

# Lesson 9 Addendum: Why we Baptize Infants at Harbor Mid-City

## Bible references

Genesis 17

Colossians 2:11-12

## A Discussion of Baptism in the Bible

Admittedly, Christians disagree on baptism. Many parents at Harbor Mid-City have chosen not to baptize their children, and we'll still love and support them in the journey because this is one of those areas where very faithful Christians read the Bible differently. Where there is widespread disagreement among faithful Christians, it is always important to remind ourselves that we need to loosen our grip a bit on the issue and not be quite so dogmatic. Infant baptism is important, yes, but it is not a reason to be divisive or lose fellowship with other believers.

*"I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you" (Gen. 17:6-7).*

This text in Genesis helps to explain why we baptize infants in our church. Remember, baptism is an outward sign. Throughout the Old Testament, God made really big agreements, called covenants, with mankind. These covenants progressively built on one another and helped men and women know how to function as the people of God. Each major covenant had a sign. God made a covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17, where He promised to make him into a great nation. And God said to Abraham 10 times—10 different times—that His covenant is with *"you and your children,"* over and over again. Ten times. Through this repetition, God is making the point that His covenant signs and promises are to be extended to the whole family, including children.

The outward sign that God instituted for this covenant in Genesis 17 was circumcision. That is a strange outward sign, right? It seems pretty private. But it was the imagery God was after. Circumcision represented a cutting away of flesh—sin was being cut off. The old you was being cut off—a death to the old self. So circumcision became an outward sign of an

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inward faith. Jeremiah 4:4 says, “Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, circumcise your hearts.” This sign of circumcision was pointing to an inward grace, a faith in God to wash, cleanse, and save you. And it was for you and your children (Genesis 17).

Circumcision was the sign, the way God’s people had identified themselves since the time of God’s covenant with Abraham. But then there was a shift from circumcision to baptism as the sign that marked the people of God. The first baptism we see in the New Testament is in Matthew 3 where John the Baptist is baptizing people. But he wasn’t the one who began this practice. John didn’t just think to himself, “Hmmm, I think people are tired of the knife. I know, I’ll make it easier on them. We’ll do this thing with water.”

In the Old Testament, when people entered the temple they went through a ritual cleansing to come into the presence of God. These were, in essence, baptisms, and this is where water became a central marker. The water functioned as an outward sign of an inward faith—that God alone could cleanse and save them.

Four hundred years passed from the last book of the Old Testament (Malachi) until the first events of the New Testament that are described in Matthew. During these 400 years, ancient literature reveals that when Gentiles (people who weren’t in relationship with God) came into relationship with God, they would go through baptism. This was a ritual cleansing, and the males were also circumcised during this ritual cleansing. So there were two outward signs—baptism and circumcision—coupled together to mark the Gentiles’ new relationship with God.

Now, let’s fast forward in history. In the New Testament, remember that the disciples were all Jewish. Paul made his first missionary journeys to Jews—to people who were religious, but not in relationship with God. When they trusted Jesus, they were already circumcised. Thus, when they heard the gospel and trusted Jesus, their new relationship with God was marked by baptism, not a second circumcision.

But what about the Gentiles, the people who weren’t circumcised? Well, they started to trust Jesus and a natural question arose: Should we baptize and circumcise them or just one or the other? The Jerusalem council in Acts 15 was convened to solve this question, and they said: Listen, this is a beautiful thing that Gentiles are coming to know the Lord. It fulfills the prophecies of old. We don’t want to put a requirement on them that is as

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onerous and difficult as undergoing the knife because that may hinder many who are opposed to circumcision from coming to Jesus. So, let's drop circumcision.

Baptism, once a dual sign, now became the single sign that identified God's people. And, not surprisingly, it was applied to children. Remember the words to "you and your children" repeated 10 times in Genesis 17. This is exactly what Peter says in his famous sermon in Acts 2: 38-39, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you...This promise is for you and your children." Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

Some of you say, "Well, that is logical, but where does the Bible say that baptism replaces circumcision and is its equivalent? I could agree with this if only there was one passage that said this." I think there is. The more I read Col. 2:11-12, the more I realize that is exactly what this passage says:

*In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.*

Here you see that the circumcision isn't physical, but spiritual—it is of the heart. The outward sign of this inward spiritual circumcision is baptism.

This provides some of the logic and the biblical rationale for why we baptize infants at Harbor Mid-City. If you would like to talk more about this subject, please follow up with one of our pastors or leaders. We also have some additional reading material on the subject that might be helpful. Regardless of the decision you reach, we'll love and support you to see your children become baptized followers of Jesus.

