

COLOSSIANS 2:11–12, THE CIRCUMCISION/ BAPTISM ANALOGY, AND INFANT BAPTISM¹

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There is a silence in the early patristic references to infant baptism concerning the analogy between circumcision and baptism. It will be shown it was not until the mid-third century that this analogy first occurs as an argument for infant baptism. Furthermore, the citing of Colossians 2:11–12 does not occur in this connection until the mid-fourth century. Can it, therefore, be maintained that the analogy between circumcision and baptism gave rise to the practice of infant baptism?

Those who support the practice of infant baptism on the basis of a covenantal analogy between circumcision and baptism believe that infants were baptized on this basis from the earliest days of the church, Acts 2:39. The passages in the NT which imply a connection between them, especially Colossians 2:11–12 in which they are juxtaposed, are said to support this view, even though make no explicit reference is made to infant baptism. It is maintained that the first Christians, being Jews, would naturally have assumed that the sign of the covenant should be given to children, and that the lack of an explicit prohibition of infant baptism thus supports the view that the early Christians practised infant baptism.²

It is proposed I. to survey selected patristic sources which discuss infant baptism,³ to see when the analogy between

¹I am grateful to both Rev. Professor C.K. Barrett who supervised the study on which this article is based and David Wright, Dean of the Faculty of Divinity at New College, Edinburgh for making a number of helpful suggestions.

²E.g. Oscar Cullmann, *Baptism in the New Testament* (ET, London, S.C.M. Press 1950) 62–3; P. Marcel, *The Biblical Doctrine of Baptism* (ET, London, James Clarke & Co. 1953) 191; John Murray: *Christian Baptism* (Philadelphia, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company 1972) 52–3; Church of Scotland, Report on Baptism, *The Biblical Doctrine of Baptism* (Edinburgh, The Saint Andrew Press 1958) 45–6.

³Tertullian and Origen have been chosen because they do not refer to the analogy in connection with infant baptism, when one might expect them to do so had the analogy been used in this connection from the first; Cyprian, Gregory and Augustine because they mark significant developments in the application of this analogy to infant baptism.

circumcision and baptism first occurs as an argument for infant baptism; II. to consider at what stage in the development of this analogy its use is consistent as an argument for infant baptism; III. to examine the part Colossians 2:11–12 played in the development of this analogy in order to ascertain when these verses were first used in connection with infant baptism; and IV. to exegete this text in the light of Pauline theology.

I. The Use of the Analogy as an Argument for Infant Baptism

The earliest certain reference to infant baptism is that of Tertullian. There are a number of earlier patristic comments which are often taken to imply the practice. However, even granting that there may be allusions to the practice,⁴ they do not give any indication that the analogy between circumcision and baptism formed part of the early rationale for it.⁵

This lack of reference to the analogy in the early possible allusions to infant baptism is significant, since neither Tertullian nor Origen, who provide the earliest explicit testimony to the practice in the East and West respectively, refers to the analogy between circumcision and baptism as an argument for infant baptism.

Tertullian's *Homily on Baptism*

Tertullian's objection to infant baptism, outlined in chapter 18 of his *Homily on Baptism* (c. 200) is well known.⁶ It is, however, instructive to consider what we may learn from this concerning the arguments advanced in favour of infant baptism in North Africa at that time. The main argument appears to have been an appeal to Jesus' blessing of the children, Matthew 19.14, which was re-inforced by an appeal to Jesus' instruction

⁴I am not myself persuaded that any of these passages do in fact bear witness to infant baptism. See the judicious evaluation by P.K. Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 1978) 25–28, 32–35.

⁵This, of course, does not prove that it did not do so. The allusions, if such they be, are made only in passing. There is no reason to expect a person to declare his whole theology of infant baptism into every reference to it.

⁶The text and translation used is that of Ernest Evans, *Tertullian's Homily on Baptism* (London, SPCK 1964).

to 'Give to those who ask of you', Luke 6:30.⁷ It is not difficult to imagine those seeking baptism for their children taunting the clergy with Jesus' injunction to his disciples to 'Let the children come unto me', likening the clergy's refusal to grant baptism to the disciples' attempt to prevent the children from coming to Jesus, and castigating their clergy: 'You refuse to grant our request for our children to be baptized, but Jesus said: "Give to those who ask of you."

Tertullian responds that neither of these texts are applicable to infant baptism. He maintains that the 'coming' to Christ mentioned in Matthew 19:14 implies an active response on the part of the child concerned, an ability to understand the Christian faith for himself, and being old enough to know Christ personally. 'Let them come,' he maintains, 'when they are growing up, when they are learning, when they are being taught what they are coming to: let them be made Christians when they have become competent to know Christ.' Clearly, in Tertullian's opinion, this dominical saying is not applicable to new-born infants. With respect to Luke 6:30, having already pointed out that this refers to almsgiving, not baptism, Tertullian further argues that it is quite obviously not applicable to new-born infants, since new-born infants are unable to 'ask' for salvation. 'Let them first learn how to ask for salvation,' he maintains, 'so that you may be seen to have given to one who asks.'

It is significant that there is no hint in Tertullian's consideration of the arguments advanced for baptizing infants of the view that because in Judaism infants were circumcised so now infants ought to be baptized. Had this view been advanced as an argument for infant baptism in North Africa at the time, Tertullian would surely have been aware of it, made reference to it, and sought to refute it.

Origen

Origen, the first Eastern writer explicitly to mention infant baptism, several times refers to the analogy between circumcision and baptism, but nowhere connects the analogy with

⁷Cf. J. Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries* (ET, SCM Press 1960) 83–4. Note that Luke 6:30 also occurs earlier in the chapter in connection with adult baptism. I shall develop the significance of this in a subsequent article.

infant baptism. The silence is particularly noteworthy in his *Homily XIV on Luke* (on Luke 2:21–24),⁸ where the analogy and infant baptism are mentioned in close proximity.

In the first part of the *Homily*, Origen discusses the spiritual significance of Christ's circumcision in his infancy. He argues that this was a representative act which is attributed to the Christian in baptism, which has, therefore, has brought an end to the requirement for physical circumcision. He does not, however, develop the possible parallel between Christ's circumcision in his infancy and infant baptism. Instead, in the continuation of the homily, he connects infant baptism with Christ's purification in the Temple—Origen argues that when Luke speaks of 'their purification' (Luke 2:22) he means both Jesus and Mary—and uses both practices to support his notion of original sin.⁹

Origen's silence concerning the application of the analogy between circumcision and baptism to infant baptism strongly suggests that he was unaware of its application in this way. That Origen should understand baptism to be the fulfilment of circumcision and yet not refer to this analogy in connection with infant baptism is not as surprising as may at first seem, since the analogy with circumcision initially focused attention upon an intelligent response to the Gospel.¹⁰ Nor is it surprising that the analogy was not used in this way in Palestine in the mid-third century, when it was clearly used as an argument for infant baptism in North Africa at about the same time. It would be a mistake to assume that the practice, or the rationale for it, necessarily developed uniformly.¹¹

⁸GCS 49, 83–91. Origin's *Homilies on Luke*, like those on Genesis and Leviticus mentioned below, were delivered at Caesarea between 239–243. See further P. Nautin, *Origène: sa vie et son œuvre* (Paris, Beauchesne 1977) 409–412.

⁹Cf. also *Homily VIII on Leviticus* § 3 (GCS 29, 396–99) where Origen again refers to infant baptism in connection with the need for purification after childbirth, Lev. 12:2. He subsequently discusses the spiritual significance of circumcision, but refers to this simply because it is mentioned in the text, Lev. 12:3, and makes no attempt to connect this with infant baptism.

¹⁰See pp. 235–238.

¹¹Cf. Wright, 'The Origins of Infant Baptism—Child Believers' Baptism?', *SJT* 40, 1–23, 3.

Cyprian on the Synod of Carthage

The earliest explicit use of the analogy between circumcision and baptism as an argument for infant baptism is recorded in Cyprian's *Letter 64* to Fidus.¹² Fidus believed that the analogy between circumcision and baptism meant that a baby should be baptized on the eighth day, and not before. In this letter, in which Cyprian reports the decision of the synod which met at Carthage in 253 to discuss this matter, Cyprian replies that since infants are subject to original sin they should be baptized immediately after birth. He re-inforces this point with an appeal to the personal innocence of new-born infants, maintaining that since they are not guilty of any actual sin, rather than being debarred from the grace of baptism, they especially deserve our aid and divine mercy, and should be baptized 'immediately at the dawn of their life'.

Clearly by this time the application of the analogy between circumcision and baptism to infant baptism was sufficiently established to be thought by some to be determinative for the administration of infant baptism; and indeed, sufficiently established for the synod to refute the implication of the analogy in this one respect, without calling into question the basic validity of the analogy itself. However, the belief that infants share in the guilt of Adam's sin and are, therefore, in need of cleansing, took precedence over the analogy between circumcision and baptism in determining when infants ought to be baptized.

The manner in which Cyprian replies to Fidus suggests that it was Fidus' view that the analogy between circumcision and baptism means that infants ought not to be baptized before the eighth day, rather than the fear of infant mortality before the eighth day, that was the innovation. Had the analogy between circumcision and baptism been used from the first as an argument for infant baptism, the issue would surely have been raised, and settled, earlier. The fact that it had only now been raised is an indication that the application of the analogy between circumcision and baptism to infant baptism was a fairly recent one, and that the possible implications of this

¹²CSEL 3, 2, 718–21.

analogy for the administration of infant baptism were only now being realised.

Placing the evidence of Tertullian, Origen and Cyprian side by side, it is clear that the analogy between circumcision and baptism did not give rise to the practice of infant baptism. It was not used as an argument for infant baptism until after the practice was clearly established on other grounds.¹³

In view of the close links between Rome and Carthage, it is reasonable to suppose that what was the case in North Africa was also the case in Rome, and that the analogy was similarly not applied to infant baptism in Rome until sometime between 200 and 250.¹⁴ Further, that Origen was not familiar with its application in this way, suggests that this development did not take place until after his visit to Rome about the year 217.¹⁵ We may cautiously conclude, therefore, that the analogy between circumcision and baptism was first advanced as an argument for infant baptism in Italy or North Africa sometime in the second quarter of the third century.

¹³Cf. Wright, *op. cit.* 19, who similarly concludes that the analogy between circumcision was not initially used in connection with infant baptism. In his opinion, the polemic against circumcision must initially have militated against this analogy being used as an argument for infant baptism. It was, he argues, only in the third century, when the controversies over the Christians' non-observance of the Jewish law had largely receded, that the parallel between circumcision and baptism became influential. However a close association is made between circumcision and baptism in the Testimony tradition from Justin onwards. It would have been easy for Christians to answer the Jewish criticism that they did not practise circumcision by referring to the practice of infant baptism as the counterpart to Jewish circumcision. That they did not do so prior to the mid-third century is in itself an indication that the analogy between circumcision and baptism did not give rise to the practice of infant baptism.

¹⁴It is not possible to adduce from the brief reference to the practice in the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus, 21.4 what arguments were or were not used in connection with infant baptism in Rome c. 217.

¹⁵We know nothing of Origen's stay in Rome save that he attended a lecture of Hippolytus, who acknowledged his presence. Since he was concerned to learn all that he could about the theology and practice of this 'most ancient church' it is likely that he would have discussed infant baptism during his visit, though we cannot be certain of this. There is no explicit reference to infant baptism in Origen's Alexandrian writings which suggests that it may not have been practised in the Alexandrian church. It is possible that he became acquainted with the practice, and the claim that it was of apostolic origin, during his visit to Rome.

Gregory Nazianzen

Although writing nearly a century later than Cyprian, Gregory Nazianzen gives an insight into how the analogy with circumcision may first have been used in connection with infant baptism. Gregory assumes that repentance and faith are pre-requisites for baptism: children, he maintains, should normally be about three years old before they are baptized since at this age they are at least capable of a partial understanding of what baptism means. However, he uses the analogy between circumcision and baptism to justify the baptism of infants *in extremis*.¹⁶ It is possible that what originally may have been used as the justification of an emergency procedure became an argument for the regular practice. It is ironic that whereas the analogy between circumcision and baptism may initially have delayed the rise of the practice because it focused attention upon the need for repentance and faith, once the practice was established on other grounds it became the means by which, in Cappadocia at least, the traditional view that repentance and faith were pre-requisites for baptism was circumvented.

In the fourth century the analogy between circumcision and baptism occurs more frequently in connection with infant baptism. There are two stages in the use of the analogy as an argument for infant baptism. First, it was used alongside John 3:5, an Old Testament counterpart to which was sometimes seen in the statement in Genesis 17:4 that any uncircumcised male shall be cut off from God's people, to confirm the necessity of infant baptism. In the West the explanation given was that new-born infants were subject to original sin.¹⁷ In the East the necessity of infant baptism was explained primarily in terms of protection against demons and heresy.¹⁸ Asterius is the only Eastern writer who explicitly connects the necessity of infant

¹⁶On *Holy Baptism*, *Oration 40* § 28 (PG 36, col 400).

¹⁷Zeno of Verona, *Sermons* I:3 (I:13) § 19–24 (CCL 22, 28–30); Ambrose, *On Abraham* II:81 (CSEL 32.1, 633); Augustine, *On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins* III:v.10 (CSEL 60, 135–6); *On Original Sin*, xxx.35; xxii.37; (CSEL 42, 194 and 196); *Defence Against Julian the Pelagian Heretic* II:vi.18; VI:vi.18 and 20 (PL 44 cols 685–6, 833–5).

¹⁸Asterius, *Homily XX* (*On Psalm 6*) §3 (ed. M. Richard, 82–4); John Chrysostom, *Homily XL on Genesis* §4 (PG 53, col 374); cf. also Gregory Nazianzen, *On Holy Baptism*, *Oration 40* § 17 (PG 36, cols 380–1).

baptism with original sin.¹⁹ The second stage was Augustine's use of the analogy between circumcision and baptism to explain how infants, despite their inability to make a personal response of repentance and faith, may nonetheless be baptized.

Augustine

Augustine notes that although in the case of Abraham circumcision was the seal of a prior righteousness by faith, in the case of Isaac the seal of righteousness by faith came first, the righteousness itself following afterwards. This enabled him to distinguish between the reception and the efficacy of the baptism, and to maintain that though a response of repentance and faith is necessary for the sacrament to become effective in a person's life, this is not a pre-requisite for the reception of the sacrament itself. The response of repentance and faith need not necessarily be concomitant with the reception of the rite itself, but may, in the case of infants, be subsequent to it.²⁰ However, there is no evidence that this reasoning was used as an argument for infant baptism from the first: its only proponent in the patristic period is Augustine who only advances it on this one occasion. It would appear, rather, that it was derived from the fact that the analogy was already in use as an argument for infant baptism. Yet it was in this form that the analogy was taken up by John Calvin²¹ and influenced the Reformed tradition.

¹⁹In section 3 of his homily on Psalm 6, Asterius allegorizes the swaddling bands worn by a child for the first seven days of its life, arguing that they signify 'the bonds of sin'. He makes a clear distinction between the swaddling bands of the womb and the swaddling bands of the senses, that is, between original and actual sin.

²⁰*On Baptism Against the Donatists* IV, xxiii. 31–xxv. 33 (PL 43, cols 174–6). Augustine adds that where infants die before they can make a personal profession of faith, this deficiency is made good by the grace and mercy of God. He emphasises, however, that where this response is intentionally lacking, the person, even though he may have been baptized, incurs guilt. On the question of the relationship between faith and infant baptism, see further E.W. Fairweather, 'St Augustine's Interpretation of Infant Baptism', *Augustinus Magister* (Paris 1954) 897–903. This distinction between the reception and efficacy of baptism formed an important part in his acceptance of Donatist baptism which, he argues, since it is Christ who baptizes, and the power of baptism comes from Christ himself not those who administer it, could become effective through subsequent repentance and faith.

²¹*Institutes* IV:xvi. 20; cf. 25.

II. The Development of the Analogy in the Patristic Period

In its classic form, the argument from infant circumcision to infant baptism rests not so much upon the nature of the correspondence between the two rites, but upon the view that the fact that infants were circumcised establishes the principle that infants are included in the covenant.²² However, this argument is not used in connection with infant baptism in the patristic period, during which time the argument from infant circumcision to infant baptism was dependent rather upon the view that the Christian rite of baptism is the typological fulfilment of the Jewish rite of circumcision.

It is important to note that, although later patristic writers draw a dual parallel between both the inner effects and the outward rites of circumcision and baptism, earlier writers understand the analogy at the former level only. In the early Testimony tradition circumcision is primarily a figure for a person's response to the Gospel. The author of the *Epistle of Barnabas*, drawing upon the Old Testament passages which speak of the circumcision of the heart and ears, argues that true circumcision involves hearing and believing the Christian message. In his treatment of the spiritual significance of circumcision in chapter 9 the author gives no indication that it is connected with baptism. The subject of baptism is discussed after an intervening section dealing with the significance of the various dietary regulations in the Old Testament, and in the treatment of baptism there is no indication that it is viewed as the spiritual fulfilment of circumcision. To assume that in speaking of a spiritual circumcision effected by Christ (chapter 9) the author means baptism would be to be guilty of reading back later patristic notions concerning the relationship between circumcision and baptism which do not appear to be present in the author's thought.

For Justin Martyr, who drew upon the same Testimony tradition as the author of the *Epistle of Barnabas*, circumcision is a figure for the freedom from deceit, error and idolatry.²³ It is the second circumcision mentioned in Joshua 5:2. Christ is the

²²Cf. *ibid.* IV:xvi. 6; John Murray, *op. cit.* 48–53.

²³Dialogue with Trypho 41:4; 47:2; 113:6, 7.

New Circumciser, the spiritual Joshua, the Stone who effects circumcision by means of his words, preached by the apostles.²⁴ Although Justin sometimes speaks of spiritual circumcision without reference to baptism,²⁵ it is clear that he closely associated the two.²⁶ Indeed, on one occasion he explicitly states that 'we have received it [spiritual circumcision] through baptism'.²⁷ However, the term 'baptism' is probably used here in an extended sense, to mean the whole process of catechetical instruction which reaches its climax in the baptismal ceremony itself, in much the same way as that in which Irenaeus refers to receiving the rule of faith 'through baptism'.²⁸ Spiritual circumcision is effected 'through baptism' in an extended sense, in that a person's response to Christian teaching reaches its climax in the baptismal ceremony, perhaps in response to the baptismal interrogations.

The connection between circumcision and baptism is more explicit in Origen's writings.²⁹ However, the tradition that true circumcision involves a response to the Christian message leads Origen to allegorize the fact that infants were circumcised. In § 5 of his *Homily III on Genesis* (On the Circumcision of Abraham) Origen argues that the ears of the infants of the Church of Christ are 'the ears which the Lord was seeking in his hearers when he said: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear"—that is, those who respond to Christ's teaching. There is no suggestion here that because infants were circumcised, so now infants ought to be baptized. Rather, it is probable that the early emphasis upon the circumcision of the heart, lips and ears delayed rather than precipitated the use of the analogy between circumcision and baptism as an argument for infant baptism since it focused attention upon the

²⁴*Ibid.* 113–4, *passim*; cf. 24:2; 47:2.

²⁵*Ibid.* 24:2; 47:2; 92:2.

²⁶*Ibid.* 114:4, 5; cf. 18:2; 19:2, 3.

²⁷ ἡμεῖς δὲ διὰ τοῦ βαπτίσματος ἀντήν. . . ἐλάβομεν, *ibid.* 43:2.

²⁸ *Against Heresies*, I:9:4, cf. J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (London, Longman 1972)³⁰ 51.

²⁹ *Homily V on Joshua*, § 6 (SC 71, 170–2); *Selections from the Catena on Joshua* (PG 12, col 821); *On Psalm 118* (119) (SC 189, 184); *Homily XIV on Luke* (GCS 49, 83–4); *Commentary on Romans* 10:58 (PG 14, col 1264).

baptism of those who were old enough to understand and accept the Christian message for themselves.

Tertullian does not develop the possible analogy between circumcision and baptism in chapters 4–9 of his *Homily on Baptism*, where he considers a number of types of baptism in the Old Testament. For Tertullian the counterpart to carnal circumcision is a spiritual one³⁰ involving an ethical transformation and change that is characteristic of one's life as a whole, and which is expressed in love,³¹ modesty³² and obedience.³³ He does, however, see an analogy between circumcision and baptism in that they are both signs and seals of a prior righteousness by faith. Alluding to Romans 4:11 he argues that baptism is 'a sealing of faith which faith is begun and commended by the faith of repentance':³⁴ it is a 'sign and seal of repentance' for those who by grace inherit the promise made to Abraham.³⁵ The latter, as Tertullian makes clear elsewhere,³⁶ are those who by faith have become the sons of Abraham. It is indeed possible, therefore, that Tertullian's understanding of the analogy between circumcision and baptism, and of those who were the true sons of Abraham, contributed to his objection to infant baptism in that it similarly focused attention upon those who were old enough to understand and respond to the Christian faith for themselves.

It is significant, therefore, that neither Cyprian³⁷ nor Zeno of Verona,³⁸ both of whom drew upon the Testimony tradition and refer to the analogy between circumcision and baptism in connection with infant baptism (the former in his letter to Fidus), make reference to circumcision as a figure for our response to the gospel. In contrast to this, in the East Syrian

³⁰To His Wife I:2.

³¹Against Marcion V:4.

³²On the Apparel of Women II:9.

³³Against the Jews 3.

³⁴On Repentance 6.

³⁵Ibid. 2.

³⁶Against Marcion V:3; On Monogamy 6.

³⁷Testimonies Against the Jews I:8.

³⁸On Circumcision, Sermons I:3(13).

Church, where, as Jeremias notes,³⁹ 'there is no trace of evidence that. . infant baptism was practised in the first four centuries', the view that true circumcision is a faith response to the gospel, expressed in baptism, is prominent.⁴⁰ It was only after this understanding of circumcision had been lost that the analogy between circumcision and baptism could be extended to mean that since infants were circumcised, so now they ought to be baptized.

There were a number of factors contributing to the ritual comparison between circumcision and baptism, and thus to the argument from infant circumcision to infant baptism. One such factor was the common description of circumcision and baptism as seals. Whether or not the New Testament references to sealing refer to baptism, from the mid-second century onwards baptism is described as a seal.⁴¹ However, it is by no means certain that those writers who describe baptism as a seal would have argued that because infants were circumcised infants ought to be baptized. The author of 2 Clement argues that baptism is effective for the forgiveness of former sins⁴² and refers to salvation as the recovery of sight⁴³ which suggests that he has the baptism of adults in mind. More significantly, the author of the *Shepherd* of Hermas preserves the Pauline connection between sealing, hearing and believing. In *Similitude* VIII:vi.3 he speaks of 'those who, having heard, believed and received the seal' (ἀκούσαντες οἱ πιστεύσαντες καὶ εἰληφότες τὴν σφραγίδα). Indeed, throughout the author presupposes repentance and faith as prerequisites for baptism.⁴⁴ This indicates that he has in mind those who were old enough to understand and respond to the Christian message for themselves. Tertullian, as we have seen, similarly retains the Pauline connection between sealing and

³⁹J. Jeremias, *op. cit.* 69. He argues that this was due to the influence of gnostic asceticism, which demanded celibacy as a condition for baptism, though he recognises that this requirement had been relaxed by the time of Aphrahat.

⁴⁰See Aphrahat, *Demonstration XII (On Circumcision)* (ET, Jacob Neusner, *Aphrahat and Judaism*, Leiden, E.J. Brill 1971, 9–30) § 10.

⁴¹See G.W.H. Lampe, 'The Second Century', *The Seal of the Spirit* (London, SPCK 1967) chapter 6.

⁴²13:1.

⁴³9:2.

⁴⁴*Similitude* IX.xvi. 4; xxxi. 3; xxxiii. 1, 3.

faith. It is indeed possible that the connection between sealing and faith initially might have delayed, rather than precipitated, the argument from infant circumcision to infant baptism. It was only after the Pauline connection between sealing and faith was lost, or after the practice of infant baptism had arisen on other grounds, that the analogy between circumcision and baptism could be extended in this way. Once this had taken place, however, the common description of circumcision and baptism as seals became an important element in the use of the analogy between circumcision and baptism as an argument for infant baptism.⁴⁵

The pressures of anti-Jewish polemic may have contributed to the view that the Jewish rite of circumcision was a type of the Christian rite of baptism. It would have been much easier to answer the Jewish criticism that Christians are inconsistent in that they claim to accept the Old Testament, but do not keep its precepts, of which the non-observance of circumcision is a prime example, by replying that baptism had replaced circumcision, than to refer to a less tangible inner, spiritual circumcision.

A further factor may have been the rise of a more sacramental typology. Justin's typological understanding of circumcision is primarily spiritual: the correspondence he makes is with the spiritual life of the believer, rather than the outward ceremony. The development of a more sacramental typology which saw correspondences between Jewish and Christian rites and rituals may have contributed to the view that the Jewish rite of circumcision was a type of the Christian rite of baptism, and thus the argument from infant circumcision.

That both circumcision and baptism took place on the eighth day, circumcision on the eighth day after birth, baptism on Sunday, the eighth day, may have been a contributory factor in this in that it focused attention upon the outward administration of the rites, though it also had a more positive effect in that it helped maintain a Christocentric view of baptism, by directly relating what happens in baptism to Christ's resurrection.

⁴⁵Cf. Asterius, *op. cit.*

III. The Analogy in Colossians 2:11–12 and Infant Baptism⁴⁶

In the patristic period the analogy between circumcision and baptism was initially developed independently of Colossians 2:11–12. It is questionable whether Justin was familiar with Colossians. His use of the term πρωτότοκος⁴⁷ is not necessarily an indication of his knowledge of Colossians. It is probable that πρωτότοκος was in general Christological use and does not always depend on Colossians 1:15. More specifically, with respect to Colossians 2:11–12, the reference in *Dialogue*: 114 to Christ as the Cornerstone ‘cut without hands’ (ἀνευ χειρῶν τμηθέντος) is an allusion not to Colossians 2:11 but to Daniel 2:34 (cf. 2:45), to which Justin alludes in *Dialogue*: 76 in a context in which neither circumcision or baptism are in mind. Indeed, the parallel between Justin’s imagery here and Colossians 2:11 is not exact. Daniel 2:34 speaks of a stone cut without hands, whereas in Colossians 2:11 Paul speaks of a circumcision made without hands. Further, Justin was familiar with the relatively rare adjective χειροποίητος which he uses twice⁴⁸ to refer to various man-made heresies. If he did have Colossians 2:11–12 specifically in mind, it is surprising that he nowhere uses this term to describe carnal circumcision, or ἀχειροποίητος to describe the second spiritual circumcision. Justin’s argument is derived from the Testimony tradition, and is not specifically based upon Colossians 2:11–12. At most, it is possible that Justin may at some time have read Colossians 2:11–12, in which case these verses may have played some part in the development of his thought, in particular the connection of the second spiritual circumcision with baptism.

Later writers, however, employ Colossians 2:11–12 to confirm traditions that had originally been developed independently of these verses. Tertullian, who was dependent upon the same Testimony tradition as Justin, similarly makes no reference to Colossians 2:11–12 when considering the spiritual

⁴⁶For a comprehensive survey of how these verses were integrated in the patristic period see my M.A. thesis, *The History of the Interpretation of Colossians 2:11–12 up to the Council of Chalcedon, with particular reference to the use of these verses as an argument for infant baptism* (Durham University 1988).

⁴⁷*Dialogue* 84, 85, 100, 125, 138; *Apology* I:46; *Apology* II:6.

⁴⁸*Apology* I:58; *Dialogue* 35:6.

significance of circumcision. However, Cyprian, writing fifty years later, adds Colossians 2:11 to provide a New Testament confirmation for this tradition.⁴⁹ The typology of the crossing of the Jordan was also originally developed independently of Colossians 2:11–12.⁵⁰ Origen several times expounds this theme, but on only one occasion links this with Colossians 2:11.⁵¹ Even there however, Colossians 2:11 adds nothing to his theme. The text is simply quoted at the end of his exposition, without comment. Again, the analogy between circumcision on the eighth day and Christ's resurrection on the eighth day was originally developed independently of Colossians 2:11–12.⁵² Origen was the first writer as far as we know explicitly to connect this tradition with Colossians 2:11–12.⁵³ Similarly the typology of the Deluge was originally developed without reference to Colossians 2:11–12,⁵⁴ Colossians 2:12 being added later to this theme.⁵⁵

A similar process appears to have taken place in the use of these verses as an argument for infant baptism. There is no indication that Colossians 2:11–12 played a part in formulating the reply to Fidus, the first occurrence of this analogy as an argument for infant baptism.⁵⁶ The argument in this letter is rather a development of the Testimony tradition. It was not until the mid-fourth century that Colossians 2:11–12 were used explicitly in connection with infant baptism.⁵⁷

IV. Colossians 2:11–12 in Pauline Theology

Recent exegesis has suggested that circumcision in Colossians 2:11 is a figure for union with Christ in his death, and that baptismal language does not begin until verse 12.⁵⁸ The phrase

⁴⁹*Testimonies Against the Jews* 1:8.

⁵⁰Justin, *Dialogue* 113–4; Tertullian, *An Answer to the Jews* 9.

⁵¹Extract from the *Catena on Joshua* 5:2.

⁵²*Barnabas* 15:9; Justin, *Dialogue* 41:4.

⁵³On *Psalm 118*.

⁵⁴Justin, *Dialogue* 138–9.

⁵⁵Asterius, *op. cit.* s7.

⁵⁶The reference to the 'hands of God' in § 4 of Cyprian's *Letter 64* is to God's formation of the child whilst in its mother's womb, not his action in the spiritual circumcision effected in baptism.

⁵⁷Asterius, *op. cit.* § 3.

⁵⁸See for example P.T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (Waco, Word 1982) *ad loc.*

εν τῇ περιτομῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ is not a periphrasis for baptism, but a reference to Christ's death which is viewed metaphorically as circumcision. This is confirmed by a comparison with Romans 6:3–4 and Ephesians 2:11–13, both of which have close parallels with Colossians 2:11–12.⁵⁹

Whereas Romans 6:3–4 speaks of death, burial and resurrection, Colossians 2:11–12 speaks of circumcision, burial and resurrection. The phrase εἰς τὸν θάνατον αὐτοῦ in Romans 6:3 is equivalent to εν τῇ περιτομῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ in Colossians 2:11. This strongly suggests that in Pauline theology the latter phrase is a reference to the death of Christ. That Colossians 2:11 speaks of being circumcised with Christ, whereas Romans 6:3 speaks of being baptized into Christ, does not mean that the former is a figure for baptism. Paul's use of βαπτίζεσθαι in 1 Corinthians 10:2 does not necessarily refer to the actual water rite of baptism. In Romans 6:3, as in Galatians 3:6 and 1 Corinthians 12:13, it is used metaphorically to describe our incorporation into Christ.⁶⁰

When Ephesians 2:13 refers to Gentiles being 'brought near' by the blood of Christ, use is being made of the imagery of Jewish proselytism in order to describe the incorporation of Gentiles into the people of God.⁶¹ The blood of Christ shed on

⁵⁹G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (London, Macmillan 1962) 155 cf. 152 suggests that 'Colossians 2.1ff is Paul's authentic commentary on Rom. 6.1ff.'. M. Barth, *Ephesians 1–3* (New York, Doubleday 1974) 281 considers the similarities and differences between Ephesians 2:11ff. and Colossians 2:11–12.

⁶⁰Cf. J.D.G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (London, SCM 1970) 109, 140.

⁶¹The imagery in Eph. 2:13ff has been understood variously, either in OT-Rabbinic terms, or in the light of the Gnostic Redeemer Myth, or Qumran parallels. While both Hans Schlier, *Christus und die Kirche in Epheserbrief* (Tübingen 1930) and E. Käsemann, *Leib und Leib Christi* (Tübingen 1930) suggest a Gnostic background, their sources were post-NT as is indeed the Gnostic Redeemer Myth, cf. M. Barth, *op. cit.* 16, 17, 286. Further the latter does not contain concepts basic to Eph. 2:13ff., in particular, the notion of representation E. Percy, *Der Leib Christi* (Lund 1942) 233–4, cf. also Stig Hanson, *The Unity of the Church in the NT* (Uppsala 1946) 143. While there are certain parallels between this passage and Qumran, cf. R.P. Martin, *Reconciliation: A Study in St. Paul's Thought* (London 1981) 172, it is open to question whether a Qumran background is able to provide an adequate interpretative key to all the imagery in this passage i.e. the new man and the dividing wall. Cf. W. Rader, *The Church and Radical Hostility: A History of Interpretation of Ephesians 2:11–22* (Tübingen 1978) 196. Qumran took no part in the temple cultus, and thus, even granting possible parallels, the reference to the 'blood of Christ' needs to

the cross is contrasted with the blood of proselyte circumcision. Christ's death is viewed metaphorically as a sacrificial circumcision. The close parallels between Ephesians 2:11ff and Colossians 2:11–12 suggest that the reference to the 'circumcision of Christ' in Colossians 2:11 is to his death.

That Paul proceeds in Colossians 2:12 to speak of burial with Christ in baptism indicates that he does have in mind a correspondence between circumcision and baptism. This correspondence is not between the outward rites themselves, nor indeed the subjects of these two rites, but between the prophetic significance of circumcision and the inner significance of baptism. Spiritual circumcision, περιτομὴ ἀχειροποιήτην, and burial in baptism are both figures for the same process, namely union with Christ in his death.

Paul may also have had in mind a parallel between circumcision and baptism in that they are both signs and seals of righteousness by faith. Elsewhere in Romans 4:11ff he draws a parallel between the faith of Abraham and that of the Christian believer. Abraham was justified by his faith in the power of God to raise up a son from the deadness of his body and the barrenness of Sarah's womb. The Christian is similarly justified by his faith in the power of God to raise up his Son from the dead. The latter thought is present in Colossians 2:12, where Paul speaks of the Christian being raised through faith in the operation of God who raised Christ from the dead.⁶²

The crucial question concerning the use of these verses in connection with infant baptism is whether it is legitimate to develop this analogy in other respects, not specifically developed by Paul. One answer is to ask whether to do so is consistent with Paul's teaching elsewhere. Would he have extended the analogy to argue that because infants were circumcised, so infants ought now to be baptized? Is this line of argument really consistent with his emphasis that a person becomes a son of Abraham not by physical descent, whether from Abraham, or by implication, from Christian parents, but

be seen as Paul's own comment. An OT-Rabbinic background, however, does provide an adequate key for the imagery used.

⁶²The genitive ἐνεργείας is objective.

through personal faith?⁶³ The radical nature of this teaching is not sufficiently taken into account by those who argue that infants were baptized from the first on the basis of the analogy between circumcision and baptism.

Colossians 2:11–12 does not support the deduction that because infants in the OT were circumcised so in the early church they were baptized. That presses the analogy between circumcision and baptism well beyond Paul's argument and reads into the text much later patristic exegesis.

V. Conclusions

The patristic evidence does not suggest that the analogy between circumcision and baptism gave rise to the practice of infant baptism, nor that Colossians 2:11–12 were initially understood to imply infant baptism. It suggests rather that this analogy was not used as an argument for infant baptism until after the practice has arisen on other grounds. The silence of the NT concerning an explicit prohibition of infant baptism is outweighed by the silence of the early centuries in which there is no mention of the analogy between circumcision and baptism in the early references to infant baptism.

Colossians 2:11–12 was understood in the light of the analogy with circumcision in the patristic period. To the present writer, the earlier patristic understanding of circumcision as a figure for our response to the gospel, which is expressed in baptism, is closer to Paul's meaning in these verses than the later patristic understanding of circumcision as a type of the outward rite of baptism itself. However, post-patristic exegesis of Colossians 2:11–12, and the use of these verses in connection with infant baptism, have been dominated by the later patristic understanding of this analogy.

⁶³This is implicit in Rom. 4:12, 16–18, 9:7f and Gal. 3. Cf. Mt. 3:7–9, Jn. 1:12–13, 8:37–40, 1 Pet. 1:23.