

Baptism and the Lord's Supper are said to be "signs." A sign is something that objectively points beyond itself to another object. Under the Old Covenant, God instituted many signs. For example, the sacrificial system was a type of sign – it pointed to the future priesthood of Christ and His sacrificial death on the cross. But there were two signs, in particular, that God instituted as special reminders of His covenant promises: circumcision and Passover.

God chose to signify His covenant relationship with Abraham and later generations by requiring that the eight day old male infant be circumcised. In Gen 17:10-11 we read the following: "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; and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and *it shall be a sign of the covenant* between Me and you."

If circumcision was a sign that pointed to something beyond itself, to what did it point? Did you notice God said to Abraham that circumcision would be a "sign of the covenant?" It is very important that we realize that the sign God instituted was not a sign of the individual's subjective faith. Eight day old infants do not have the capacity to respond to anything except temperature and hunger.

When a parent brought their male child to be circumcised, the act of circumcision was as much for them as for their son. For the parents? Absolutely. Consider the example of Moses, who failed to circumcise his child. When God appointed Moses to be the leader of Israel and sent him on his way to Egypt, a fascinating passage in Ex 4 tells us that God actually met him and "sought to kill him." Sought to kill Moses, the one whom He had just appointed to go to Egypt? Yes, because Moses had failed to circumcise his son.

If circumcision was to be a sign of the child's faith, why was the father penalized? The answer has to do with the objectivity of circumcision. Because circumcision was a sign of the covenant, by failing to circumcise his son, Moses implied that he, *Moses*, was not a member of the covenant community. Non-members were to be exiled from Israel, and certainly death would be the ultimate exile.

Was there anything subjective about circumcision? No, not in itself. But, circumcision was intended to produce a subjective reaction. Consider the modern day sign of a wedding ring. A wedding ring is a sign of a marital relationship between a husband and his wife. Is it an objective sign? Yes. Its meaning does not change if one spouse is disloyal to the other. The ring is an outward symbol of what *should* be an inward reality - marital faithfulness. Couples do not wear the sign of a ring because they are faithful. Rather, they should be faithful, and the ring constantly reminds them of that fact.

This is how circumcision was a sign. It was a graphic, external symbol of God's covenant relationship with Israel, but it should also have been representative of an inward reality of faith. The Old Testament Israelites were to "die to their flesh." This was called an internal "circumcision of the heart." In Deut 30:6, Moses tells Israel that "the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live."

Notice that the internal circumcision was an act of God. The *Lord* will circumcise your hearts. Notice, too, that Moses spoke to individuals who had already been externally circumcised. Why? Because the external ceremony merely pointed to what hopefully would become an internal reality. How long did Moses' son, for example, bear the sign of circumcision in his flesh before God circumcised his heart? What was the evidence of a circumcised heart? According to Lev 26:40-42, a circumcised heart is humble and faithful to the covenant. Uncircumcised hearts belonged to those who broke their covenant relationship with God.

Was it possible to be circumcised in the flesh and yet be uncircumcised of heart? You bet. Just as it is possible to wear a wedding ring and be a covenant breaker. Rom 2:25-29 says this: "For circumcision is indeed profitable if you keep the law; but if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. Therefore, if an uncircumcised man keeps the righteous requirements of the law, will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision? And will not the physically uncircumcised, if he fulfills the law, judge you who, even with your written code and circumcision, are a transgressor of the law? For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God." While physical circumcision pointed to a circumcision of the heart it did not guarantee it.

In the early church, circumcision was so much a part of Israelite culture that new converts were expected by the Jews to be circumcised. This was true at Galatia where many well-meaning Jewish converts were trying to force the Galatian men to be circumcised. Gal 5:2-6: "Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love."

What happened? Why was circumcision no longer being practiced in Galatia? Jesus happened. When Jesus inaugurated the New Covenant, a significant advancement took place; significant enough to require a new sign. Circumcision was reminiscent of the Old Testament order. Its very nature, the cutting off of flesh represented the need to sacrifice animals regularly to atone for sin. The fact that only Israel was circumcised reminded Israelites constantly of their physical separation from other nations. Even though circumcision pointed to God's covenant, it thus also carried with it much ethnic and cultural significance. The Apostle Paul writes that the continuation of circumcision would amount to a failure to acknowledge that Christ had come and brought a new covenant that now incorporated both male *and* female, Jew *and* Gentile, free *and* slave. Hence, we needed a new sign that represents that we have been separated from sin and death and united instead with Christ.

Hold that thought and consider Passover for a moment. For more than a thousand years, to a greater or lesser degree of consistency, the Old Testament church celebrated the Passover, a feast meant to commemorate the "passing over" of Israelite families by the Angel of Death during the exodus from Egypt. Like circumcision, it, too, was a sign of the covenant, not of their personal

faith. The reason the Angel of Death passed over the Israelites that night was not because they were worthy of God's grace. In fact, the very same families that were covenantally blessed that first Passover evening would later die in the desert *due to their lack of faith!*

In future years, families would celebrate the Passover sign. Fathers, mothers, and children would sit around the table, partaking in the feast with its various symbolic elements, and the children would be taught about the meaning of what they ate. Notice again the objectivity of this sign. The child ate and at the same time was taught the meaning of what he ate. He ate because he was a member of the covenant community, and this was the covenant meal.

Why don't we celebrate Passover anymore? Why don't we circumcise anymore? Jesus came. Passover was commemorative of an important Old Testament event and it pointed forward to Christ, but it did not overtly represent Christ. Listen to what Paul writes in 1 Cor 5:7: "Purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, *our Passover*, was sacrificed for us." Think about those words. Christ is our Passover. Hence, we need a new sign that incorporates this advancement.

Getting back to baptism, in the New Testament, we are not told explicitly that baptism replaces circumcision or that the Lord's Supper replaces Passover. What we do have are strong inferences that this is the case. First, we know that Jesus commanded that only two signs be observed by all of His disciples: baptism and the Lord's Supper. Second, we know that circumcision and Passover have ceased. One of the primary disputes recorded in Acts and the Pauline Epistles is the argument over circumcision and whether it was still a covenantal sign. The answer in Galatians, Romans, Acts, and other books is a resounding, "No." With regard to Passover, Jesus changed the very nature of Passover by transforming its symbols into those of the Communion.

Third, in an important passage, Col 2:11-12, we read: "In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the *circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism*, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead."

Let's take a moment to think through this passage. What was the "circumcision made without hands?" This was the circumcision of the heart mentioned earlier that Moses, Joshua, and other leaders described to Israel. Here, it is called the "circumcision of Christ" and is tied together with being buried in baptism, the baptism referring to the internal baptism of the Holy Spirit. But think about this for a moment. If being baptized through the Holy Spirit into Jesus' death is parallel to the Old Testament circumcision of the heart, is it that surprising that the external signs of the event, baptism and circumcision, are also parallel?

The inferential connection between circumcision and baptism, Passover and the Lord's Supper, is also strong in that the signs of baptism and communion point to the very things to which circumcision and Passover once pointed. The bread that once represented God's fulfillment of a promise to redeem His people through the Exodus, now represents God's faithfulness to His promises through Christ. The wine that once represented the covenantal blessings of God who saved the Israelites from the Egyptians now represents God's covenantal blessing through the atonement of Jesus' blood. Circumcision was a sign of God setting Israel apart from other

nations and His promise to dwell among them and be their God. Similarly, baptism is a sign of God setting apart a people to Himself through union with Christ.

God instituted the original covenantal signs because they reminded His people of their covenantal responsibilities and obligations. Since God still describes our relationship to Him after Christ as covenantal, should we not expect that He might be consistent with His actions of the past and institute new covenant signs? And should we not anticipate that those signs would share the same objective nature as the previous ones?

We saw with circumcision that God did not require professions of faith from eight-day-old male infants. God was certainly no less concerned in the Old Testament with the inner circumcision of the heart as He is today. However, because believers and unbelievers, adults and their children were included in the covenant, all male infants were to be circumcised. Ideally, because circumcision was an objective sign, it represented what would one day come to be true about that child – namely that he would be a faithful, covenant keeper. The same is true of baptism. Because believers and unbelievers, adults and their children are said to be set apart within the New Testament covenant community, all covenant children should be baptized.

Let's quickly summarize some more reasons as to why we should regard baptism as a sign of God's covenant rather than simply the badge of profession of faith. One, baptism, as circumcision, is a gift of God to His people; not of people to God. Abraham did not bring circumcision to God; he "received" it from God. Similarly, baptism is God's gift and testimony to us of His covenant, not our testimony to Him of our faith. Baptism is not a sign of anything that we do. It is a sign of God's work on our behalf, by means of His grace, to save His people. Abraham's circumcision was God's testimony in Abraham's flesh that righteousness can not be earned by man's natural efforts – that it must be graciously imputed to the helpless sinner. This is why the circumcision was performed in infancy, before any act of the child. Circumcision declared the objective truth that justification comes only by faith in God's promise. Throughout his life, the child wore the reminder of that truth and he was to respond to it in faith. The same thing happens with the baptism of children born of believing parents.

Does a person's faith and outward behavior matter then at all? Of course. If a man bore circumcision with hypocrisy, his testimony was abhorrent before God and he called the judgment of the covenant upon himself. The same is true for anyone who bears the sign of baptism or eats at the Table with hypocrisy. When a person becomes a believer, the external sign *becomes parallel* to an inner reality; it is now, as the Apostle Peter writes, "the pledge of a clean conscience." This was true of circumcision as well.

When foreigners desired to be included within the Jewish covenant community, they were circumcised as adults. In this case, it was assumed that there was a parallel between the external sign and the internal nature. But even then, does the internal presence or absence of faith change the nature of the external, objective sign? Did it change the nature and meaning of circumcision?

The answer must be "No." The external sign points to the objective truth of Jesus' sacrifice and atonement. It points to *His* righteousness, not ours. These signs are not arrows pointing subjectively to the inner man, but objectively to the Redeemer. Every individual that was

circumcised in the Old Testament, or now is baptized in the New Testament proclaims by that act that Jesus was cut off and suffered the covenant curses of God, whether his personal life matches that truth or not. As Col 2 and Rom 6 remind us, the covenant signs point to the fact that Jesus was buried in the tomb for our sins. When the Old Testament child was circumcised or the New Testament child is baptized, we proclaim that objective truth. We place upon our children this witness, and it will witness to them for the rest of their lives. We pray that they will respond to that witness in faith, just like Old Testament parents similarly prayed for their circumcised children.

Symbolizing Jesus' death through baptism does not guarantee salvation. Many insincere adults are baptized, just as many covenant children are baptized who later reject the covenant. Inner baptism by the Holy Spirit is God's prerogative, just as was inner circumcision of the heart. Our hope is that physical water baptism will be parallel to the life-giving baptism of the Holy Spirit, and certainly we pray that for the children we baptize.

The objective nature of New Covenant baptism is paralleled in New Covenant communion. The unleavened bread of Passover was to symbolize two things: 1) the lack of time available for the Israelites to let their dough rise on the night of their flight from Egypt; and 2) the absence of leaven, which in the Scriptures often symbolizes sin. According to Luke 22:19, Jesus took this bread, gave thanks, and told the disciples, "This is My body." By taking the unleavened bread, he applied to Himself the symbol of innocence; a sinless life about to be broken on their behalf.

After the breaking of bread, the Passover host lifted the third cup of wine, called the Cup of Redemption. With this cup of wine the family thanked God for redeeming them from Egypt. They would sing Psalm 115-118 and follow it by eating the full supper. This is the cup we would think Jesus would use to symbolize His crucifixion, but according to Luke 22:20, Jesus did not take this third cup. He took the cup *after* the supper - the Cup of Blessing. As the host lifted this cup, all in the home would sing Psalm 136, thanking God for His goodness to Israel in smiting the Egyptians in their first-born and redeeming Israel out of their midst. Of this cup, Jesus said, "This is the New Covenant in My blood which is shed for you."

Verses 17 and 18 of Luke 22 tell us something very important. Jesus says: "Take this and divide it *among yourselves*; for I say to you, *I will not drink* of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." The disciples drank of the cup of blessing, but Jesus did not. Do you remember why? Jesus had another cup to drink, alone. In the Gospels, Jesus asks the disciples: "Can you drink the cup which *I am about to drink*?"

In Gethsemane Jesus calls His ordeal the drinking of a cup. Of course, this is not the cup of blessing that He gave the disciples in the upper room. This cup is the cup of the covenantal judgment and curse. Isa 51:17 reads: "Awake, awake! Stand up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk at the hand of the LORD, the *cup of His fury*; you have drunk the dregs of the cup of trembling, and drained it out." Jer 25:15-19 reads: "For thus says the LORD God of Israel to me: 'Take this wine cup of fury from My hand, and cause all the nations, to whom I send you, to drink it. And they will drink and stagger and go mad because of the sword that I will send among them.' Then I took the cup from the LORD's hand, and made all the nations drink, to whom the LORD had sent me: Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, its kings and its princes, to make them a

desolation, an astonishment, a hissing, and a curse, as it is this day.” Can you not hear the reverberations of these passages in the crucifixion of Jesus? Jesus became a desolation; an astonishment. He drank the cup of God’s fury and drained it out.

Ezek 23:32-34 reads: “Thus says the Lord GOD: ‘You shall drink of your sister's cup, the deep and wide one; you shall be laughed to scorn and held in derision.’” Again this echoes the crucifixion experience. Ezekiel continues: “You will be filled with drunkenness and sorrow, the *cup of horror and desolation*, the cup of your sister Samaria. You shall drink and drain it, you shall break its shards, and tear at your own breasts; for I have spoken,’ says the Lord GOD.” And last, Hab 2:16: “You are filled with shame instead of glory. You also — drink! And be exposed as uncircumcised! The *cup of the LORD's right hand* will be turned against you, and utter shame will be on your glory.”

Do you see how Jesus’ cup, His crucifixion, is the drinking of God’s cup of judgment, which in various passages is described as the “Cup of Fury?” Shouldn’t that have been the cup that the disciples drank? Were they not rebellious enemies of God due to their depraved natures and sinful lives? Isn’t that the same for the Israelites who were passed over? Yes, but in the light of the contrast between Gethsemane and the Upper Room, we should see Jesus’ words in Luke 22, “This cup is the new covenant...” as Jesus extending the cup of blessing to the disciples, the cup of fellowship with the Father, because in their place He was about to go to Calvary and drink the cup of God’s alienation, wrath, and fury. What a contrast between the cup of thanksgiving that Paul mentions in 1 Cor 11:25 and 10:16 and the cup of wrath which Jesus took in our place!

So, just as with baptism we see that the sign of the Lord’s Supper points not to anything worthy in us. None of us are worthy to approach the Table. We were given the cup of blessing; we didn’t take it by virtue of our faith, any more than the disciples took the cup from Jesus’ hands that night by virtue of their faith.

When we come to the Table, we don’t reach inside for some subjective profession of faith as if that separates us from all the unworthy participants. Rather, when we eat and drink we take in the significance of what Jesus Christ has done for us through His covenant grace. We attest that we are members of that covenant and that it covers us. The Lord’s Supper points to God’s passing over of those who deserved His wrath, because on a cross one night on Calvary a Passover Lamb was slain in our place.

How trivial if we leave the Lord’s Table and simply say afterwards, “Wasn’t it a blessing to take part in the communion this morning?” without understanding the fullness of what the bread and cup mean. Every time we approach the table, we apply to ourselves, whether we inwardly recognize it or not, the covenant of Christ. For some who are covenant keepers, that means we eat and drink in blessing. For others, covenant breakers, they eat and drink in cursing.

Baptism and the Lord’s Supper remind God’s people that they are in covenant with Him and lay upon them His claim to their love and loyalty. Like every covenant privilege, the sacraments carry a corresponding obligation or responsibility. In the words of the Westminster Confession, they “solemnly...engage believers to the service of God in Christ, according to His Word.” As signs and seals of our calling in Christ, these two sacraments bear ongoing, objective witness to

the command to “live a life worthy of the calling we have received.” Knowing that we have been baptized “into the name” of the triune God whose name we bear by virtue of baptism, should instill a deep desire to be faithful and obedient to Him who loved us and redeemed us. Likewise the Table of the Lord should challenge us to take up our cross daily, deny ourselves, and follow Him as the One who was crucified in our stead. When properly used, the sacraments motivate us to grow and mature in holiness.

One last question that some may have regards the mode of baptism used at CVP. While we are willing to immerse individuals upon request, we believe that immersion is not only *not* required by Scripture, but that pouring or sprinkling actually have stronger biblical support. Here’s why.

Most individuals when they argue for baptism by immersion point to two passages: Matt. 3:15-16 and Acts 8:36-40. The Matthew passage reads: “When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him.” Acts 8 reads: “Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, “See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?” Then Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” And he answered and said, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him. Now when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more; and he went on his way rejoicing.”

In Matthew we read that Jesus “came up” from the water and in Acts that Philip and the eunuch “came up out of the water.” These descriptions, together with the fact that the Greek word “baptidzo” used for baptize can mean to dip an object in water, lead many to think that baptism must have been by immersion. While this is possible, it is by no means a certainty. First, the phrase “come up out of the water,” could refer to an individual simply leaving the water and returning to the shore. There is no question that baptisms were conducted at places where there was water. When you consider the sheer number of people being baptized in some of the biblical passages (3000 in Acts, hundreds in the Gospels), a water source like a river was vital. What’s interesting is that the Acts 8 passage describes *both Philip and the eunuch* coming up out of the water. They didn’t baptize each other, so this must be a generic description of how the two men came up from the river and not a how-to manual for how to baptize.

Since there is no equivalent for the word “baptism” to be found in the Old Testament and no solid historical precedent for Jewish baptisms prior to John the Baptist’s baptism of repentance described in the Gospels, our look for how to baptize is a matter of either inferring from the two passages mentioned above in the New Testament, or inferring from Old Testament models.

In Ezek 36:24-27 God tells His people: “I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. *I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean*; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.” Here, the visual picture of the sprinkling of water is made parallel to the purifying sprinkling of blood which was done during the offering of sacrifices and anointing of

the priests. In other sections of the Old Testament we see cleansing rituals performed through the pouring of oil and water upon individual's heads.

In the end, we see three potential modes for baptism: immersion, pouring, and sprinkling. The last two modes occur in many Old Testament rituals of cleansing and anointing and given the continuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament, we might expect this to be the expected mode of baptism today. We have chosen at CVP to have these two represent the normal modes of baptism administered at the church.