

Baptism Runs Counter to Autonomy (Col 2.8-15)

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⁸ See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. ⁹ For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰ and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. ¹¹ In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ¹² having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. ¹³ And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵ He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

Introduction

As we continue to study the doctrine of baptism (with church membership and communion in the back of our minds), we come today to Colossians 2.8-15. In this letter, Paul expresses concern for the saints at Colossae, praying that they be filled with knowledge of God's will in a worthy walk that pleases God being fruitful in good works (1.9-12). These brothers and sisters are earnest disciple learners (1.7) and surrounding them is the danger of false teachers who promote **self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body...of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh** (2.23, i.e. our sin nature). Therefore, to put the Colossians on guard, Paul appeals to their baptism telling them that it runs counter to autonomy. So we have two main things to consider: the context of Paul's appeal to baptism, and the meaning of his appeal.

I. The context of Paul's appeal to baptism¹

The context consists of two exhortations and two reasons for the second exhortation.

A. Two exhortations

1) In his first exhortation, the apostle speaks to the believer's manner of life: He says, walk in Christ **rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving** (7); in every step you take; live your life in a way that is consistent with your commitment to the Lordship of Christ, healthy discipleship, and thankful worship. In the second exhortation, Paul emphasizes the negative side of a strong walk with God, namely, the need to avoid the tricky thinking of the ungodly with their **plausible arguments** (2.4): **See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ** (v. 8). If you have a healthy discipleship, then you will engage various arguments, and you will engage with a fear, not of men, but of deception by subtle and hollow philosophy (this is the point stressed by the writer to the Hebrews, which is vital in discipleship by mutual exhortation: **But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin**, Heb 3.13). This kind of

¹Is this water baptism? Yes, one way to argue this (similarly for 1 Cor 12.13) is to frame the question for the normative state of things after the transitional period of the Book of Acts (transition is most acute up to Acts 11.16). When we do that, we have to view the baptism texts of the epistles through the lens furnished by Ephesians 4.5: **There is one body and one Spirit--just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call--one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.** Is the one baptism Spirit baptism with water ritual as merely outward and not really baptism? Perhaps, water washing is not even a sacrament. However, the water ritual has great significance by God's command; it is baptism and it is a sacrament instituted by Christ (Mat 28.19-20). Now, to frame it in the opposite way, if the one baptism is Christian water baptism, then how do we account for Holy Spirit baptism in the time between beyond the transitional period of Acts? Well, it must be that Paul is telling us that water baptism as a confession of the Lordship of Christ from the heart is *in the Spirit* (as he informs us in 1 Cor 12.3, 13). In that sense, water baptism is Spirit baptism because of the normative action of the Holy Spirit in all believers in the present time. Therefore, when Paul speaks of baptism in Colossians, even with no mention of water and with no mention of the Holy Spirit, we can be sure that he is talking about water baptism, which is baptism in the Spirit when baptism is from true faith in the heart, i.e. as here in Col 2.12, **"Baptism...through faith."** The key is that we cannot separate water baptism from Spirit baptism (if you say that the one baptism is Spirit baptism, you have to include in it water baptism: Spirit baptism that comes to expression in the gift of obedience in water baptism; if you say that the one baptism is water baptism, you have to include Spirit baptism: the one baptism, water baptism, is in the Spirit. The latter is preferred.

philosophy depends on human tradition and basic principles of this world (2.8b). The basic principles rest on human commands and teachings (2.22), which is the way of religious self-sufficiency. Thus, this exhortation pertains to claims of human autonomy and human authority because it does not depend on Christ. It operates independent of Christ and not in accord with His Lordship or authority (2.8c, it is **not according to Christ**).

B. Two reasons for the second exhortation

Two reasons ground the command to avoid human autonomy.

1) First, do not go down the independent road because Christ is the incarnate God and Lord of all: ⁹ **For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,** ¹⁰ **and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority** (9-10). He is the only mediator between God and man, and worship is due to Him alone by His instruction since He is **the head of all rule and authority** (10b). In 2.10a, something remarkable is sandwiched between the affirmations of the incarnation (9, He is the bodily manifestation of God as fully man and fully God) and the exaltation of Christ (10b, He is universal sovereign with all authority). It is the fact that you have been filled in Him. This means you depend on Him “for only...everything” because in Him you possess all things, you are a joint-heir with Christ of all things, and everything you need to sustain your entire life body and soul is yours in Him. Thus, if God spared not His Son but delivered Him up to the cross for you, then how much more will He see to it that you have all things for your journey now and for your eternal joy hereafter. So, as you continue to grow spiritually, you have work to do, but it is not by the laws of false teachers. Instead, your growth will come by humble submission to Christ.

2) At this point, Paul introduces his second reason to avoid acting autonomously, which is baptism in a complex relationship to circumcision: ¹¹ **In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ,** ¹² **having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead** (2.11-12). All who read these words have to wonder how water baptism fits into the flow of thought (**having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him**)? Burial is the seal of death; it confirms the reality that a body will undergo corruption and therefore is best buried to avoid the stench of death and other degradations to which man is subject because of sin. So, what does it mean to connect death and burial with baptism? If it simply said, “You died with Christ and were raised with Him,” we would have an easier time explaining what this means. However, Paul ties both our death with Christ and our resurrection with Him to baptism: you were buried in death (in death sealed and confirmed) with Him *in baptism*, and you were raised with Him *in baptism*. Moreover, he develops a relationship of union with Christ to both circumcision and baptism (2.11-12: **In him also you were circumcised...having been buried with him in baptism**). Finally, we must not lose sight of the fact that Paul makes this appeal to baptism as part of his exhortation to avoid the sin of autonomy. Thus, we now turn to what he means by these things.

II. The meaning of Paul's appeal to baptism in relationship to circumcision

Some questions will help us work through the complexity here.

A. How is circumcision being used in this text?

It is used metaphorically for the death of Christ (**In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ**). That you were circumcised *in Him* rests on the fact that He was circumcised. To be sure, as a true Israelite, Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day after His birth (Gen 17.10), and the literal circumcision is a removal of the foreskin from the male organ of generation, but clearly this is not a literal cutting away of a portion of a person's flesh. It refers to a circumcision **made without hands**; so a human action is not in view. Instead, this cutting away has its roots in the removal of disobedient Israelites according to the institution of circumcision in Genesis 17.14: **Any**

uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant. Strikingly, Jesus is the uncircumcised Israelite that has broken God's covenant. He is a covenant breaker, the just in the place of the unjust. So, in the fulfillment of God's eternal plan, He must be circumcised. Thus, He identifies Himself with covenant breaking (uncircumcised) Israelites; at the same time, He identifies Himself with covenant breaking Gentiles (the uncircumcised). He therefore comes under the knife of judgment for disobedience to endure the curses of the covenant by being cut off from God and His family.

B. What aspect of union with Christ is in view in this circumcision-death?

Application of union with Christ is what Paul accents.² What God planned for you (in the *pactum salutis*) and what Jesus therefore secured for you (in the *historia salutis*) by your union with Him in circumcision-death is applied to you in your experience in history in three ways.

1) First, this union comes to realization by a surgery God performs on your sin nature. You were circumcised **by putting off the body of the flesh** (2.11). The verb form of this noun (**putting off**) is used in 3.9 (**Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices**). The flesh and the old self refer to our sin nature in the fall, the indulgence of the flesh (2.23). The death of Christ, His cutting off, is applied to you by the cutting off of your sin nature. Although this is decisive issuing in a great change, a battle with the remnants of sin remains and so does a fight to the death: **Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.** ⁶**On account of these the wrath of God is coming.** ⁷**In these you too once walked, when you were living in them.** ⁸**But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth.** ⁹**Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices** ¹⁰**and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator** (Col 3.5-10).

2) Second, this union comes to realization by God's work in your baptism: **having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith** (Col 2.12).

3) Third, this union comes to realization in your new resurrection life *from spiritual death*: **you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him** (Col 2.13a).

²How should we understand union with Christ in death and resurrection in circumcision and baptism? To understand these things, we need the largest possible context, which is the context of salvation planned, accomplished, and applied.

A. Plan of salvation or the *pactum salutis*

The *pactum salutis* is the pact, covenant, or agreement regarding salvation between the members of the triune God before the beginning of the world. The key passages are John 17 and Ephesians 1.

1) In John 17, Jesus tells us that He came to this earth to fulfill a mission, one that He agreed to accomplish in obedience to the Father. The goal of this plan is the salvation of a people that the Father gave to the Son in the covenant of redemption: **you have given [me] authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him** [that is, given to me in our agreement before the creation of the world] (Jn 17.2).

2) In Ephesians 1, Paul identifies these "given ones" as God's chosen people: **he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him** (1.4). It is important to note that our election according to this verse is in him. It is in union with Jesus Christ the Son of God who became the redeemer of God's elect by becoming the God-man. He had to be truly and fully God and truly and fully man to save sinners. Now it should be obvious that being joined to Christ's death and resurrection in baptism is not speaking directly of this union of election or of the *pactum salutis*.

B. The accomplishment of salvation, the *historia salutis*

From John 17, we learn that Jesus finished the saving work He came to do for the particular sinners God gave to Him in the plan of redemption before the foundation of the world (v. 4). Interestingly, they were united to Christ in His death on the cross; thus, Paul says, we died with Him (Rom 6.8). To be clear, our death was in union with Him in His death on the cross; we died with Him back there in history in the accomplishment of salvation when He bore our sins in His own body on the tree (1 Pet 2.24). Consequently, the Father's plan of election (His plan for those united with Christ in the eternal covenant of redemption) was accomplished for them by their union with Him in His death, but neither of these aspects of union with Christ is in view directly in the Christian's burial and resurrection in union with Christ *in water baptism*. According to Colossians 2.11, we need to add circumcision to the list of what took place in union with Christ on the cross.

C. The application of salvation, the *ordo salutis*

This is sometimes called the existential or experiential union with Christ, because it refers to the order or the way in which we receive the benefits of Christ's work in our personal experience. In this connection, the apostle tells us that water baptism joined us to Christ in His death (confirmed by burial) and to His resurrection: **having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him** (Col 2.12a). So, water baptism is an *application* of union with Christ, i.e. something the Spirit applies with efficacious grace.

It should be evident that all three of these things refer to applied union with Christ (the *ordo salutis*) that presupposes union with Him in the eternal covenant of redemption and union with Him in His death and resurrection in His personal history. Therefore, your circumcision with Christ involves this combination of things: the cutting out of your dead heart (the heart of stone), the giving of a new heart (Eze 36.26-27), and your baptism. Baptism seems to be the odd man out, which leads to the third question.

C. How does baptism fit into this flow of thought?

The answer is a true marvel. Your baptism is as much a work of God as is the cutting out and replacing of your heart. Truly, Paul presents baptism as an act of God in which you are passive: you *were buried* with Him in baptism. Of course, your being washed with water in the ritual was performed by a church administrator. However, Paul looks beyond the secondary agent to the ultimate agent. He looks to God who gave you a new heart, new resurrection life from spiritual death, and baptism.

Along with the emphasis on God's action, the writer also cites your posture in baptism for he says that in your baptism **you were also raised with him through faith** (2.12). Importantly, this is not saying that baptism results in union with Christ or that it has some holy power; there is no holy water in the church, and the church does not dispense grace by its use of water in baptism. It is not saying that everyone who is baptized has faith. It says that all who are baptized through faith do so *because they were united to Christ in His circumcision-death and because God cut out their dead hearts, gave them new living hearts of faith (gave them faith) by which they obeyed the Lord's command to receive baptism*. How can the dead believe? How can people with spiritually dead hearts obey the Lord in baptism? They do so by the power of God in grace, by the power of His resurrection that has its roots in the wonder working power of the cross (cf. "there is power, power, wonder working power in the precious blood of the Lamb). You will recall that the central idea of baptism as a human response to the gospel is obedience, as Christ's obedience in baptism shows (both in the ritual and in the baptism of fire). Therefore, the obedience of baptism includes a commitment to good behavior (1 Pet 3.21) to be learned as disciples of Christ in His church (Mat 28.19-20). Accordingly, those who receive baptism by faith confess that Jesus is Lord *by the Spirit* and from the heart (1 Cor 12.3). This is trust in the reality of the resurrection by God's power for it is **faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead** (Col 2.12). Thus, believing from the heart and confessing the resurrection Lordship of Christ with the mouth is how one is saved (Rom 10.9-10) and it is the product of union with Christ in His circumcision-death.

D. A final question: what else flows from your union with Christ?

Paul goes on to include the canceling of your legal debt of punishment required by God's law. This occurred at the cross (nailed to the cross) and is applied to you in the declaration of your forgiveness: ¹³**And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses,** ¹⁴**by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross** (Col 2.13-14).

The apostle makes one final point in 2.15: ¹⁵**He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him**. At this point, he returns full circle to his first reason to avoid autonomy, which he grounded in the headship of Christ over all (2.10). Accordingly, to give in to the sin of attempted autonomy is to claim the impossible, to speak and embody falsehood, to contradict Christ, and to deny His resurrection power and glory.

Concluding applications

On one hand, baptism is a reminder of your commitment to be a disciple of Christ under His authority in the church, and it is a call to you to renew that commitment. Baptism is set against autonomy. It is an act of obedience in which you pledge obedience. So, because of the

work of Christ (for you, the just for the unjust), renew your pledge of obedient good behavior (1 Pet 3.15). Here in Colossians, this means to regroup and keep training for battle with the sin of remnant autonomy and unrighteousness. Acknowledge your proneness to wander from the God you love. Give Him your heart to seal it for the courts above. Put this sin to death, the sin of asserted autonomy (Col 3.5-10) by humbling yourself before God.

In this connection, consider how true humility is the opposite of false and subtle autonomous humility. False humility has the ingredients of self-sufficiency (self-imposed worship, 2.23) and self-law (of human commands and teaching, instead of God's law, 2.20-22). It is not humble to live without recognizing your need and personal inadequacy before the Lord. This is an independent spirit that says, "I would rather do it myself, I did it my way, and I do not need to have a submissive spirit." *This posture does no good, Paul says, against the flesh, that is, against the sinful nature that we still have as Christians* (your earthly nature, 3:5; your old self, 3:9). The way to spiritual progress is by humbling yourself before the Lord denying any self-sufficiency and acknowledging your total dependence on Him. Furthermore, you do this at a basic level and in a fundamental way when you submit to His absolute and final authority. You are humble when you submit your will to His will, when you submit your "want to's" to His commands. Submitting to His commands while clinging to Christ for mercy is the pathway of progress in holiness. As much as it might go against the grain of our sinful hearts, submission to God and others carries with it the promise of growth in the things of God.

On the other hand, baptism thus gives you God's promise of sustaining grace, the kind that goes with His circumcision of your hearts. It is an application by resurrection power of your union with Christ in the eternal covenant of grace and in His death and resurrection in history. He cleansed you with full forgiveness and pardon from all the legal claims against you. He did that decisively by giving you His Son to be your substitute; that is the assurance that baptism speaks to you about, namely, *that God will cleanse you all the way to glory*. So, do battle with the sins of autonomy, lack of submission, and the entangling deceptions of unbelieving thought. This is discipleship work that requires toughness. Do tough battle with a tough enemy; do so knowing that you must engage, but also knowing that you will win the battle: for Christ disarmed all His and your enemies and triumphed for your eternal salvation.

May we fall down before the majesty of God with a sense of fear and awe knowing that what the Father planned for us before the foundation of the world, and what Jesus secured for us in His painful circumcision-death, the Holy Spirit applies to us, by cutting out our dead hearts and replacing them with hearts of obedience in baptism, by which we commit ourselves to live under the authority of Christ, as His disciples, by the resurrection power of grace; to the glory of the triune God, amen.