealed a conditional promise that the recipient will be justified if and when he believes. Instead, it says that Abraham’s circumcision testified that God had already accepted him and counted him righteous because of his faith. It actually sealed the righteousness he received through faith by confirming his right standing before God. In this way, Romans 4:11 ‘does not speak of a general ‘promise’ at all, but of the present justified status of a particular person,’ that person being Abraham.”

It is quite clear that this is exactly the point that Paul wishes to make in this passage. Looking at verse 10 this seems obvious:

“¹⁰ How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised.”

Paul is asking, how was this righteousness counted to him. Could it have been that he was justified through circumcision itself? No, he was justified before he was even circumcised, indicating firstly, that circumcision had no salvific value, and secondly, that it was not even intended as a promise of future salvation based on faith. Abraham’s circumcision as an example of faith for everyone who would follow was merely signified through the circumcision. For this reason, circumcision is significant for no other reason than this. As Douglas Moo explains:

“...Paul uses the word to denote something that ‘confirms’ the truth or reality of something else, as in 1 Cor. 9:2, where Paul describes the Corinthian believers themselves as the ‘seal,’ the confirmation and authentication, of his apostleship. In like manner, Abraham’s circumcision confirms his righteous status, a status that was his by virtue of his faith. Circumcision, therefore, has no independent value. It cannot affect one’s entrance into the people of God; nor does it even ‘mark’ a person as belonging to God’s people apart from a prior justifying. Abraham was declared

righteous while still uncircumcised. His later circumcision added nothing materially to that transaction; it simply signified and confirmed it.”²

What Moo says is indeed also the heart of the matter as it involves baptism. Circumcision does not mark a person as belonging to the people of God without a prior justification. Abraham’s circumcision “signified” and “confirmed” this fact. The New Testament takes a similar view to baptism which is seen as the sign of the believer. Baptism becomes the means by which a person who is already justified, or saved, is certified as being saved. The salvation which is already present is symbolised by water baptism.

3. What is the New Testament view of baptism?

a. *Romans 6:3*

Most scholars read the reference to baptism in Rom. 6:3 as a metaphor for salvation, or being baptised into the Spirit, or something like that. However, Moo suggests that this is not the case. He explains that,

“...without discounting the possibility of allusions to one or more of these ideas [seeing it as metaphorical], a reference to water baptism is primary. By the date of Romans, ‘baptize’ had become almost a technical expression for the rite of Christian initiation by water, and this is surely the meaning the Roman Christians would have given the word.”³

If we can assume that Paul is talking about water baptism here in Rom. 6:3, and if baptism is the sign of the one who believes, then it makes sense for Paul to use it in this way. He is then in effect saying that “do you not know that all who have undergone water baptism have also been baptised into his death, or been placed on the road of sanctification, dying to self.”

This is something that can only be true of a born-again believer. Many children in believing families do not yet exercise this kind of discipleship, let alone babies.

b. *Examples of people baptised after faith*

In addition to Paul’s view of baptism as something that should join salvation, is the fact that we only find scriptural examples that list those who believed and then were baptised, and not those who have not yet believed being baptised. In fact, this is one of the main arguments of the paedobaptist view. They assume that whenever the Bible makes mention of people being baptised that there must have been babies present who were baptised. One such example is found in Acts 16, where Luke recorded the account of the Philippian jailor’s salvation.

“³⁰ Then he brought them out and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” ³¹ And they said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” ³² And they spoke the word of the

² Douglas Moo, *The Letter to the Romans: The New International Commentary of the New Testament*, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: MI.

³ In addition, Moo (2018:384) observes: “Paul uses the verb [baptidso] eleven other times, and – in our estimation – all but one (1 Cor. 10:2 – and it is probably used in analogy to Christian water baptism) denote Christian water baptism (see also 1 Cor. 1:13, 14, 15, 16 [twice], 17; 12:13 [debated, but I think it belongs here]; 15:29 [twice]; Gal. 3:27).”

Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³ *And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family”* – Acts 16:30-33.

What we find here in short succession is firstly, the man’s inquiry about how to be saved. His urgency can be understood in light of the great miracle that just took place. Paul and Silas were singing hymns when all of the sudden there came an earthquake which caused all the gates to come undone. The jailor who was about to kill himself heard Paul telling him not to do it and so he immediately expressed his desire to know how to be saved, perhaps after hearing Paul and Silas talk and sing about Jesus.

Then we see how he actually comes to the Lord through faith. Luke tells that *“they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.”* Implied by the man’s question about how to be saved, is that he got saved, and that some others from his household got saved as well, at least, those who could believe, and all of them who believed were then baptised. This passage does not teach that there were underaged children who were baptised along with him. If we recommend this then we are making ourselves guilty of making an argument out of silence. Even the designation that *“he and all his family”* were baptised does not imply that there must have been a baby or two in their household who were baptised along with mom and dad. No, it simply means that he and those of his family who were believing and repentant were baptised.⁴

For this reason, we can expect the New Testament to view baptism as something that *always* follows conversion, as a symbol. One other example that deserves mention is that of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8.

“³⁴ And the eunuch said to Philip, “About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” ³⁵ Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?” ³⁸ And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him” (Acts 8:34-38).

In spite of an explicit reference to the Eunuch’s repentance, what is implied through Phillip’s explaining of the gospel to the man is that it lead to his conversion, which in turn led to his eligibility to be baptised. And this is exactly what Philip did for him once they saw a pool of water where he could be baptised.

c. Baptism by immersion

In addition to the spiritual requirement of baptism, i.e. to be saved, the New Testament also has a specific requirement in terms of the *mode* of baptism.

This is where it becomes helpful to look at the meaning of the word *“to baptise”* or *“baptidso”* (one word in the Greek) and it plainly means to *“dip,” “immerse,”* or *“sink”* something in

⁴ Paedobaptists also like to refer to other examples of “household baptisms” like Lydia’s household (Acts 16:15) and Stephanas’ household (1 Cor. 1:16).

water (Mark 1:4; Jn. 4:2; 1 Cor. 1:17).⁵ If we were going to be faithful to the actual meaning of the word then it would make sense that when we baptise people that it would have to be by immersion. The whole body has to be immersed into water. MacArthur&Mayhue (2017:782) explain:

“When used literally, the term refers to actions like dipping of fabric into dye or the immersion of a person in water. But it is also used figuratively in the New Testament to emphasize the close identity and solidarity between two people. For example, in 1 Corinthians 10:2, Paul explains that Old Testament Israel was baptized into Moses.”

However, when it comes to the water baptism of the believer, the figurative employment of the word does not detract from its literal use. Paul uses the symbol of water baptism to explain that a believer dies with Christ and then is raised to life. In the same way that someone gets lowered into the water and immersed, and then again brought up out of the water, so a person dies to self along with Christ and is raised to life with Christ. This is the very point Paul makes in Romans 6:4 when he says:

“4 We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”

So, in addition to it being the sign of salvation, it also symbolizes what this new life is like. This new life necessitated a dying to self, and a being made alive to Christ (Eph. 2:5).

Finally, believer’s baptism seems to be the mode of baptism which the early church modelled in the first few centuries after Christ.⁶

4. What should the Christian’s response to baptism be?

Without hesitation, we should embrace baptism as the first step of obedience after salvation. If you have embraced the Lord through saving faith, then he commands you to be baptised. Like the Ethiopian eunuch, nothing prevents you from being baptised. If you are now convinced that believer’s baptism by immersion is the way that the Bible presents baptism, then you are being disobedient if you don’t get baptised.

In addition, when we don’t obey our Lord in baptism then we miss out on the opportunity to identify with our Lord (Matt. 10:32-33) through the symbolism of baptism. Your baptism can be a great opportunity to invite unsaved family and tell them how the Lord saved you. It is likewise encouraging for your fellow believer and strengthening to their faith to hear how the Lord saved you.

⁵ “The practice of baptism in the New Testament was carried out in one way: the person being baptized was immersed or put completely under the water and then brought back up again. Baptism by immersion is therefore the ‘mode’ of baptism or the way in which baptism was carried out in the New Testament.” Wayne Grudem, 1994. *Systematic Theology*. Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, p. 967.

⁶ MacArthur&Mayhue (2017:794) insert: “For a detailed discussion on this point, see Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009). See also Hendricks Stander and Johannes Louw, *Baptism in the Early Church*, rev. ed. (Leeds: Carey, 2004).

5. Conclusion

The Bible is clear on the necessity for Christians to be baptised. Our baptism is not a New Testament repackaging of the Old Testament circumcision. Also, baptism does not save us. Rather it is the symbol of salvation for those who have placed their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and have repented from their sin. If we keep holding off on baptism, then we are not obeying our Lord in this very first step of obedience.