

# The Unity of the Testaments and its Significance for Infant Baptism

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Modern Biblical theology is intent on establishing the unity of the Bible. Analytical studies have been relentlessly pursued for upwards of a century and have produced their fruits—not all of equal value, and some, at least, decidedly not good. To-day the emphasis has shifted and is concentrated on synthetical study to enable the Church and the Christian believer to accept the Bible in its wholeness as in a true sense the Word of God. It has occurred to the writer that this emphasis has not been given due respect in modern discussions on infant baptism—vide some rather cavalier correspondence by the Revd. Hugh Martin in recent issues of *Theology*<sup>1</sup>—though this has in part been made good by Dr. Oscar Cullman's recent *Baptism in the New Testament*. It may well prove that a closer examination of the oneness of Old and New Testament faith, with particular concentration on the connection between circumcision and baptism, will produce additional, and perhaps the best, grounds for the practice of infant baptism. Should we seem to be making an unnecessary detour in order to reach a position not far distant, our only reply is that the longer road, provided it be properly sign-posted, may ultimately prove shorter than the cross-country by-path which leads nowhere.

## I

The Christian Church appropriated the Jewish Scriptures overnight. Within the prophetic writings it discovered even the significance of its birth—or re-birth—at Pentecost. With an assurance born of faith in Jesus of Nazareth as Israel's Messiah it proceeded to interpret the Christian facts in terms derived from the Old Testament. The Church awoke to the fact that it was Israel's rightful successor and therefore the possessor of that new and better covenant which Jeremiah foretold and which the Lord inaugurated in His death. The secret which in other ages had remained hidden in the counsels of God was now revealed in the Church, whose members were fellow-heirs and fellow-partakers of the promise through the Gospel. The Hebrew Scriptures became the text-book of the Christian community.

When we seek an explanation of the sudden and complete change from disappointment and confused thinking to strong assurance and deep insight into the meaning of recent events the New Testament writers have a common answer. They point to the resurrection of Jesus<sup>2</sup>, “that distinctive and valid message, unique in content and in relevance for faith. In the area in which the New Testament concentrates there is a penetration, a clear and authoritative word . . . in which the resurrection of Jesus is the interpreting focus of the triumphant Lordship of God”. Christ's resurrection and exaltation with the accompanying Pentecostal effusion gave a new and startling significance to the death which had seemed the grave of their hopes. Tragedy was changed into triumph. By these events Jesus was given a unique and central place in God's eternal purpose, and was Himself recognised as the proper and adequate Object of faith.

How did this transformation of thought concerning Jesus of Nazareth assume the form it did? The answer is in the Old Testament. If Jesus was Messiah—and the resurrection settled that

question—then the meaning of His person and mission must be discoverable from the Scriptures, and He must be the key to their interpretation; and so in the suffering Servant whom God raised from the dead they found the vital clue they required. With this torch of truth they retraced their steps through the labyrinths of Israel's history, institutions and faith to find that the new and brighter light was the true Light from which the prophetic lights derived their brightness, and which had in turn lightened the path that leads to Him. In introducing the New Covenant the risen Lord fulfilled the Old. Thus after the manner of a rightful owner entering upon the enjoyment of his property the Church assumed its position as the Israel of God, in virtue of its recognition of Messiah, and in so doing claimed the Old Testament for its title-deeds.

Whilst few would challenge this general statement, not all have recognised how complete and detailed was the Church's acceptance of the vocation of the Elect Nation and how freely she appropriated the promises made unto the fathers. The significance of the ancient Scriptures for the New Israel can scarcely be exaggerated.<sup>3</sup> The Church saw that it was not enough to recognise the prophetic element in the Old Testament. The Old Testament was one vast prophecy." The Hebrew Scriptures moulded the Church's doctrines, shaped its institutions, coloured its worship, directed its behaviour. New Testament Christianity was dyed deep in the wool of Judaism. Any attempt to remove the Jewish colouring would result in the virtual destruction of the New Testament itself. "The New Testament, no more than the Old, can stand alone."

It is our purpose to pursue this theme in greater detail with special reference to the ordinances of Israel and the Church.

## II

(a) In their *conception of God* the Old and the New are basically one.<sup>4</sup> There may be development, but there is no denial by the New of the validity of the Old. For the Church, God is always "the God of our fathers". The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is none other than the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. His character is the same—in the Old He is Holy love, in the New full of grace and truth. Jehovah, God of Israel, is perfectly mirrored in Jesus of Nazareth. This implies that the ordinances God devises for His people's worship and service must be *consistent with His revealed character and purpose, and also that those which belong to the Old covenant must have real affinities with those of the New*, for He is the same God and His purpose is one in both eras.

(b) The great complementary truth of Holy Scripture which is set over against its doctrine of God is that of *the People of God*. In each period God has had His Church, but the relation between the Old and the New is so close as to amount to oneness. The foundation-members of the New Church were also members of the Old, nor did they, in order to enter the New, reject their older status.<sup>5</sup> Theirs was not so much an act of renunciation as appropriation of the true significance of the former covenant. This is brought out in the names<sup>6</sup> it adopted, mainly borrowed from the Old Testament: the Israel of God, the seed of Abraham, the twelve tribes of the dispersion, the holy nation, the elect race, the royal priesthood. They were the elect and redeemed people of God even as Israel after the flesh had been. Hosea's description of Israel as those who were not, but now are, the people of God, is applied by St. Peter to the Christian Church.<sup>7</sup> Likewise St. Paul's argument<sup>8</sup> from Abraham's two wives as representing Israel and the Church suggests their common origin in the father of the faithful. The Church is represented in the New Testament as receiving through faith what Israel lost through

unbelief.<sup>9</sup> Therefore whatever ordinances as properly belong to Israel's vocation should be *at least consistent in design and effectiveness with the fuller revelation in Christ.*

(c) Again, the biblical revelation of God and the People of God reveals God as One who enters into *covenant-relation* with His People. He made a *covenant with Abraham*,<sup>10</sup> which covenant is mentioned again and again in the Old Testament<sup>11</sup> as the basis of God's relationship with Israel, and it re-appears in the New Testament<sup>12</sup> where it is interpreted of Christ and believers in whom its universality and spirituality are made plain. As this covenant will come up for more detailed consideration later it is sufficient at this juncture to note how it undergirds and binds together religious experience under both Old and New covenants. *At Sinai*<sup>13</sup> God again entered into a covenant with Israel whom He had redeemed from bondage, and constituted what was then but a slave-rabble the People of God. From this time forward the Passover became the 'sacrament' of that deliverance, and in course of time its celebration was the occasion for the inauguration of the Lord's Supper, which commemorated an even greater Exodus when Christ our Passover was sacrificed for us.

Centuries after the inauguration of the Mosaic covenant God *covenanted with David*<sup>14</sup> that his seed should occupy the throne of Israel for ever and reign over the whole earth. This promise, according to the Christian Church, was fulfilled in Christ, the seed of David, whom God raised from the dead and exalted to His own throne, from whence He reigns over all. In contrast with the Sinaitic Covenant, which is called the "old" covenant, God through the prophet Jeremiah, promised a "*new covenant*",<sup>15</sup> richer in content and more spiritual in character. This was reserved for the last days and was addressed to the houses of Israel and Jacob; but the Church appropriated it to itself and declared its promises fulfilled in Christ and His People. It is this covenant which our Lord inaugurated<sup>16</sup> in His blood and which is commemorated in the Christian Holy Communion. Thus Old and New are inextricably interlaced by the covenants which are fulfilled in Christ. In all these covenants God was the initiator and His grace the basis. In return, He sought intelligent and personal response, which issues in a life of obedience and fellowship with God maintained by "the promises". The covenants themselves so offered Christ to believers of the Old Order that it was as though the Gospel had been preached to them, and they rejoiced in seeing the day<sup>17</sup> and glory<sup>18</sup> of Christ, even though afar off. To be effective as symbols and seals of the older covenants the 'sacraments' of such covenants must be *at least comparable in significance and purpose with the sacraments of the Gospel*, else they were 'dumb' ceremonies.

(d) Closely related to the covenant idea is that of "*the promise*"<sup>19</sup> or as it is alternatively given, "the promises".<sup>20</sup> The singular is used to denote the all-inclusive promise in Christ or the final achievement of the Gospel in bringing men to the heavenly rest for the people of God. It is used frequently of the Abrahamic Covenant, which is the Christian Covenant. The plural may be taken to denote the many promises given in the Old Testament, some of which were fulfilled in the experience of those to whom they were made, and others (the most significant) pointed forward to the New Covenant enacted on better promises. These promises were embraced by the Church, and the principle of interpretation is enunciated by St. Paul<sup>21</sup>: "For how so many be the promises of God, in Him (i.e. Christ) is the yea". In these words St. Paul surveys "the long roll of the divine promises, and sees in Christ and all that He is, the re-affirmation of them all".<sup>22</sup> These promises, "made unto the fathers", have been fulfilled in Christ and are available for both Jew and Gentile in "the unsearchable riches of Christ". Again we feel justified in affirming the *congruity of the Old Testament ordinances with the New* if the covenants and promises to which they are joined speak unmistakably of Christ.

(e) Another field for the pursuit of our theme is the significance attached by the New Testament to *Israel's institutions*,<sup>23</sup> and particularly the cultus. In relation to it Jesus Christ's mission is conceived of in terms of fulfilment, not contradiction. It was part of God's preparatory revelation expressing the needs and aspirations of the people, and so long as the Old Covenant was operative it ministered as a divine ordinance to their spiritual needs as well as pointing to the better covenant with its better provisions. In a very real sense it ministered the benefits of Christ to the saints of the older dispensation, who saw the promises afar off and embraced them. The pre-existent Christ was as truly, though not so fully, manifested to the faithful in Israel as in the Church. Many more than Abraham and Isaiah saw Christ's day and glory under the Old Order. This is the emphasis of the Epistle to the Hebrews in which contrasts emerge, not between the true and the false, but between the good and the "better", i.e. better things, better hope, better covenant, better promises, better sacrifices, a better country. If therefore the Israelitish sacrificial system not only pointed to Christ but actually conveyed Christ to the people of Israel it is not too much to expect that the constant 'sacraments' of Hebrew religion—Circumcision and Passover—*should have deep and real affinities* with their counterparts in the Gospel age.

(f) At this stage it will be convenient to make some general observations on the Old Covenant 'sacraments', reserving fuller treatment of Circumcision to a later occasion. Outwardly their likeness to the Gospel sacraments is immediately noticeable whether we consider them separately or together. They exactly correspond to the Christian sacraments in that they represent *initiation*<sup>24</sup> into and *continuance*<sup>25</sup> in the faith of Israel. Both, like their New Testament counterparts, are related to God's redemptive purpose and man's participation in it. Both require on the human side the exercise of faith in terms of intelligent response, and a mode of living agreeable to the profession thus made. At least one of them, the Passover, is generally acknowledged to have close affinities with the Christian Lord's Supper, which was instituted in immediate association with it.<sup>26</sup> Both, i.e., Passover and Supper, find their theological centre in the New Testament in the sacrifice of Christ, who is described as our Passover offered up on our behalf.<sup>27</sup> *The establishment of this relationship leads us to hope (and not without evidence) that the same connection exists between Circumcision and Baptism.*

(g) Whilst on the subject of the inter-relation between the Testaments we should not ignore the meaning of *biblical history*. Both Testaments contain 'salvation-history', i.e., records of events in which the divine working may be recognised which has a saving significance for mankind. In the Old Testament we have the record of God's march through the ages in connection with Israel's history, whilst in the New the consummation of His purpose in the appearing of Messiah is presented. History, thus recorded, has a twofold value for the Christian, which might be differentiated as temporal and eternal.

(i) Its temporal value is also twofold in that the earlier history of God's People provides the later saints with instruction and admonition, and in addition reveals the presence of the pre-existent Christ with His ancient people, providing for their needs and judging their conduct. Incidentally, St. Paul<sup>28</sup> uses the historical incident to impart sacramental teaching which he later applies to the misuse of the Lord's Supper, and warns them of similar punishment. At the risk of being considered over-persistent we would point out that if a mere incident from the People's history can so illustrate Christian experience, how much closer must be the affinities between a duly-ordained 'sacrament' of that People's faith and its fulfilment in Christ and enshrined in a Gospel ordinance. (ii) The eternal value relates to its

consummation. History is purposeful because 'history is His story'. Biblical history does not revolve in endless cycles. It advances towards a goal. The direction of Israel's history is indicated in the words, "It shall come to pass". Israel's history is seeking fulfilment. In the New Testament time reaches its goal—"the time is fulfilled". In Christ "the fulness of time" has arrived. We are in "the last hour". We have reached the terminus, which extends to the Second Advent. Old and New are related to one another as pathway to goal. They are parts of the same divine action. There is no contradiction between them, but rather continuity, and if God's purpose in all ages has been to bless mankind in Christ then *the means He engages and the ordinances He employs must be consistent with each other in the successive eras.*

(h) The nature of *the religious life* engendered by Israel's faith and expressed in its institutions is also worthy of consideration. Circumcision was its badge, but of what quality was it? Dr. Martin, and others, declare that circumcision was a national or racial symbol and that its significance in the Old Testament is related to earthly or material favours. It is our contention that such a view is a misreading of the plain meaning of Old Testament religion, unless we are prepared to judge it by the standards of its degeneracy—a most unfair test. Old Testament religion is based on a right relationship with God, grounded in grace and not in legalism, and conveying to its true professors the blessings of justification by faith, including forgiveness and restoration with the gift of the Spirit. The life thus begun issues in a profound mystical experience with its consciousness of God's nearness and intimacy with His worshippers. The outcome of such vital relationship is a life of ethical obedience expressed in terms of duty towards God and men. Its final phase is the achievement of the Vision of God and the Rest of God, both inherent in the promises, which are fundamentally spiritual, and only secondarily concerned with temporalities. These higher qualities of spiritual religion are frequently emphasised in the Psalms, which are the inward and spiritual aspect of the religion of Israel, the outward expression of which is seen in the cultus, in connection with which it should be understood. It is the religion of those who have truly entered into the significance of their circumcision, the inward spiritual grace of which the rite is the outward and visible sign. Thus New Testament religion is but the intensification of the experience of Old Testament saints—"Christianity is Judaism raised to the *n*th power". It would follow that *the sacraments of both eras have close affinities with each other and may even be described as the sacraments of the one Gospel in its pre- and post- incarnational aspects.*

As our *aim has been to establish pre-suppositions* in favour of a genuine relationship between ordinances of the two covenants, it follows that we wholly disagree with Dr. Hugh Martin when he asserts that "there may be good arguments for infant baptism but circumcision is not one of them", and again when he concludes that "circumcision is one thing and baptism is quite another". We would rather see with Dr. Oscar Cullman "a fundamental kinship between circumcision and Christian Baptism" and believe that such kinship is "decisive for the question of Infant Baptism". It is our aim now to seek confirmation of these pre-suppositions.

### III

In the Old Testament circumcision is *a specifically religious rite*. It is concerned with covenant relationship between God and men, and of this covenant it is the seal. God offers and man accepts, and the deed is sealed by the ordinance of circumcision. The seal signifies the *personal nature* of the contrast—it implies personal response to the divine overtures. The covenant thus sealed was of *universal application*, and had no national or social limitations.

It was not concerned primarily with material blessings or earthly promises. It implied a *right relationship*. Abraham was justified through the exercise of faith. His descendants were heirs with him of the same promises. The outward sign of circumcision had an inward meaning. The physical mark had its spiritual counterpart. It committed the whole man in faith and obedience to God, and the end of the covenant of grace which it sealed was conformity to the law of God. Circumcision may have degenerated into a symbol of national pride, but such was a departure from its original meaning. The Old Testament makes it clear that those who have received the sign, but who do not live accordingly, are in fact as those who have not received it. Mere externalism is void of virtue. It should also be recalled that circumcision has a forward look towards fulfilment. Moreover its application was universal, not racial.

When we turn to the New Testament it is to be reminded time and again that *God is one and His purpose one*. The promise made unto the fathers, “God has fulfilled the same unto us, in that He raised up Jesus”, in whom all the promises have their fulfilment. Christ is the theme of both prophet and apostle, and both declare the one Gospel. This Gospel, we are informed, God preached unto Abraham. Abraham believed the word of the Lord and was justified by faith in Him who was to come. He saw Christ’s day and rejoiced in it. Abraham was thus brought into a new and saving relationship with God. The action of God was solely gracious, begun when Abraham was probably an idolater. Thus it is separate from any idea of merit or privilege. The covenant was fundamentally religious and conveyed truly spiritual blessings. Earthly promises or material blessings were merely secondary and symbolic of the higher good that was Abraham’s.

Years later God confirmed and enlarged His covenant and in doing so added the rite of circumcision. The significance of the symbol was *not to make him a Hebrew ‘national’, but to mark him as a believer in God*. It was the seal of his faith. Furthermore God increased the sphere in which the rite was to be effective as sign and token. Abraham’s eight-day old son was also given the seal of faith whilst as yet he could not exercise it. Nevertheless it was given by command of God, without any change of significance being suggested, but rather with indications that it remained the same. Here, if anywhere, the New Testament should have spoken unequivocally, if change in the Abrahamic—Christian covenant was intended. The silence is eloquent and conclusive.

Again, it must be noted that this Covenant was *not annulled by the giving of the Law and its attendant covenant, nor has it been abrogated since*. It is still operative for the good reason that the Abrahamic Covenant and the Christian Covenant are one. Abraham’s true seed are believers in Christ, and believers in Christ are the seed of Abraham.<sup>29</sup> The true heir of the promise made to Abram and sealed by circumcision is ‘in Christ’, whether he be Jew or Gentile; for the original promise like the Christian Gospel is universal in scope. What then is the content of Old Testament religion as enshrined in the example of Abraham—the classical illustration in the New of what the Old essentially is? First, it introduces Abraham to a *right relationship* through faith apart from the works of the law. Secondly, it launched him on a life of *faith and obedience*. This is powerfully illustrated in Romans iv. and Hebrews xi., and it should be here noted that Abraham’s faith and obedience were not a thing apart in Israel’s history, but were repeated again and again in countless and unknown saints, as both Hebrews xi. and the Psalms so amply testify. Thirdly, it has “respect unto the recompense of reward” in spiritual blessings *extending into the world of eternal realities*. The faith of the Old Testament heroes was not merely external and formal or bound by the limits of this life. They were Pilgrims ‘here’, and were travelling ‘there’, i.e., to the saints’ everlasting rest (Romans iv. 17; Heb. xi. 17).

And this faith and experience of God were *of universal validity* and intended for all mankind. Abraham's blessing was all-inclusive in its embrace. The nations were in view from the beginning.<sup>30</sup> And though Israel was ever tending towards exclusivism, she was being constantly reminded of her calling to represent Jehovah to the nations and to bring the nations into captivity to that faith. Similarly, Israel's calling at Sinai involved her in the vocation of a nation of priests to minister to mankind, and psalmists and prophets are frequent in their reiteration of that ideal.

Once more, this faith committed to Israel was *characterised by intelligent response*. Its inner core was response to revelation. The religion of the Old Testament is one that makes demands on man's intellect. God is to be 'known' in Israel. The rich theology of the Old Testament presupposes an intelligent grasp of his faith on the part of the Israelite. Before admission as a proselyte a candidate had to submit to considerable catechising. But the response was not only intellectual: even more so was it *moral*. God is holy and requires holiness from those who profess His Name. Such holiness is not mainly in outward observance of a ritual but of obedience in heart and life to the highest idealism. And the badge of this profession was circumcision, which outward seal must be worked out in life.<sup>31</sup> It was recognised that the outward sign without the corresponding inward grace was null and void; yet this did not deny its validity for infants, as yet unable to make such a response.

In all these ways we see in the Old Testament and in Israel the true preparation for, and natural climate of, Christ and His Church. The words which describe the relationships of Old and New are not so much 'cancellation' and 'abrogation' as 'completion' and 'fulfilment'; and *what is true of the whole must also be true of such a significant and central part as circumcision undoubtedly is*.

#### IV

It remains to us now to examine briefly the more specific references to circumcision in the New Testament and their bearing on the doctrine of Infant Baptism.

For what is implied in being a Jew we may turn to St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans.<sup>32</sup> The letter of the law and the externalities of circumcision are rejected out of hand as an altogether inadequate presentation of Jewish faith and practice. The outward is necessary as a sign of something else which is the essence of Old Testament religion. Circumcision *really* operates in the region of the inner man of the heart and is reflected in a God-centred rather than a man-centred life. What St. Paul here says of Old Testament Judaism is scarcely veiled New Testament Christianity. Moreover, what St. Paul says in Romans is but a repetition of what has been said already in Moses and the Prophets. It is therefore a travesty of the facts to dismiss circumcision as being chiefly concerned with earthly promises and material blessings, or to suggest that it belongs to a wholly different order. But lest the outward sign of circumcision should be thought insignificant or irrelevant, St. Paul proceeds<sup>33</sup> to show *the riches of that faith of which circumcision is the seal or confirmation*. The advantages are great every way, supremely that it entrusted to its possessors the oracles of God. It marked them off from all mankind as *the People of God*. They were thus admitted to the heritage of the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the law, the service, the promises and above all and inclusive of all, the Christ. To admit that Israel failed to appropriate all this in no sense takes away from the reality of what was offered them by God and sealed in the divinely appointed

ordinance. Israel failed of her heritage because she failed to see the terms on which she received them, i.e., by promise through faith.<sup>34</sup> In this we see that circumcision is significant for all that is involved in the whole biblical conception of Promise and Fulfilment.

One of the greatest passages of the New Testament bearing on our subject is Romans iv., which is so potent in its significance for circumcision and baptism (though the latter is not mentioned) as scarcely to require comment. But because it really deals with the heart of our theme we will underline a few main points. Circumcision in the New Testament treatment of the subject, is traced back to Abraham. There it had its beginnings for biblical faith. There its true nature is laid bare. It is a seal, and it presupposes faith in the justifying act of God. It is associated with free and undeserved grace. It is not the badge of salvation by the works of the law. (Even at Sinai it is associated with Israel's redemption from bondage, a type of the Christian Exodus achieved in Christ.) Abraham received the seal as a sign of his faith, which faith was independent of, and prior to, the seal. In this respect it stands in precisely the same relation to faith in God as baptism does to those who restrict it to actual believers. And to this extent we who practise paedobaptism have no quarrel with them. All that is positive in their position we heartily embrace. But we are convinced from the whole biblical testimony, the testimony of both Old and New Testaments, that their understanding of baptism is *incomplete—and this on the very analogy which supports their positive contribution*. The doctrine of circumcision is carried a stage further than Abraham's own person. It has a significance—the same significance—for his seed. “The promise is to you *and to your children*,” i.e. to Isaac and his seed after him. The children of the stock of Abraham had the promise made to the fathers fulfilled to them in Christ, and *they were encouraged to receive it as it had been made and sealed—both to them and their seed*. The faith of the parent brought his children into the covenant, which Abrahamic covenant is none other than the covenant in Christ. Circumcision is thus a pre-incarnational ordinance of the Gospel conferred on the believer and his offspring, and there is no suggestion in the New Testament that one part of it has been cancelled whilst the other remains valid. The ‘form’ has been changed, i.e., to Baptism, but the conditions and scope remain the same. (We may see in the change from Sabbath to Lord's Day something of a parallel, i.e., change of the day with adherence to the principle underlying it.)

We must take an equally inadequate glance at the Epistle of Christian Liberty—Galatians.<sup>35</sup> Here St. Paul is determined to safeguard the Gospel from first century Judaism; to safeguard grace against any admixture of works as the ground of acceptance with God. In doing so *he appeals, not away from, but to, the Old Testament covenant of grace* of which circumcision was the seal and the New Covenant its extension and fulfilment, and baptism its counterpart. His appeal goes behind the Law, which is but an interim measure, to the Promise to Abraham. This Promise is still operative and is revealed in its full significance in the Gospel proclamation. In this Promise God “preached the Gospel unto him”, and the initial blessing of the Promise was that of New Testament Christianity, i.e., justification by faith. This Word of Promise still stands. Those who, in the period before Christ, believed after the pattern of Abraham, and those who in the time after Christ's coming embraced the apostolic preaching with its appeal to the Promise made unto the fathers of Israel, are one in Christ and—in a derivatory sense—one in Abraham. In this way the interim period of Law was bridged by the great span of faith beginning with the Abrahamic Promise and reaching over to fulfilment in Christ. It is most necessary to stress that these things are not two separate ideas, but simply two sides of the one Covenant of Grace. This enduring Covenant had in its earlier proclamation the badge of circumcision, even as in the present it has baptism for its seal, and

there is not the slightest suggestion that the range of its application has in any sense been limited or restricted. In both “the promise is to you and to your children”.

## V

Let us turn to a less controversial and more placid piece of apostolic writing—the Epistle to the Philippians.<sup>36</sup> One of the deep-seated mistakes of those who seek complete dissociation of circumcision from baptism is their apparent failure to see what in both Old Testament prophet and New Testament apostle is made abundantly obvious, i.e., that circumcision is spoken of in two senses, good and bad, true and false. The prophets express the fundamental difference between the mere flesh-excision and its inward significance for heart and life. The apostle who teaches that true circumcision is an inward and spiritual experience (albeit expressed by the outward and visible sacrament) is also the one who scornfully and mercilessly condemns those who trust in the external rite. He is also emphatic that *the Christian believer is the one who has truly entered into the meaning of circumcision*. The truly circumcised believer is he who worships in spirit, exults in Christ (as the sole but sufficient ground of faith), and eschews confidence in externalism or self-achievement, even as he embraces the righteousness of God through faith in Christ. It was in the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings and in the knowledge of the power of His resurrection that St. Paul found the true circumcision which he so vigorously contrasts with the mistaken Judaistical interpretation of “the seal of the righteousness by faith.”<sup>36</sup>

We would urge (though here space will scarcely permit more than the making of the appeal) a careful study of Ephesians ch. ii. as exhibiting the close relationship between Old and New Testament faith and life and the contrast of both with the pagan world. The revelation made to and in Israel was “the great divide”. Gentiles were “afar off”, “alienated”, “strangers”, “without hope”. “Salvation was of the Jews” and in allegiance to Jewry. The Jews *were* the highly privileged people, but they came to misunderstand the nature of the privilege and vaunted themselves and despised others. In their degeneracy they substituted the badge of their religious profession for the thing itself. Circumcision, the badge of high privilege and of spiritual faith, fell into disrepute and condemnation. In this context St. Paul contrasts those who are “*called* uncircumcision” and those “*called* circumcision” with the real facts of the case, which are these: though “called” uncircumcised by the Judaisers, believers were, “in Christ”, really the heirs of the promises and covenants and citizens in the commonwealth of the Israel of God; whilst those “called” (note the implied distinction between real and apparent in this word) circumcision only achieved the fulfilment of their privileges in the same way, i.e., in Christ. Our point here is twofold—the vital distinction between circumcision true and false, and the true nature of circumcision as the seal or attestation of promises which are valid in Christ alone, and which in the Christian era are given the new badge of baptism. In the light of this close association with “all the promises of God” which in Christ receive their “Amen” it is surely the height of extravagance to assert that “there is *no true analogy at any point* between baptism and circumcision”.

The last passage for a brief consideration is in Colossians ch. ii. 9-17. It is also the most decisive in favour of a close connection between the outward and visible signs of the religious faith and life of Old and New Testaments. Christ is all, and in Him the believer has all. Expressed in another way, Christ is “the body”, i.e., the substance, all else is “shadow”. The former state by nature is described as “the uncircumcision of the flesh”, i.e., the old man with his unrestrained passions. The new life in Christ, in which “the body of the flesh” is put

off, is described as “a circumcision not made with hands . . . in the circumcision of Christ”. Now this “putting off of the body of the flesh”, i.e., death to the old life, is exactly the significance of baptism in Romans vi. 1-10. To look a little more closely at the construction of vv. 11-12: (i) Circumcision is the term used to denote the spiritual life in Christ. *Therefore it is competent to express the Christian reality*. It is no mere nationalistic, racial sign, mainly associated with material and earthly blessings. It comes to the apostle’s hand loaded with inward and spiritual significance and he uses it accordingly. (ii) Circumcision thus used is only a pointer. It is not in itself an end. It is a “shadow”, but a shadow of something, and it has the close relationship of shadow to substance. The substance is “the circumcision of Christ”, that is death to sin and new life unto righteousness, which spring from union with Christ. It is pointing to no less an experience than that which in other metaphors is a “new birth” and a “new Creation”. Thus the rite of circumcision is the *forward-looking symbol* of crucial Christian experience. (iii) Even as circumcision finds its fulfilment in Christ so baptism finds its origin and significance there too. The old life is buried, the new springs forth. The Old Testament exhorts to an understanding of circumcision, the New Testament offers an exposition of baptism, and these two are one as they find their meeting-place in Christ. What circumcision was for the pre-Incarnation Church, that baptism (with all its richer significance now revealed) is for the Church of the post-Incarnation period. And again there is no change suggested that would make the ‘better part’ narrower in its application than the lesser. Indeed, “we should have to postulate in the New Testament an express prohibition of Infant Baptism if this in fact contradicted the doctrine and practice of primitive Christianity”.

In this inter-relationship between the Testaments and their unity in Christ we see the complete justification for the ordinance of Infant Baptism as both implicit and explicit in the Gospel of Christ. To argue from circumcision to baptism is to appeal to the New Testament.

## **J. STAFFORD WRIGHT**

### Endnotes:

- 1) August, 1950, pp. 301-3; November, 1950, pp. 453-4.
- 2) F. V. Filson, *The New Testament Against Its Environment*, pp. 41-2.
- 3) A. V. Takser, *The Old Testament in the New Testament*.
- 4) *Theological Word Book of the Bible*, p. 90f.; cf. Acts iii. 13; xiii. 32, etc.
- 5) Acts xxvi. 6; II Cor. i. 20; Ephesians ii. 11-22, etc.
- 6) Gal. vi. 16; iii. 29; James i. 1; I Peter ii. 5, 9-10.
- 7) Hosea i. 9; I Pet. ii. 10.
- 8) Gal. iv. 24.
- 9) Romans xi. 19 ff.
- 10) Genesis 17.

- 11) Exodus ii. 4; Deut. ix. 5; II Kings xiii. 23; Micah vii. 20; cf. N.T.—Matt i. 1, etc.
- 12) Luke i. 73; Gal. iii., etc.
- 13) Exodus xix.
- 14) II Samuel vii. 13-16.
- 15) Jeremiah xxxi. 31ff. cf. Heb. viii. 8-12.
- 16) Luke xxii. 20.
- 17) John viii. 56.
- 18) John xii. 41.
- 19) Eph. iii. 6, etc.
- 20) Hebrews viii. 6.
- 21) II Cor. i. 20.
- 22) Goudge on II Cor. i. 20 in *Westminster Commentary*.
- 23) Hebrews, chs. viii-x especially. See Filson, ut. supra, pp. 61ff.
- 24) Genesis xvii. 10; Leviticus xii. 3.
- 25) Exodus xii. 14.
- 26) Luke xxii. 14-20.
- 27) I Cor. v. 7.
- 28) I Cor. x. 1f.
- 29) Gal. iii. 29.
- 30) Gen. xvii. 4-6; Rom. iv. 13.
- 31) Deut. x. 16; Jer. iv. 4; Ezek. xliv. 7; cf. Acts. vii. 51.
- 32) Rom. ii. 25-29.
- 33) Rom. iii. 1; cf. ix. 3 ff.
- 34) Rom. iii. 3; ix. 8.
- 35) Ch. iii.
- 36) Ch. iii. 1-10.
- 37) Rom. iv. 10.