

DOES BAPTISM REPLACE CIRCUMCISION? A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

by
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Many theologians believe that there is an obvious connection between circumcision and baptism. This belief is perhaps most prevalent in the Reformed paedobaptist community, but it also exists among some Reformed Baptists. For the Reformed paedobaptist, the belief that baptism has replaced circumcision is a critical argument in support of infant baptism. Thus, the majority of this article will interact with the Reformed paedobaptist literature on the subject.

John Calvin summarized the typical Reformed argument when he wrote the following:

Now we can see without difficulty the similarity and difference of these two signs. The promise...is the same in both, namely, that of God's fatherly favor, of forgiveness of sins, and of eternal life. Then the thing represented is the same, namely, regeneration. In both there is one foundation upon which the fulfillment of these things rests. Therefore, there is no difference in the inner mystery, by which the whole force and character of the sacraments are to be weighed. What dissimilarity remains lies in the outward ceremony, which is a very slight factor, since the most weighty part depends upon the promise and the thing signified. We therefore conclude that, apart from the difference in the visible ceremony, whatever belongs to circumcision pertains likewise to baptism.... By this it appears incontrovertible that baptism has taken the place of circumcision to fulfill the same office among us.²

Similarly, Zacharias Ursinus, who represented the generation after Calvin, noted in his *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, "Baptism occupies the place of circumcision in the New Testament, and has the same use that circumcision had in the Old Testament."³

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²John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 2:1327 (emphasis added).

³Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G. W. Williard (Cincinnati, OH: T. P. Bucher, 1851), 367.

Some more recent theologians, like Robert Booth, connect circumcision and baptism so closely that they assume any argument against infant baptism is also an argument against infant circumcision. Booth writes, “This clear connection between the two covenant signs of circumcision and baptism creates a difficult problem for opponents of infant baptism, for any argument against infant baptism is necessarily an argument against infant circumcision.”⁴

The above citations are but a few of the many statements from Reformed paedobaptists about the connection between circumcision and baptism. There is remarkable unity among Reformed paedobaptists on this point. The idea that baptism has replaced circumcision is so central to the Reformed system, covenant theologians wrote it into the Reformed confessions. For example, the Belgic Confession asserts, “Having abolished circumcision, which was done with blood, he established in its place the sacrament of baptism.... Moreover, what circumcision was to the Jews, that baptism is for our children” (art. 34).

It is helpful to spell out why the connection between circumcision and baptism is so essential to the Reformed paedobaptist argument. Under the old covenant, infants were granted immediate entrance into the covenant community through circumcision. Therefore, unless there is some explicit scriptural guidance to change that pattern, we should grant infants immediate entrance into the covenant under the new administration (i.e., baptism into the church). If we can show that circumcision and baptism are the same, then this is strong support for the idea of continuity between the people of God in the Old and New Testaments. Thus, the link between baptism and circumcision is a crucial piece of evidence for the Reformed paedobaptist position.⁵

The connection between baptism and circumcision is an excellent discussion point to test one’s theology. Both circumcision and baptism have significant descriptions in Scripture. Therefore, we have sufficient material from which to draw comparisons or contrasts.

By observing the detailed narratives and descriptions of baptism and circumcision, one should be able to discern whether there are any essential differences between the two. As such, the purpose of this article will be to provide a brief overview of circumcision and then to compare circumcision and baptism. The goal will be to adequately demonstrate that circumcision and baptism are significantly different and should not be thought of as essentially equal.

⁴Robert R. Booth, *Children of the Promise: The Biblical Case for Infant Baptism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1995), 109.

⁵Ross states it this way: “If no direct proof of the sort discussed above can be given for the paedobaptist position, what kind of evidence can be given? I would maintain that the case fundamentally rests on establishing two principal contentions: first, that baptism and circumcision have essentially the same meaning; and second, that the covenant community is similarly constituted in the Old and New Testaments (specifically, that children are members of the covenant community in both)” (Mark E. Ross, “Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals,” in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, ed. Gregg Strawbridge [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003], 100).

A Brief Overview of Circumcision⁶

Although we know about circumcision primarily through the Old Testament description, it was not a unique custom known only to Israel. Jeremiah 9:25–26 provides a list of nations that seem to have practiced circumcision.⁷ Besides Judah, this list specifies Egypt, Edom, the sons of Ammon, and Moab. Out of all the nations listed, Abraham appears to have had the most significant interactions with Egypt.⁸ He spent time in Egypt during a severe famine in Canaan (Gen 12:10–20) and at least 23 years with Hagar, an Egyptian maidservant (Gen 16:1–3; 17:25).⁹ In the time after Abraham, Israel spent over 400 years in Egypt where they developed as a nation and continued to practice the rite of circumcision, apparently unaltered (cf. Exod 4:24–26; 12:44, 48; Lev 12:3; Josh 5:2–9). Although Scripture is silent on the issue, it seems reasonable that when God instituted the sign of circumcision with Abraham, he interpreted circumcision in light of his familiarity with Egypt.

Egyptian circumcision differed from Israelite circumcision in a variety of ways.¹⁰ First, Egyptian circumcision involved only a slight incision in the foreskin, rather than a removal of the entire foreskin as practiced by Israel. Second, the Egyptians performed circumcision on males 6–14 years old, rather than on male infants eight days old. Third, the evidence seems to indicate that circumcision was obligatory for only the rulers and priests of Egypt, but in Israel it was required for every male Israelite (Gen 17:10). After presenting and evaluating the Egyptian evidence, Meade concludes, “Egyptian circumcision functioned as a specific, voluntary, and initiatory rite to identify and affiliate the subject with the deity and to signify devotion to the same deity.”¹¹

Given the above information, I believe we can reasonably establish

⁶I am grateful for the work of ThM student, Hunter Hays, “The Meaning and Significance of Circumcision” (ThM thesis, Shepherds Theological Seminary, 2022). He helped bolster this section on circumcision by his observations and comments.

⁷Peter C. Craigie, *Jeremiah 1–25*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1991), 153; William Lee Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, Chapters 1–25*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 319. Alternatively, this text could simply be saying that the circumcised (Judah) will be punished with the uncircumcised nations, who are then listed in verse 26. This is the translation followed by the KJV, “I will punish all *them which are* circumcised with the uncircumcised.” I think it makes more sense to follow the translation of the ESV, “I will punish all those who are circumcised merely in the flesh.”

⁸Although Abraham is not so named until Genesis 17, for the sake of the reader I will refer to him as Abraham throughout.

⁹We arrive at 23 years by taking the 10 years from Genesis 16:1–3 and adding the 13 years in Genesis 17:25.

¹⁰John D. Meade, “The Meaning of Circumcision in Israel: A Proposal for a Transfer of Rite from Egypt to Israel,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 20 (2016): 35–54.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 45.

the purpose of Egyptian circumcision. Since Egyptian circumcision focused primarily on the royal and priestly class, it seems correct to understand Egyptian circumcision as some sort of divine dedication of royalty or priests. If Israel was aware of the dedicatory implications of the Egyptian rite of circumcision for the royal and priestly class, then it would be natural to associate the sign of circumcision with the role of being a kingdom of priests. The title “kingdom of priests” is exactly how God labels Israel in Exodus 19:6.¹² If this understanding is correct, circumcision would at least be marking Israel out for a special role as a kingdom of priests. But it is unlikely that this nuance exhausts the full meaning of circumcision for the ancient Israelites.

In addition to the likely Ancient Near Eastern background of Egyptian circumcision, Scripture itself provides a helpful description that allows us to discern the meaning and significance of circumcision. Genesis 17 is the initial mention of circumcision in the Bible, and the context of the sign of circumcision is God’s promise of an eternal covenant (Gen 17:7, 13, 19). Importantly, Genesis 17 was not the initiation of the covenant. God had already initiated and instituted his covenant with Abraham previously (cf. Gen 12:1–3, 7; 13:14–17; 15:7–21). As part of the covenant, God had promised Abraham blessing, descendants, land, nations, and kings. Circumcision was a sign that was tied to these promises of the Abrahamic covenant.¹³

A sign in the Old Testament can function in three different ways.¹⁴ First, a proof sign endeavors to prove a proposition through extraordinary display. An example of this would be Isaiah 38, where God promises Hezekiah that he will add 15 years to his life (in response to his repentance), as well as deliver Jerusalem from the king of Assyria. To prove that this prophecy would occur, the prophet Isaiah says God will give a sign, specifically, the sundial will turn back ten steps (vv. 7–8). Second, a symbol sign represents something through association or similarity. An example of this is when Ezekiel sets up a model of Jerusalem under siege using a brick and an iron griddle, which is called “a sign for the house of Israel” (Ezek 4:1–3). Finally, there can also be a cognition sign, the purpose of which is to bring to remembrance something in the mind of an observer. One can further subdivide a cognition sign into

¹²John D. Meade, “Circumcision of Flesh to Circumcision of Heart: The Typology of the Sign of the Abrahamic Covenant,” in *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenant Theologies*, ed. Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker (Nashville, TN: B & H, 2016), 131.

¹³In contrast, the Reformed paedobaptist will often only discuss the spiritual blessings and ignore the physical promises of the Abrahamic covenant. For example, Helopoulos writes, “When it comes to the sacrament of circumcision, it is important for us to note that it served not primarily as a sign of family, racial, or national identity—although it did distinguish the Jews from the people of other nations—but rather as a sign and seal of the most extravagant spiritual blessings that God bestows upon man” (Jason Helopoulos, *Covenantal Baptism* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2021], 30).

¹⁴This paragraph relies on Michael V. Fox, “The Sign of the Covenant: Circumcision in the Light of the Priestly ’ôl Etiologies,” *Revue Biblique* 81 (1974): 562–69.

two categories: identity signs, which mark something as having a specific identity or function, and mnemonic signs, which bring to mind something already known. An example of an identity sign would be the banners of Numbers 2:2, which each tribe would fly to identify the encampments. An example of a mnemonic sign is Exodus 13:9, where the eating of unleavened bread is a sign which reminds Israel of the Exodus experience and how God brought them out of Egypt.

In light of the above categories, how is the sign of circumcision functioning within the Abrahamic covenant? To answer this question, some scholars point to similarities in Genesis 9:8–17, where the rainbow functions as a mnemonic sign to remind God of his covenant between the creation and Creator.¹⁵ The rainbow reminds God that he will never again destroy the world by flood (vv. 15–16). If the sign of circumcision is like the sign of the rainbow, then the sign of circumcision could be a reminder to God to be faithful to his covenant with Abraham to make his descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky (Gen 15:5).¹⁶

However, although there are a few parallels with the Noahic covenant, Genesis 17 does not indicate that the sign of the covenant is to remind God of anything.¹⁷ Thus, it is conjecture to say that the sign of circumcision is to remind God of something. Moreover, in contrast to the Noahic covenant, there are significant obligations placed upon Abraham to walk blamelessly (v. 2). As such, although it is possible that the sign of the covenant reminds God of his promises, it seems more in line with the context of Genesis 17 and the command to be blameless that the sign would remind Abraham and his descendants of the need to live holy and righteous lives before God as his chosen people in light of his promises.¹⁸ This emphasis would seem to coincide with the Egyptian concept of circumcision being a mark of dedication and commitment to a deity.

Within the context of Genesis 17, circumcision as a mark of dedication and commitment to God makes sense. However, there are later texts where this idea of dedication and commitment to God do not seem to be the best understanding of circumcision. When we look further into the Old Testament, we regularly see the idea of uncircumcision

¹⁵DeRouchie notes the following, “Only these ‘signs’ in the Hebrew Bible are linked directly to בְּרִית (‘covenant’), and each of these covenants ‘signs’ is denoted by the verb נתן (‘to give, confirm, make’) and qualified by the phrase ‘between me and you’ (cf. Gen 9:12, 13; 17:2, 10, 11; Ezek 20:12 with Exod 16:29). Because the rainbow (cf. Gen 9:15–16) and the Sabbath (Exod 31:13–15) explicitly function to *remind* the covenant parties of their obligations, circumcision very likely performs the same role” (Jason S. DeRouchie, “Circumcision in the Hebrew Bible and Targums: Theology, Rhetoric, and the Handling of Metaphor,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 14 [2004]: 185).

¹⁶Fox, “Sign of the Covenant,” 595.

¹⁷Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1998), 24.

¹⁸Ibid.

being used as a figurative depiction of ineffective body parts. The best example of this is probably Exodus 6:12 where Moses wonders how Pharaoh would listen to him, because he was of “uncircumcised lips.” This description most likely parallels Moses’s previous complaint in Exodus 4:10, where Moses claimed he was “slow of speech and of tongue.”¹⁹ Hence, the significance of the phrase “uncircumcised lips” most likely refers to a lack of ability.²⁰

That uncircumcision refers to inability seems supported by how Scripture writers use the language of uncircumcision to refer to other body parts as well. For example, Jeremiah 6:10 says that the people of Israel had ears that were uncircumcised, and therefore “they cannot listen.” The picture is one of having skin over the ears, and therefore the ears are incapable of hearing.²¹ Like Exodus 6, this illustration of uncircumcision seems to indicate inability. Similarly, elsewhere Scripture refers to an uncircumcised heart as a metaphor for a dull, insensitive heart (cf. Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4; 9:25). Leviticus 26:41 notes that the solution to an uncircumcised heart is humility and turning from iniquity.²² All of these examples seem to be consistent with the idea that language of uncircumcision emphasizes the inability to function as one ought to.²³

In summary, circumcision likely was a visible reminder to Israel of their special, holy status before God. They were to function as a kingdom of priests to the watching nations. Additionally, circumcision was a reminder of God’s promises to Abraham—namely, a multitude of descendants, nations, kings, land, and blessing. Due to the prevalence of circumcision in Israelite society, uncircumcision became a ready illustration of dysfunction and inability. Prophets regularly referred to

¹⁹Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publications Society, 1991), 33.

²⁰However, some have interpreted the phrase as an inherent unfitnes or unsuitability to be God’s spokesperson. See T. Desmond Alexander, *Exodus*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 129. This understanding of Exodus 6:12 might fit better with the Egyptian belief that circumcision was about dedication and commitment, however, I think inability remains a prominent meaning for the metaphor of uncircumcision.

²¹Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, 214.

²²Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 2332–33.

²³However, scholars have noted that these examples could be construed as examples of the need for dedication or consecration. For example, Sarna writes, “From early times, the terms for uncircumcision and circumcision came to be used figuratively. A mind blocked to God’s commandments has been described as ‘an uncircumcised heart’ (Lev. 26:41; Jer. 9:25; Ezek. 44:7, 9), a heart that required ‘circumcising’ (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4); one unresponsive to God’s word as having ‘an uncircumcised ear’ (Jer. 6:10); one impeded in his speech as having ‘uncircumcised lips’ (Exod. 6:12, 30). All these metaphors prove conclusively that circumcision in Israel was no mere formal outward ritual but was invested with a spiritual aspect that betokened dedication and commitment to God” (Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, JPS Torah Commentary [Philadelphia: Jewish Publications Society, 1989], 387).

mouths, ears, and hearts as uncircumcised in order to describe a failure to function properly.

With this brief background of circumcision, we are now in a better position to compare circumcision and baptism. In this next section, I will seek to show that there are significant areas of difference between baptism and circumcision. As such, I will contend it is incorrect for us to agree with Calvin, who says, “whatever belongs to circumcision pertains likewise to baptism.”²⁴

Differences between Circumcision and Baptism

Although Reformed arguments emphasize the apparent similarities between baptism and circumcision, they often give little attention to the significant differences between the two.²⁵ There are at least seven significant differences between circumcision and baptism. These differences demonstrate that it is incorrect to say everything applicable to circumcision also applies to baptism. Even more so, these differences should challenge the idea that baptism has replaced circumcision.

Circumcision Was a Male-Only Rite

The first major difference between circumcision and baptism is that circumcision was a male-only sign, whereas baptism does not distinguish between male and female. Under the Abrahamic covenant, “Every male among you shall be circumcised” (Gen 17:10b). However, under the new covenant, every disciple, male or female, is baptized (cf. Acts 8:12). Reformed paedobaptists often downplay this point of difference by appealing to covenant expansion and inclusion. For example, referring to this issue, Helopoulos writes, “The new covenant establishes a more inclusive, free, and gracious era, and we should expect to see its sacrament of initiation become more inclusive, not less.”²⁶

However, this reasoning runs into two problems. First, as the rest of the examination of circumcision and baptism makes clear, baptism is more restrictive than circumcision. Circumcision was acceptable for anyone who was Jewish (adults or children), no questions asked. In contrast, we reserve baptism only for those who make professions of faith. Even paedobaptists require a profession of faith by adults before baptism. Thus, the standard for baptism is more restrictive than

²⁴Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2:1327.

²⁵“What is needed is not a repetition of this point but rather a close look at the Old Testament to determine exactly what is the nature of the non-essential diversity between the signs. Paedobaptists, it would seem, are so committed to the similarity of circumcision and baptism that they care little for the task of determining wherein the two are dissimilar. Circumcision *is* baptism and baptism *is* circumcision, for all theological purposes. The difference between the signs is so incidental that no good thing, theologically speaking, could come from probing it” (Paul K. Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace* [Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999], 96).

²⁶Helopoulos, *Covenantal Baptism*, 106.

circumcision. Second, women enjoyed full covenant participation under Moses without circumcision, so it is incorrect to argue their inclusion in baptism somehow finally brings them into full participation in the covenant community.

We can illustrate this point by discussing the Passover. Circumcision was required for every male who wanted to participate in the Passover, even for the non-Jew. If any non-Israelite male wanted to observe the Passover, he needed to be circumcised (Exod 12:48). However, although the Passover stipulations dictate “no uncircumcised person shall eat of it” (v. 48), women could eat of the Passover with full participation.²⁷ So, although women could fully participate in the covenant, the sign of circumcision belonged only to the males.

A further problem with the Reformed paedobaptist explanation is the problem of continuity, the primary principle upon which Reformed paedobaptists rely. They argue that if there was to be any kind of departure from Old Testament practice, then we would expect to see that departure clearly laid out in the New Testament.²⁸ Yet, there is no mandate in the New Testament to baptize baby girls, nor is there any description of it happening! There is narrative description of baptizing women who have made a profession of faith, but no indication anywhere that we should expect a male-only covenant sign to transition from male infants to male and female infants. It is a major inconsistency in the argument, and it seems that adherents to paedobaptism rely on the argument of continuity only when convenient.

Lastly, Reformed paedobaptists are unable to give a good theological reason why the covenant sign would apply to only males under the old covenant but expand to include females in the new covenant.²⁹ It is difficult to suggest an explanation since covenant paedobaptists argue that there is only one covenant of grace which is the same in the old covenant and in the new covenant. So why would there be a sudden difference in the expression of that sign? An argument for more inclusion is unsatisfactory, especially if the Reformed paedobaptist considers the covenant of grace to be the same in its essence across the testaments.

²⁷According to the Mishnah, they were not allowed to eat of it if they were in an unclean state from menstruation or childbirth (*m. Pesachim* 9:4).

²⁸Ross, “Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals,” 110.

²⁹But see the reasons listed by Brownson, who notes, “We could point to the movement away from bloody sacrifice to spiritual sacrifice. We could note the abolition of the ceremonial law in the New Covenant. We might point to Jesus’ attempts to express the deeper intent of the law, rather than merely its external demands. We could point to the full inclusion of women in the church (Gal. 3:28), and the need for a covenant sign that included them (which circumcision could not do). All these factors doubtless played a part. But at bottom, a large portion of the answer must also be that circumcision was so closely identified with Jewish ethnicity that to continue to circumcise believers would have distorted the missional movement of the gospel beyond Israel to the ‘ends of the earth’” (James V. Brownson, *The Promise of Baptism: An Introduction to Baptism in Scripture and the Reformed Tradition* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007], 141).

Circumcision Was Observed on the Eighth Day after Birth

A rather significant contrast between circumcision and baptism is the question of timing. God commanded Abraham and his descendants to circumcise their male children on the eighth day after birth (Gen 17:12). However, there is no indication in the New Testament about a specific day on which we should perform baptisms. In fact, at the time of Cyprian of Carthage (c. 200–258), there was a significant debate about when an infant should be baptized.³⁰ This kind of debate seems unlikely if infant baptism was already being practiced as an apostolic mandate handed down to replace circumcision. Although circumcision was linked with the eighth day after birth, the New Testament links the timing of baptism to the exercise of faith.

Circumcision Was a Physical Sign

Although this point may seem minor, it is significant that circumcision was a physical mark that always remained with a Jewish male. The removal of the foreskin was always visible and recognizable to both Jew and Gentile. Historically, some Jews tried to remove the evidence of circumcision to fit in with the Gentiles (1 Macc 1:15; Ant. 12.241).³¹

In contrast, baptism carries with it no visible mark or physical reminder. This is potentially problematic for the paedobaptist. There have been examples in paedobaptist churches where an individual cannot remember whether he was baptized as an infant, and since there is no way of telling, the church grants him another baptism. In Roman Catholicism, these are called conditional baptisms.

Like the previous section, covenant paedobaptists argue that transitioning from a physical to a non-physical expression of the sign is consistent with progressive revelation. However, one must ask why was it necessary to change from a physical to a non-physical sign if circumcision and baptism signify the same thing? The Mosaic Law already included many acts and practices of washing and sprinkling. If we understand baptism and circumcision to be equivalent, it seems odd that God would not simply have instituted baptism from the start. It seems difficult to argue that baptism, being a non-physical sign, is a better sign of the covenant than circumcision, which is physically observable and impossible to forget.

Circumcision Marked a National Identity

The physical nature of circumcision relates to the fact that circumcision was the mark of a physical, national identity. Those who were physically descended from Abraham were circumcised to show their

³⁰Cyprian, *The Epistles of Cyprian* 58.2–6, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 5:353–54. Cf. Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace*, 18.

³¹Josephus notes in *Antiquities* 12.241 that the Jews hid their circumcision so they could appear to be Greeks.

affiliation with him (Gen 17:10). This mandate applied to the later nation of Israel as well. Similarly, non-Israelites who wanted to embrace the national identity of Israel were commanded to undergo circumcision to demonstrate their affiliation with the nation (cf. Exod 12:48–49).

In contrast, baptism belongs to all nations and all peoples who express faith in Christ. One who is baptized can simultaneously be a citizen of any nation (not just Israel). This is a significant difference between baptism and circumcision, yet Reformed paedobaptists often downplay the national identity of circumcision. But this point deserves to be explored in more detail.

On the one hand, New Testament baptism is described clearly in Galatians 3:26–27. Paul writes that those in the church have exercised faith and been baptized (vv. 26–27). Furthermore, verse 28 separates this baptism from national or personal identity. Paul specifies, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Baptism is for all those who have faith in Christ, regardless of their national identity. National distinctions are secondary to membership in the church.

In contrast to how baptism is described in the New Testament, circumcision is viewed in the Old Testament as the hallmark of Jewish identity and a marker of a multigenerational covenant with Abraham and his descendants.³² Abraham was told at the outset that every male associated with him must be circumcised (Gen 17:10). Circumcision marked every male who was associated with Abraham, because he was the start of the nation of Israel. This unique situation is why even those who would go out and form other nations were circumcised. This included Ishmael (Gen 17:23) and Abraham’s other sons by his wife, Keturah (Gen 25:1–6), all of whom were not recipients of the covenant. Abraham circumcised these individuals because of their direct relationship with Abraham, yet they were sent out to start other nations, which was also a fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham, that he would be the father of a multitude of nations (cf. Gen 17:4).

Later generations of Abraham’s descendants were expected to follow this same pattern because they were descended from his genealogical line. Circumcision was not dependent upon one’s own faith or genealogical descent from parents who exercised faith. Circumcision was primarily related to one’s national identity. All male offspring of Abraham were to be circumcised regardless of their spiritual condition or that of their parents.³³

Another evidence of circumcision being linked with national identity is the study of Passover regulation. As previously noted, any uncircumcised males were prohibited from participating in the Passover

³²Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B & H, 2005), 202.

³³Gavin Ortlund, “Why Not Grandchildren? An Argument against Reformed Paedobaptism,” *Themelios* 45 (2020): 337.

(Exod 12:43–49). This prohibition specifically targets foreigners because it would be assumed that Israelites were circumcised.³⁴ Thus, in Exodus 12:43–49, the instruction targets the foreigner who wants to fully participate in the nation’s celebration of Passover. The clear implication is that by undergoing circumcision the foreigner joined himself to the nation of Israel and was able to fully participate in Passover observance. Physical circumcision was intrinsically related to being identified with the nation of Israel.

A notable point is that Israelites were not kicked out of the nation for failing to exercise faith. In fact, there is no indication anywhere that unbelievers who circumcised their children were in the wrong. The next section further confirms that circumcision primarily functioned as a national identity marker for the nation of Israel and not as a function of belief.

*Circumcision Was Knowingly Practiced
on Unbelieving Adults*

Most adherents of Reformed paedobaptism would likely find the notion of baptizing an adult unbeliever, who has not made a profession of faith, to be particularly objectionable. In fact, I am not aware of any such practice in a Reformed church. And if baptism and circumcision are essentially equal, as paedobaptists claim, one would expect the same principle in circumcision. However, in strong contrast to the Baptist and paedobaptist practice of baptism, there are multiple examples in Scripture of adults who are circumcised without reference to a profession of faith. These examples demonstrate that circumcision was performed on adults who were not genuine believers.

The first example of this would be Genesis 17 itself, where God instructs Abraham to circumcise every male (v. 10). Abraham followed this exhaustive mandate, circumcising those born in his house and those he had purchased (vv. 23, 27). We know from earlier in Genesis that this would have included at least 318 men who were born in his house (Gen 14:14), plus other foreigners he had purchased. It is not conceivable that Abraham would have interviewed all those men and asked them

³⁴It should be noted that the book of Jubilees viewed a Jew not being circumcised as one of the most revolting acts of treachery. Jubilees, which is dated by most scholars to the second century BC, says this: “I am now telling you that the Israelites will prove false to this ordinance. They will not circumcise their sons in accord with this entire law because they will leave some of the flesh of their circumcision when they circumcise their sons. All the people of Belial will leave their sons uncircumcised just as they were born. Then there will be great anger from the Lord against the Israelites because they abandoned his covenant, departed from his word, provoked, and blasphemed in that they did not perform the ordinance of this sign. For they have made themselves like the nations so as to be removed and uprooted from the earth. They will no longer have forgiveness or pardon so that they should be pardoned and forgiven for every sin, for (their) violation of this eternal (ordinance)” (15:33–34). Translation from James C. VanderKam, *Jubilees: A Commentary on the Book of Jubilees, Chapters 1–50*, vol. 1, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018), 507.

for professions of faith before circumcising them.³⁵ In fact, that would have gone against the command of Yahweh. The command was simply to circumcise them all—faith was not a requirement.

We should also observe that Abraham circumcised Ishmael, although Scripture is explicit that Ishmael was outside of God's promise (Gen 16:11–12; 21:10–13; Gal 4:21–31). Not only is there no indication that Ishmael ever exercised faith in Yahweh, but Scripture unambiguously describes him as not being a child of the promise. Importantly, Abraham was told even before circumcision that Ishmael was not a part of the covenant (Gen 17:18–21).

Many paedobaptists would argue that whatever the meaning of circumcision, it would also have to apply to Ishmael.³⁶ I would agree, and so I would argue there are irreconcilable differences between Ishmael's circumcision and the New Testament definition of baptism. Of greatest significance is the fact that Ishmael never exercised faith yet was circumcised at thirteen (Gen 17:25). Ishmael's example is difficult for the Reformed paedobaptist who argues that we baptize infants to communicate that they belong to the covenant. Such is certainly not the case with Ishmael's circumcision. Since Abraham knew Ishmael was not a part of the covenant, Ishmael must have been circumcised for a different reason than his own inclusion in the covenant.³⁷

In Joshua 5:2–8 we glean more insight into circumcision and its application to unbelievers. The people of Israel were preparing to conquer the land of Canaan, but there was a problem. The current generation that had just emerged from wandering in the wilderness had not been circumcised (Josh 5:7).³⁸ This lack of circumcision is probably evidence of the continued disobedience of the hard-hearted generation that God had brought out of Egypt. The generation that came out of Egypt was circumcised (Josh 5:5), but they either refused to circumcise their children after being disallowed entry into the land of Canaan, or they were unable to perform circumcisions while wandering in the wilderness. Regardless, almost the entire nation was uncircumcised.

There are a couple of essential observations to make about this text. First, the generation coming out of Egypt was a wicked generation set

³⁵Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace*, 98.

³⁶Ross, "Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals," 92.

³⁷As noted in the previous section, I would argue that Ishmael and the sons of Keturah (Gen 25:1–6) were circumcised because of the unique importance of Abraham as the progenitor of the covenant. Ishmael and Abraham's later sons were circumcised due to their familial association with Abraham in obedience to Genesis 17, even though they were not themselves recipients of the promise. Importantly, Abraham knew they would not be recipients of the promise ahead of time.

³⁸There is an interpretive issue in this passage about what it means that Israel was circumcised a "second time" (Josh 5:2). This could mean that Israel had been circumcised according to the Egyptian method, and now was being circumcised according to the Abrahamic method before entrance into the land of Canaan. Or "a second time" could refer to the current generation replacing the previous wilderness generation that died in the wilderness. The second option seems preferable.

on rebellion against God (cf. Exod 14:10–14; 16:2–3; 17:2–7; Num 14:26–30). Ezekiel 20:8 says that this generation continued worshipping the idols of Egypt even after they left Egypt. Significantly, even though most of those who came out of Egypt were engaged in wickedness, there was never any suggestion that their circumcision was not a valid mark of their relationship to Abraham.

Second, we see in Joshua 5 that Israel circumcised an entire adult generation in one day (Josh 5:9). There is no indication that there was any profession of faith by those who were circumcised. It would certainly be a logistical nightmare for Joshua and the leaders to interview even half of the adult males and listen to their profession of faith before circumcision.³⁹ To fully recognize the significance of this narrative and the difference between circumcision and baptism, all we need to do is substitute baptism for circumcision in this story. If we try to imagine this story taking place in a modern context, it is simply not possible. No true church would indiscriminately dispense baptism to adults without verifying their profession of faith.

It is worth emphasizing at this point that the above examples show that circumcision of the children of unbelievers was legitimate. In contrast to the typical Reformed paedobaptist practice of a child needing at least one believing parent to be baptized,⁴⁰ these narratives demonstrate that the spiritual condition of one's parents did not influence the mandate of Genesis 17 to circumcise every male. The generation of Israelites that wandered in the wilderness was idolatrous and unfaithful to God, yet God commanded each male Israelite to be circumcised—and so they were. Each Israelite's right to circumcision was unrelated to a profession of faith or the parent's status as a believer.

Circumcision Was a Sign of National Promises

Another difference between circumcision and baptism is that circumcision was a specific reminder of national promises given to Israel. As noted above, baptism has no exclusivity to any nation—it has broad application to all nations. Additionally, in all the New Testament texts which explain the significance of baptism, there is no reference to national promises. This is a significant contrast to circumcision, where the promises to Abraham are foundational to the explanation of circumcision.

We see this in Genesis 17, which is not the initiation of the covenant, but is a further explanation of the covenant that God instituted with Abraham earlier (cf. Gen 12:1–3; 13:14–17; esp. 15:7–21).⁴¹ Prior

³⁹Numbers 26:51 records 601,730 males, 20 years and older who made up the army of Israel. These men would have needed to be circumcised, as well as any children 19 years old and younger, possibly another 200,000 or so.

⁴⁰Cf. *Westminster Confession* 28.4.

⁴¹A few scholars see multiple covenants given to Abraham, e.g., T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: An Introduction to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 175–82; T. Desmond Alexander, “Genesis 22 and the Covenant

to Genesis 17, there was already a promise of blessing to Abraham (12:2), as well as blessing for those who blessed Abraham and cursing for those who mistreated him (12:3). God also promised Abraham a plurality of descendants,⁴² who would make up a great nation (12:2; 15:5). Last, but certainly not least, God also promised Abraham a specific land allotment (12:1, 7; 13:14–17; 15:7, 18–21). In sum, it is advantageous to summarize the Abrahamic covenant by highlighting its threefold promise of blessing, land, and offspring.

Importantly, Genesis 17 changes none of these previous promises, but only repeats and expands them. Expanding the idea of a plurality of descendants, God promises Abraham that he will be the father of a multitude of nations (vv. 4–6). The reference to nations (plural) is important. Minimally, in addition to the Israelites, the Ishmaelites, Edomites, and Midianites are also descended from Abraham.⁴³ Besides the promise of multiple nations coming from Abraham, God also promises him that kings (plural) will come from Abraham (v. 6). Genesis 17 thus solidifies the promise given to Abraham in the preceding chapters. God would give Abraham a plurality of descendants, which Genesis 17 specifies to include the idea of nations and kings.

Genesis 17 also continues the land promise. God tells Abraham, “And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God” (v. 8). This promise is unchanged from previous chapters. God unequivocally promises that the land of Canaan belongs not just to Abraham, but to his descendants, “for an everlasting possession.”

Most important for our purposes is the fact that circumcision is specifically called the “sign of the covenant” (Gen 17:11). Circumcision was to point to the promises of the covenant that God made with Abraham. As Wellum puts it, “What promises were signified by circumcision? All the promises tied to the Abrahamic covenant, which included not only salvific promises but also national ones, particularly the land promise (e.g., Gen 12:7; 15:12–21; 17:8).”⁴⁴ These promises

of Circumcision,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 25 (1983): 17–22. However, it is much more consistent with biblical revelation (cf. Ps 105:8–9) to view Genesis 17 and 22 as further expansions of the one Abrahamic covenant. For defense of this, see Jeffrey J. Niehaus, “God’s Covenant with Abraham,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 56 (2013): 249–71; Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 275–80; Keith Essex, “The Abrahamic Covenant,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 10 (Fall 1999): 191–212.

⁴²As a side note, this may be the best explanation for why the sign of circumcision was given to males only. It is through the male line that generations were continued and propagated.

⁴³Sarna, *Genesis*, 124.

⁴⁴Stephen J. Wellum, “Baptism and the Relationship between the Covenants,” in *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright (Nashville, TN: B & H, 2006), 155.

and the sign of these promises applied to Abraham and to all his descendants. It was a perpetual sign that was to exist, “throughout their generations” (v. 9).

In contrast to the clear link between the national promises to Abraham and his descendants (Israel), baptism signifies no national promises.⁴⁵ This is an undervalued point that is often ignored by Reformed paedobaptists. God did not give baptism as a sign linking someone to the promise of land or the growth of a great nation. Reformed paedobaptists should give this distinction between baptism and circumcision greater consideration.

Circumcision Was Unrelated to the Exercise of Faith

Perhaps the most significant difference between circumcision and baptism relates to faith. Both the New Testament and early church sources view faith as integral to baptism. It was not until Ulrich Zwingli that there was a serious alternative of any significance. Because of Zwingli, some covenant theologians separated faith from baptism. However, prior to Zwingli it was the universal practice of the church to associate faith with baptism.⁴⁶ Although the Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches practice infant baptism, they have retained the traditional viewpoint that faith is essential to baptism. It is only some within the Reformed paedobaptist camp that downplay the relationship between faith and baptism.

Because of the presumed link between baptism and circumcision, Reformed paedobaptists will often appeal to circumcision as evidence that faith is not required for baptism. For example, noted Reformed theologian and paedobaptist R. C. Sproul writes:

The most common argument against infant baptism is that it signifies things that flow from faith, and since infants are not capable of expressing or embracing faith, they should not receive the sign. But if that argument were correct, it would nullify the legitimacy of circumcision in the Old Testament. If we reject infant baptism on the basis of the principle that a sign that involves faith must never be given until after faith is present, we also negate the legitimacy of circumcision in the Old Testament.⁴⁷

Sproul seems to be engaging in circular reasoning here. He assumes that baptism and circumcision are the same, so what applies to one must apply to the other. But as we have already seen, there are some significant differences between baptism and circumcision. I argue that those differences demonstrate that baptism and circumcision are not equal. In contrast to baptism, there is no indication that faith was a prerequisite

⁴⁵Matt Waymeyer, *A Biblical Critique of Infant Baptism* (The Woodlands, TX: Kress Christian Publications, 2008), 52.

⁴⁶Goeman, *The Baptism Debate*, 17–36.

⁴⁷R. C. Sproul, *What Is Baptism?* (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2011), 63.

for circumcision.

We find proof that faith is not essential to circumcision by looking at passages that discuss foreign circumcisions. Texts that refer to foreigners becoming circumcised are devoid of any language of faith. For example, in Genesis 34:14–24, Jacob's sons tell the men of Shechem that they need to be circumcised to intermarry with Israel's women, but there is no mention of faith or commitment to Yahweh. Although Genesis 34 deals with deceit and treachery, there is no reason to question the standard that Jacob's sons gave to Shechem.

As another example, in Exodus 12:43–49, we read that a stranger could partake of the Passover meal if he circumcised himself and all his males (v. 48). The simple requirement of Exodus 12 is that a foreigner needs to be circumcised to participate in the meal. There is no reference to further commitment to Yahweh or to faith. Although one could make a reasonable case that commitment to Yahweh is assumed, this is a drastic difference from the New Testament picture of baptism. For how much the New Testament associates faith with baptism, it is even more noteworthy that the exact opposite is the case for circumcision. Not once is faith linked with circumcision in the Old Testament. The best we can argue is that it is assumed. However, faith is explicitly and repeatedly linked with baptism in the New Testament.

Comparing the Meaning of Circumcision with Baptism

We can now summarize the meaning of circumcision and discuss how it does (or does not) relate to baptism. As shown above, circumcision is tied to the Abrahamic covenant and represents both the physical and spiritual promises of that covenant. These promises include blessing, land, and a plurality of descendants. In comparing what we know about circumcision from ancient Egypt, I have proposed that Israelite circumcision primarily symbolized consecration and dedication to Yahweh. Thus, Israel dedicated each male to Yahweh as a royal priest through circumcision. Circumcision belonged to each male in Israel because of God's promise of increased offspring, which occurs through the male line.

Reformed paedobaptists may not reject this summary, but in attempting to link circumcision and baptism, they must argue that circumcision represents more than the above. For example, Ross argues that the meanings of baptism and circumcision "can be summarized in two terms of two fundamental concepts: cleansing and consecration."⁴⁸ As already noted above, the idea of consecration matches well with the ancient Egyptian concept of circumcision and the biblical descriptions. However, the concept of cleansing does not readily find a parallel in passages on circumcision.

Ross appeals to Romans 4:11 as evidence that circumcision has to

⁴⁸Ross, "Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals," 100.

do with forgiveness of sins (and thus metaphorical cleansing).⁴⁹ However, not only is there no language of cleansing in Romans 4:11, but the text is an appeal to Abraham's unique experience as the father of faith for both the circumcised and uncircumcised. In other words, the application of Romans 4:11 would apply equally to the uncircumcised, not just the circumcised. Ross also appeals to Deuteronomy 30:6, where God promises that he will circumcise the hearts of the people of Israel. Yet again, there is no mention of the language of cleansing, and Ross is assuming the point he is trying to make. At the end of the day, the argument that circumcision (like baptism) relates to cleansing remains unpersuasive, having little evidence to back it up.

Nevertheless, the signs of circumcision and baptism remain linked for many, especially in the Reformed paedobaptist community. But if baptism has replaced circumcision, the Reformed paedobaptist needs to give a satisfactory explanation as to why the sign of entrance into the covenant has changed.

The typical answer as to why the sign of entrance has changed is that circumcision was the bloody sign of sacrifice before Christ's death on the cross, but baptism is a fitting sign of entrance after Christ's death, since his blood has already been shed. Chapell explains,

The bloody sign of circumcision that prefigured the shedding of Christ's blood no longer remains appropriate after the Lamb of God has shed his blood once for all in order to remove our sin (cf. Heb. 10:10; 1 Peter 1:18). Therefore, New Testament believers receive a new sign of the covenant that indicates what Christ has accomplished for them. Baptism with water is the sign of washing away our sin (cf. Acts 22:16; 1 Cor. 6:11; Heb. 9:14).⁵⁰

Chapell gives a reason why there was a transition in covenantal sign. However, there is little evidence for this interpretation. If blood is such a major part of the symbolism of circumcision, one wonders why the Bible never mentions this connection in the Old or New Testament. In fact, although the Bible mentions circumcision or uncircumcision 86 times in 64 verses,⁵¹ only twice is there any reference to blood at all (Ezek 44:7; Exod 4:25). Neither of these references to blood relates to the symbolism of circumcision.

In Ezekiel 44:7, God chastens Israel for admitting uncircumcised foreigners to the sanctuary while offering food, fat, and blood to Yahweh. This passage has nothing to do with blood pertaining to circumcision, only with the blood of sacrifice. The only other passage that mentions blood alongside circumcision is the enigmatic text of Exodus

⁴⁹Ibid., 101.

⁵⁰Bryan Chapell, "A Pastoral Overview of Infant Baptism," in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, ed. Gregg Strawbridge (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 16.

⁵¹Word usage statistics provided by Logos Bible Software 9. The search included all occurrences of verbs מורל, ערל, and מלל. Non-verbs ערלה, ערלה, and מורלה were also included.

4:25–26, where either Moses’s life or his son’s life is endangered because the son was not circumcised.⁵² After Zipporah circumcises their son, she touches his feet and says, “Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me” (v. 25). The translation “bridegroom of blood” (אִתְּךָ דָּמַי) is probably better translated, “blood relative.”⁵³ Although it is possible that the blood in this passage has to do with circumcision, even so, it would be the only place in the Bible where blood is mentioned in the context of circumcision. If the blood of circumcision is such a vital part of the typology of circumcision, one would think it would receive more attention. However, passages which focus on the importance of circumcision make no such mention of blood (e.g., Gen 17).

The strongest connection between circumcision and baptism is that Scripture describes both as entrances into a covenant community. This is undoubtedly a strong and real connection between the two. However, recognizing both circumcision and baptism as rites of entrance highlights the differences between the two. As Waymeyer states,

In the Old Testament, the means of entrance into the nation of Israel was involuntary, physical, and external—one became a Jew by being born of Jewish parents. In the New Testament church, however, the means of entrance is voluntary, spiritual, and internal—one becomes a member of the church by exercising faith in Christ and being born again.⁵⁴

Conclusion

The Reformed paedobaptist argument relies heavily on the connection between circumcision and baptism. Many Reformed Baptists also assume a connection between circumcision and baptism. This article has brought to light the numerous differences between baptism and circumcision. While baptism and circumcision are both viewed as initiatory rites, that is where the similarity ends. Circumcision was a male-only sign that signified the promises of the Abrahamic covenant and a special national identity. Circumcision was also given to unbelieving adults and unbelieving children who were outside the promise of God. This contrasts strongly with baptism, which even ardent paedobaptists acknowledge should not be given to adults who do not profess faith in Christ.

⁵²The difficulties in Exodus 4:25–26 are significant. Only pronouns are used, and Moses’s name is never mentioned. Although a very difficult passage, I understand the passage to be saying that Moses’s son, Gershom, was in danger of being killed by God for not being circumcised. Zipporah then circumcised the son, touched his feet (possibly with the foreskin), and called him a “bridegroom of blood,” probably meaning he was confirmed as her covenantal family member. For a defense of this view, see Duane A. Garrett, *A Commentary on Exodus*, Kregel Exegetical Library (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2014), 225–31; Douglas Stuart, *Exodus*, New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 152–56.

⁵³Garrett, *Exodus*, 228–30; Stuart, *Exodus*, 154.

⁵⁴Waymeyer, *Biblical Critique of Infant Baptism*, 79.

By comparing baptism and circumcision, we have shown significant problems with the idea that baptism has replaced circumcision. The proposal that baptism has replaced circumcision is an assertion that seems lacking in evidence. Baptism and circumcision have much more dissimilarity than similarity, and the idea that baptism has replaced circumcision should be seriously questioned, if not abandoned entirely.

