

**Notes for Children's Talk & Sermon Outline for
Sunday, 16 May 2021**

Children's Talk: Baptism: What You Can and Can't See

- We get to watch a little baby get baptised today.
 - What that means is that we put water on the baby and the parents promise to try to raise that baby to know and love the Lord God Jesus Christ.
- Today, I want to talk to you about what baptism does.
 - There are some things that you can see and some things that you can't see.
- Because you're here today, you'll be able to see the water get put on the baby and so you'll see the baptism happen.
 - But there's also a part that you can't see.
 - Will the baby look any different after his baptism? (He might be a bit wet but nothing else.)
 - I can't look at you guys and tell whether you've been baptised.
- But even though we can't see any difference after baptism, the Lord and the angels can.
 - It's very clear to them which people have been baptised.
 - When someone gets baptised they join the group of people who are trying to follow the Lord Jesus Christ.
- We can sometimes struggle to understand why something matters if we can't see any difference.
 - We might think, "Why does baptism matter if I can't see any difference?"
 - Well, baptism is about helping us to change on the inside and sometimes that doesn't show on the outside.
- But other times changes on the inside *do* show on the outside.
 - Jesus actually told His disciples how people would be able to tell if they were His followers or disciples:
 - John 13:34-35 (NKJV)
 - [Jesus said] ³⁴ "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. ³⁵ By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."
- How will all people be able to tell if are the Lord's disciples? (If we love other people the way that the Lord loves us.)
 - That's something that people can see.
 - Have you ever met someone and pretty quickly you can see that they're a kind and loving person?
 - That's what the Lord is talking about.
- But here's an interesting thing: anyone who we can see is a kind and loving person and who really is kind and loving, the way that they have become that way is by doing work on the inside that nobody can see.
 - For example, think of the work to forgive someone when they've hurt us.
 - A lot of that work happens just within us and people couldn't tell.
 - But if you see a group of friends that are good at forgiving each other, you notice that.
- Baptism is a sign that a person is going to do work that we can't see to become a person who is loving in a way that we can see.
- Let's all try to do that invisible work on the inside so that people can see on the outside that we're trying to follow the Lord. *Amen.*

Circumcision and Baptism

A Sermon by Pastor Malcolm G. Smith
16 May 2021

Intro

- When Abram was seventy-five years old, Jehovah called him to leave his home and go to the land of Canaan.
 - God promised Abram that he would be the father of a great nation and that God would give Abram and his descendants the land of Canaan to live in.
- Some years after that, when Abram had done what God had asked him to, and when Abram was ninety-nine years old, Jehovah appeared to Abram to make the terms of their covenant (or agreement) more specific.
 - Jehovah promised again to make Abram the father of a great nation, He changed his name to Abraham, and he again promised all the land of Canaan to Abraham and his descendants.
 - And then Jehovah gave more specific instructions about Abraham's side of the covenant:
 - Genesis 17:9-14 (NKJV)
 - ⁹ And God said to Abraham: "As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰ This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised; ¹¹ and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you. ¹² He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male child in your generations, he who is born in your house or bought with money from any foreigner who is not your descendant. ¹³ He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. ¹⁴ And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant."
 - And Abraham followed through with his side of the covenant.
 - Genesis 17:26-27 (NKJV)
 - ²⁶ That very same day Abraham was circumcised, and his son Ishmael; ²⁷ and all the men of his house, born in the house or bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.
- And from then on circumcision was a sign that people were part of the group that was descended from Abraham and part of the covenant that had been made between Jehovah and Abraham.
- Fast-forward two-thousand years and Jehovah Himself takes on flesh and comes into the world as Jesus Christ.
 - Following the Jewish laws, He is circumcised at eight days old (Luke 2:21).
- But, after His death and resurrection, He does not command His disciples to go and make disciples of all nations and circumcise them.
 - Instead He tells them to baptise people.
 - He says,

- Matthew 28:19-20 (Kempton Project Translation, modified)
 - ¹⁹ “Going forth, therefore, make disciples of all nations, baptising them into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to keep all things whatever I have commanded you....”
- So why?
 - Why was cutting off the foreskin the sign of the covenant with God for a long time?
 - Why was circumcision replaced by baptism?
 - Why is there a need for this kind of ritual at all?
- Today, we’re going to try to answer these and other questions.
 - And also, I hope, that we will gain a fresh perspective on the meaning and purpose of baptism, by looking at the ritual that it replaced.

External Acts With Spiritual Symbolism

- Let’s look at a passage from a chapter on baptism in the book *True Christianity*.
 - If you’re interested in learning more about baptism, read that chapter.
- It says,
 - *True Christianity* §674
 - Baptism Was Instituted as a Replacement for Circumcision Because Circumcision of the Foreskin Symbolized Circumcision of the Heart; the Intent Was to Have an Internal Church Replace the External Church, Which as a Whole and in Every Detail Prefigured That Internal Church
- Let’s go through that bit by bit.
- In this passage “church” means a particular group of people and the way that they approach God.
 - The church before Christianity, the church of the Children of Israel was all about external actions.
 - The same passage says this:
 - *True Christianity* §674
 - If we examine the succession of churches over time from ancient times to our own, we see that the former churches were external in nature. Their worship consisted of external actions that symbolized the internal practices taught by the Christian church, whose foundation the Lord laid when he was in the world, and which he is now building for the first time.
- So “as a whole and in every detail” the *external* laws of the Children of Israel prefigured and symbolized the *internal* practices that would later be taught by the Lord when He started the Christian church.
 - That includes all the laws about sacrifices, and what they could eat, and how they were to dress, and also the requirement for all of the males to be circumcised.
- So circumcision wasn’t just a random action.
 - Removing the foreskin had a specific spiritual symbolism.
 - The external act was meant to represent internal work—or circumcision of the heart.

- The fact that the act of circumcision was about a spiritual kind of circumcision is actually very clear in the Old Testament.
- For example, here are two statements from Deuteronomy:
 - Moses says to the people,
 - Deuteronomy 10:16 (NKJV)
 - ¹⁶ [C]ircumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer.
 - Deuteronomy 30:5-6 (NKJV, modified)
 - ⁵ Then Jehovah your God will bring you to the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it. He will prosper you and multiply you more than your fathers. ⁶ And Jehovah your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love Jehovah your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.
- The real circumcision that was being represented was a circumcision of heart that would make the people stop being stiff-necked or stubborn against their God.
 - And this spiritual circumcision would mean that they will be able to love their God with all their heart and soul.
- The teachings of the New Church provide more detail about what circumcision specifically represented at a spiritual level.
 - *Secrets of Heaven* §4462:3
 - [C]ircumcision meant the departure from filthy loves, namely self-love and love of the world, and the acceptance of heavenly loves, which are love to the Lord and love towards the neighbour, and so an acceptance of the Church.
- And the teachings of the New Church even explain that the tools that were used to perform physical circumcision also represented the tools that person needs to use to perform spiritual circumcision.
 - *Secrets of Heaven* §7044
 - The use of knives made of flint to carry out circumcision meant the use of the truths of faith to carry out purification from filthy kinds of love.... The reason why purification is effected by means of the truths of faith is that these truths teach what good is and also what evil is, and so what ought to be done and what ought not to be done. And when a person knows those truths and wishes to act in accordance with them, they are being led by the Lord and purified by the Lord's Divine means.
- That was what circumcision represented.
- Despite the passages in the Old Testament that made it clear that circumcision of the *heart* was the point, many people thought that it was just about the external act of being circumcised.
 - So, when the Lord came on earth, He wanted to change that; He wanted to move people towards seeing that it was actually about the internal work.
 - And that was part of why He replaced circumcision with baptism.
 - As it said in the passage, "the intent was to have an internal church replace the external church".

- *True Christianity* §674

- Circumcision represented rejecting the cravings of the flesh, and therefore being purified from evils. Baptism means the same thing.

Clearly then, there are two reasons why baptism was commanded as a replacement for circumcision: (1) to differentiate the Christian church from the Jewish church; and (2) to make it more easily recognisable that the Christian church is internal in nature....

- So that might have been some interesting (or perhaps not so interesting) history and perspective on how and why circumcision was eventually replaced by baptism.
 - How is this all relevant to you?
 - Now that we've laid this groundwork, let's talk about some of the ways in which circumcision and baptism are similar and different and maybe it will give you a fresh perspective on the significance that baptism could have for you.

How Circumcision and Baptism Are Similar and Different

Visible vs. Invisible Change

- One basic difference between circumcision and baptism is that the results of circumcision are visible (at least to the person who has been circumcised) whereas the results of baptism are not visible at all.
 - This would seem to line up with the goal of working towards a more internal church.
 - The ritual of baptism is not about making an obvious external change, it's about internal change.
 - So that seems to be an advantage to baptism.
- On the other hand, because there is no obvious physical change, it can be rather easy to just forget that you were ever baptised.
 - Be honest, if you're baptised, when was the last time you thought about the fact that you were baptised?
 - I would guess it was quite a while ago.
- It's a good thing to remember.
 - It might be worth thinking of something that could remind you.
 - Every time you come to take Holy Supper could be a good time to remember the significance of your baptism.
 - Or, because baptism is a washing, you could try to build a habit of remembering the significance of your baptism when you wash.
 - For example, if you take a daily shower, you could use that as a prompt to think about what things you need to ask the Lord to help you clean up in your life.

Just for Males vs. For Males and Females

- Another difference between circumcision and baptism is that circumcision was just for males whereas baptism is for males and females.
 - That seems like a real advantage of baptism.

A Permanent Change vs. An Ongoing Daily Task

- Another interesting similarity or difference to consider has to do with permanence.
 - Circumcision is permanent; it can't be undone.
 - What about baptism?
 - Is it a permanent change?
 - Can it be undone?
- This is another place where we can, perhaps, see the advantage of the ritual of baptism for thinking about the internal meaning of the ritual.
 - Circumcision is something that only needs to be done once and it's done forever.
 - And we'd like to think of spiritual work in the same way.
 - This is the huge appeal of instantaneous salvation, people thinking that they were saved once and so they were saved for always, no matter what.
 - Whereas washing is not a once and done process.
 - We have to keep washing ourselves for our whole lifetime.
 - Just like the work of rejecting the cravings of the flesh, and being purified from evils also requires daily work for our whole lifetime.
 - It seems like in this area baptism is a better representation of the work that's involved in this ongoing, daily task.
 - But, then again, we're not required to get ritually baptised over and over again.
 - We have a different ritual for the ongoing, daily work of trying to follow the Lord, the Holy Supper.
 - And that one is connected to the ongoing and daily tasks of eating and drinking.
- Anyway, it's interesting to think about the permanence of circumcision and baptism.

A Painful Process vs. A Not So Painful Process

- A notable feature of circumcision is the pain involved.
 - A good, hard scrubbing wash can be somewhat painful but it really doesn't compare to the pain of having one's foreskin removed.
- When you think about the pain involved, which of these rituals, do you think, is the better representation of the work involved?
 - At least sometimes, the work of rejecting our evil and selfish inclinations is going to feel more like getting circumcised than like just having a good cleaning.

A Part of You Needs to Be Removed vs. Something Needs to Be Removed From You

- A related aspect of this that's also worth thinking about is that in both circumcision and baptism there is something that needs to be removed and something to do the removal.
 - In baptism it's something dirty *on* you that needs to be removed from you, whereas in circumcision it's *a part of* you that needs to be removed.
 - In baptism it's water that does the removing, but in circumcision it was a flint knife.
 - Water and stones (like flint) both represent truth and both of these processes represent using truth to deal with the evil thing but the feeling is very different.
 - Again, sometimes getting circumcised with a flint knife is more how it's going to feel to do the spiritual work that we need to do.
 - Jesus Himself said,
 - Matthew 18:8-9 (NKJV)
 - ⁸ "If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire. ⁹ And if your eye

causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire.”

- The selfish things that we love that need to be removed will sometimes feel like a part of us and getting rid of them will sometimes feel like cutting off our own hand or foot, or plucking out our eye, or getting circumcised.
 - Let's take just one example:
 - Let's say that someone has hurt you in the past or you've just had a lot of conflict with them.
 - It would be very natural to look down on that person.
 - To look for things that are wrong with them and celebrate when things go badly for them.
 - And it can be fun to find a friend or friends who also dislike that person and you can make fun of that person together.
 - If you want to love the Lord and love your neighbour, then that way of being needs to be cut out.
 - It's going to hurt to remove it.
 - It feels good and it's a strong habit and it was funny.
 - Does removing that from your life feel more like getting a good scrubbing or like chopping your hand off?
- This is an area where, when we're thinking about the work that baptism represents, it could be useful to think about the ritual that it replaced and the pain and sacrifice that the work of baptism is likely to involve.

A Way to Join a Distinct Group

- In the minds of the Jewish people, one of the main functions of circumcision was to make them distinct from the other people's around them.
 - They thought of people falling into two camps: the circumcised chosen people and the uncircumcised Gentiles.
 - Does baptism create those same kinds of divisions?
 - Consider this passage also from the chapter on baptism in *True Christianity*:
 - *True Christianity* §677
 - The First Function of Baptism Is to Bring People into the Christian Church and at the Same Time to Bring Them into the Company of Christians in the Spiritual World
- [J]ust as circumcision was a sign that people belonged to the Israelite church, baptism is a sign that people belong to the Christian church.... This sign functions much like the ribbons of different colours tied to newborns of two mothers in order to tell them apart and not switch them by accident.
- Isn't that language and comparison surprising?
 - The consistent teaching is that baptism really does affect who we are associated with in the spiritual world.
 - And the passage that we read and the passages that follow it go on to explain how different smaller and larger communities of like-minded people are arranged in the spiritual world and how important it is for them to be arranged like that.

- And then we read this:

- *True Christianity* §678:2

- The preservation of the entire universe hinges on this precise arrangement.

This precision would not be possible unless all of us, after we were born, were given some sign that identified which religious community we belonged to.

- So, like circumcision, baptism really does provide a way to join a distinct group of people.

- But it's also quite different from circumcision.

- Remember that baptism was meant to be the ritual of an internal church—a church in which people knew that the point is to be doing internal work to get their hearts and lives right with the Lord.

- A group like that is not going to be thinking of themselves as the chosen people and looking down on those around them.

- A group of people like that would always be happy to have more people join.

- So baptism is a way of joining a distinct group, like circumcision, but with a much better sense of the purpose behind the group.

Focussed on the People vs. Focussed on the Lord Jesus Christ

- There are probably many other similarities and differences between circumcision and baptism that would be useful to consider.

- If you have any additional ideas, please let me know.

- I would enjoy hearing them.

- For now, I want to end with one last area to consider: focus on the Lord.

- Circumcision seems to have had a focus on the people.

- The central question was whether the people were willing to make that sacrifice so that they could be God's chosen people.

- And it seems like it felt like a deal, like the people had done their part and now God has to do His part.

- Baptism, on the other hand, is directly connected to the name of the Lord.

- People are baptised into the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

- And being baptised means that you are a follower of Jesus Christ.

- The purpose of baptism is directly connected to this.

- *True Christianity* §681

- The Second Function of Baptism Is to Allow Christians to Know and Acknowledge the Lord Jesus Christ as Redeemer and Saviour, and to Follow Him

- That's a very different feel and focus than circumcision seems to have.

- It's about an ongoing relationship with the Lord.

- That's what the Lord has always wanted with His children.

- *True Christianity* tells us that

- *True Christianity* §684

- The Third Function of Baptism, and Its Ultimate Purpose, Is to Lead Us to Be Regenerated

- The Lord loves us and wants to bless us and inspire us and guide us and help us be loving and wise people.

- And He wants to help us deal with and be purified from all the gross and hellish things inclinations we have that get in the way of us being loving and wise and useful.

- In the language of the Old Testament and the Jewish Church, He wants to circumcise our hearts, to love Jehovah our God with all our heart and with all our soul so that we may live (Deuteronomy 30:6).
- And, in the language of the New Testament and the Christian Church, He wants to baptise us with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Matthew 3:11).
- I pray that each of us will let Him do this work with us every day.
- *Amen.*