

AN EXEGETICAL APPRAISAL OF COLOSSIANS 2:11-12

By Richard C. Barcellos*

“and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.” (Col. 2:11-12)¹

Colossians 2:11-12 is a text used by paedobaptists to justify their practice of baptizing infants. This text is used to display the relationship between OT circumcision and NT baptism. The conclusion drawn is that what circumcision was, baptism is. As John Murray puts it, “baptism is the circumcision of the New Testament.”² Simply put, in paedobaptist thought baptism replaces circumcision as the sign and seal of the covenant. Since infants were circumcised in the OT, infants should be baptized under the NT. A replacement theology between circumcision and baptism is argued by this understanding of the text.

It must be admitted that a *prima facie* glance at the text seems to give credibility to such an interpretation. Our purpose in this article, however, is to examine Col. 2:11-12 in the Greek text to determine its meaning in context and to compare our findings with the claim that it is a proof text for infant baptism. The approach will be as follows: *first*, to set the text in its context; *second*, to examine its syntactical structure and provide exegesis of its contents; *third*, to compare our conclusions with arguments used in *The Case For Covenantal Infant Baptism*; and *fourth*, to draw some pertinent conclusions.

Colossians 2:11-12 in Context

Colossians 2:11-12 comes in a larger context where Paul is exposing error and giving its remedy (Col. 2:4-3:4).³ In the immediate context, Paul warns the Colossians: “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ” (2:8). Verses 9-15 give the reasons why they are not to be led astray in ways not according to Christ.

Verses 9 and 10 give two (possibly three) reasons why Christ is the remedy against error. “For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head of all rule and authority” (2:9-10). The first reason is Christ’s deity (2:9). The second reason is the completeness that Christians have in Christ (2:10). A third reason may appear in the final clause of v. 10: “and He is the head over all rule and authority.”⁴ This is surely added due to the complex heresy Paul is combating. Paul assures the Colossians that Christ is head of all rule and authority. T.K. Abbott adds:

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¹ English Bible references are taken from *The New American Standard Bible*. Greek references are taken from *The Greek New Testament*, UBS, third edition.

² Quoted by Joseph Pipa, “The Mode of Baptism” in Gregg Strawbridge, ed., *The Case For Covenantal Infant Baptism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2003), 123.

³ See Murray J. Harris, *Exegetical Guide to the New Testament: Colossians & Philemon* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 85-143 for his discussion on this section and reasons for his outline of this portion of the epistle.

⁴ This is a relative clause and should be translated “who is” (NKJV).

He is the head of all those angelic powers to whose mediation the false teachers would teach you to seek. As they are subordinate to Christ, ye have nothing to expect from them which is not given you in full completeness in Christ.⁵

Christ is God and provides everything the Colossians need for their souls.

Verses 11-15 present the means by which completeness in Christ has come.⁶ The *first* means occurs in vv. 11-12 (see the syntactical and exegetical discussion below). Christians are complete in Christ by means of being “circumcised with a circumcision made without hands.” Christ performs this circumcision or it is Christ’s circumcision in that it belongs to Him as Christian or New Covenant circumcision (see below). The *second* means by which completeness in Christ has come to the Colossians is found in vv. 13-15. It is due to what God did to them while they were “dead in [their] transgressions and the uncircumcision of [their] flesh.” He made them “alive together with Him,” that is, with Christ. This making “alive together with Him” was effected by God the Father. The verb συνεζωποίησεν (“made you alive together”) implies a subject other than the “Him” of σὺν αὐτῷ (“with Him”). Christ, therefore, is not the subject of the verb. This would be a cumbersome tautology indeed. Taking ὁ θεὸς (“God” the Father) as the implied subject does away with the tautology and is supported by the parallel passage in Eph. 2:4-5.⁷

The Colossians were told that Christ alone was not enough. Paul argues against such anti-Christian teaching by highlighting Christ’s deity and the completeness Christians have in Him.

Syntactical Structure and Exegesis of Colossians 2:11-12

Having set the verses in context, we are now prepared to uncover the relationship and meaning of their parts. As we move through the text, the completeness Christians have in Christ will become clearer.

The first question is the meaning and function of the first three words in the Greek text, ἐν ᾧ καὶ, translated “and in Him” (NASB), “In Him ...also” (NKJV), and literally “in [or “by”] whom also” (KJV). The “whom” (ᾧ) refers back to Christ in v. 10. Some commentators take this to mean union with Christ.⁸ For instance, John Eadie says:

...the formula ἐν ᾧ has its usual significance—union with Him—union created by the Spirit, and effected by faith; and, secondly, the blessing described in the verse had been already enjoyed, for they were and had been believers in Him in whom they are complete. Through their living union with Christ, they had enjoyed the privilege, and were enjoying the results of a spiritual circumcision.⁹

On the face of it, Eadie’s comments seem appropriate. Upon further examination, however, problems arise. Notice that he is arguing that the union under discussion is vital, experiential union with Christ “created by the Spirit, and effected by faith.” Commenting further, Eadie adds, “It is plain that the spiritual circumcision is not different from regeneration.”¹⁰ Assuming a causal order in Col. 2:11 (which will become clearer below), Eadie’s position would imply that the

⁵ T.K. Abbott, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians in The International Critical Commentary*, eds. S.R. Driver, A. Plummer, and C.A. Briggs (reprint ed., Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1974), 250.

⁶ “Here in 2:11-15 Paul described in more detail the fullness believers have in Christ through salvation.” Sharon Gray, ed., *Translator’s Notes on Colossians* (Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 2001), 61.

⁷ Cf. Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 106 and J.B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon* (New York: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1897), 183.

⁸ Cf. Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 101 and John Eadie, *Colossians* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Klock & Klock, 1980), 149.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 151.

Spirit creates and faith effects union with Christ, thus, ἐν ᾧ καὶ, which is then followed by spiritual circumcision or regeneration. Eadie understands union with Christ here in terms of a vital union (i.e., communion) “created by the Spirit, and effected by faith.” If this is so, then causally, faith precedes circumcision of the heart or regeneration. Communion with Christ through faith precedes regeneration by the Spirit. As we will see below, in this passage faith comes as a result of spiritual circumcision or regeneration (Col. 2:13; cf., Jn. 3:3-8) and is the means through which believers are personally united to Christ (i.e., vital union and communion).

Can Paul be alluding to union with Christ by ἐν ᾧ καὶ? The answer is yes, but not without crucial qualification. To understand union with Christ here as commonly understood in the realm of the application of redemption effected by faith is unnecessary for several reasons. *First*, the idea of faith is not found in the text until the end of v. 12. *Second*, faith itself is a result of the “circumcision made without hands” (see the discussion below). *Third*, the concept of union with Christ is not limited to the application of redemption effected by faith elsewhere in Paul.¹¹ John Murray says, “It is quite apparent that the Scripture applies the expression ‘in Christ’ to much more than the application of redemption.”¹² Eph. 1:4, for instance, indicates that Christians were chosen “in Him before the foundation of the world.” This indicates a pre-temporal union with Christ apart from faith and void of communion with Christ. Vital union (i.e., communion with Christ), the type of union experienced in space and time, unites us to Christ in such a way that we experience personally the spiritual benefits of being saved (i.e., justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification). *Fourth*, assuming a causal sequence in the text and assuming ἐν ᾧ καὶ refers to vital union, we would have an *ordo salutis* as follows: union with Christ by faith then spiritual circumcision (i.e., regeneration). Again, as we shall see, faith that unites one vitally to Christ is a product of the “circumcision made without hands” and proceeds from it, not the other way around. It may be better to paraphrase ἐν ᾧ καὶ as “through your relation to Him”¹³ understanding union with Christ here in a non-vital manner. This would allow for a union apart from faith that corresponds with the broader meaning of union with Christ in many other places in Paul.¹⁴ Richard Gaffin argues for a “broader, more basic notion of union”¹⁵ in his *Resurrection and Redemption*. He lists three types of union: predestinarian, redemptive-historical, and existential.¹⁶

There are at least two other ways to understand ἐν ᾧ καὶ. It could be understood like the ἐν αὐτῷ (“in Him”) of Col. 1:17. The ἐν (“in”) would function like a dative of sphere. It would be paraphrased as “in the sphere of Christ’s activity you were circumcised.” Or it could be translated “by whom also.” The ἐν (“by”) would function like a dative of means or agency. Paul uses ἐν ᾧ 26 times in the Greek text. The NASB translates it “by which” in Rom. 7:6; 8:15 [“by whom” NKJV]; 14:21; and Eph. 4:30. He uses ἐν ᾧ καὶ seven times in the Greek text. Though the NASB does not translate it “by whom also,” the NKJV does in 1 Pt. 3:19a and Clarence B. Hale suggests this translation for Eph. 2:22 (i.e., “...by whom you also are being built together...”).¹⁷ It would be translated as “by whom also you were circumcised.”

¹¹ See the discussion by John Murray in *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 161-173.

¹² Murray, *Redemption*, 161.

¹³ Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 101.

¹⁴ Cf. Murray’s discussion as noted above.

¹⁵ Richard B. Gaffin, *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul’s Soteriology* (reprint ed., Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1987), 53. Gaffin relies heavily on John Murray at this point. Cf., John Murray, “Definitive Sanctification” in *Collected Writing of John Murray*, vol. 2, *Selected Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1984), 277-284.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁷ Clarence B. Hale, *The Meaning of “In Christ” in the Greek New Testament* (Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1991), 32. Hale translates Col. 2:11 “in whom also.”

The union with Christ in Col. 2:11 may be understood best either as a union based on election “in Him” (Eph. 1:4) and true of all the elect prior to the personal application of redemption in space and time¹⁸ or in one of the last two ways suggested above. Either of these views fits the context of Col. 2:11ff. and is syntactically and theologically consistent with Paul’s usage elsewhere. And either view will allow for the causal relationship between circumcision and union with Christ effected through faith, which is clear in the passage (see the discussion below).

The ἐν ᾧ καὶ refers back to Christ and our being complete in Him (v. 10). Verses 11 and 12 go on to describe just how Christians are complete in Him. The verb περιετμήθητε (“you were circumcised”) indicates a past action in which the Colossians were passive. They were acted upon by an outsider. They did not circumcise themselves. Someone else was the subject, the circumciser, and they were the objects, the recipients of circumcision. The rest of vv. 11 and 12 are subordinate to this verb and explanatory of it.

The *first* thing Paul tells us about this circumcision is its character or nature. It was περιτομῇ ἀχειροποιήτῳ (“a circumcision made without hands”). It was performed without human hands, unlike the circumcision of the OT and the type being promoted by Judaizers in the first century. John Eadie says, “The circumcision made without hands is plainly opposed to that which is made with hands.”¹⁹ It is a spiritual circumcision, a circumcision of the heart (cf., Dt. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4; Ezek. 44:7; Rom. 2:28-29; Phil. 3:3).²⁰ Harris says, “It is spiritual surgery performed on Christ’s followers at the time of their regeneration.”²¹ The Colossians are complete in Christ due to being circumcised without hands.

The *second* thing Paul tells us about this “circumcision made without hands” is its effect. This spiritual circumcision was ἐν τῇ ἀπεκδύσει τοῦ σώματος τῆς σαρκός (“in the removal of the body of the flesh”). “[T]he body of the flesh” (τοῦ σώματος τῆς σαρκός) is also spiritual. Since the circumcision under discussion is spiritual, then its effect must be spiritual. The preposition ἐν (“in”) is best understood exegetically (NASB). It could be stated as “consisting of the removal of the body of the flesh.” It exegetes or explains the “circumcision made without hands.” The effect of the spiritual circumcision was a spiritual “removal of the body of the flesh.” But what does Paul mean by “the body of the flesh”? The noun ἀπεκδύσει (“removal”) has a double prepositional prefix (ἀπο and ἐκ) which intensify the noun so that it can be translated “completely off from.”²² The “removal of the body of the flesh” was a radical and spiritual act effected by the “circumcision made without hands.” The “body of the flesh” is what is stripped off or radically affected. As noted above, “the flesh” (τῆς σαρκός) is best taken as spiritual. In this case, σαρκός (flesh”) is used in an ethical sense. It refers to the sinful natures of the Colossians (cf., Col. 2:18; Rom. 8:5-7; 13:14; and Eph. 2:3 for similar uses). Eadie says, “Flesh is corrupted humanity.”²³ The fleshly body (i.e., the entirety of their sinful natures) was radically altered by this spiritual circumcision. Abbott adds, “The connexion requires it to be understood passively, not ‘ye have put off,’ but ‘was put off from you.’”²⁴ The sinful souls of the Colossians were radically changed. The body of the flesh was put off from them. This is a description of the radical effects of heart

¹⁸ John Callow acknowledges that union can be understood “outside the categories of time (Eph. 1:4)” though he does not opt for this view. See John Callow, *A Semantic Structure Analysis of Colossians*, ed. Michael F. Kopeseck (Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1983), 140.

¹⁹ Eadie, *Colossians*, 150.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 149; Harris, *Colossians & Philemon*, 101; and Lightfoot, *Colossians and Philemon*, 181.

²¹ Harris, *Colossians & Philemon*, 116.

²² *Ibid.*, 101.

²³ Eadie, *Colossians*, 150. Cf. John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, vol. XXI, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 184.

²⁴ Abbott, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 250.

circumcision upon the soul within the complex of the grace of regeneration (cf. Tit. 3:5).²⁵ Discussing regeneration, Murray says:

There is a change that God effects in man, radical and reconstructive in its nature, called new birth, new creation, regeneration, renewal—a change that cannot be accounted for by anything that is in lower terms than the interposition of the almighty power of God. . . . The governing disposition, the character, the mind and will are renewed and so the person is now able to respond to the call of the gospel and enter into privileges and blessings of the divine vocation.²⁶

Regeneration involves both cleansing from sin (Tit. 3:5) and new life (Jn. 3:3-8). Paul is saying that the Colossians have experienced regeneration. They were complete in Christ because of the radical alteration of soul effected by the “circumcision made without hands.”

The *third* thing Paul tells us about this “circumcision made without hands” is its author or owner. This is indicated by the words ἐν τῇ περιτομῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ (“by the circumcision of Christ”). This phrase has three possible meanings. The primary issue revolves around the function of the genitive τοῦ Χριστοῦ (“of Christ”). One option takes it as an objective genitive and translates as “the circumcision performed on Christ” or “experienced by Christ.” This would refer either to Christ’s physical circumcision or “to his death when he stripped off his physical body.”²⁷ This is strained. Paul has been talking about what has happened *in* and *to* the Colossians not *for* them. Paul discusses what Christ did *for* the Colossians in vv. 13b and 14. Verses 11 and 12 discuss what happens *in* the Colossians and *to* them. Callow says:

Ingenious though this view is, it seems rather far-fetched to take circumcision as figuratively referring to Christ’s death. There is no suggestion of this in such passages as Rom. 2:28f. or Phil. 3:3. And in the nearer context of Col. 2:15, it is not said that Christ put off his body of flesh, but the powers and authorities. Further, in the ethical application of the teaching here which is given in chapter 3, Paul says (3:9) that the Colossians have “put off” the old man with his (evil) deeds, a statement which is very similar to the one used here.²⁸

Another option takes the genitive as subjective and translates as “a circumcision effected by Christ.” The NIV reads “done by Christ.” This makes Christ the circumciser of the Colossians’ hearts.

The last option sees the genitive as possessive. It is “Christ’s circumcision” or “Christian circumcision.” It is a circumcision that belongs to Christ. Either of the last two options fits the context better than the first option. The genitive of possession view, of course, does not preclude Christ from performing the circumcision, especially if we translate ἐν ᾧ καὶ (2:11a) as “by whom also.”

In Tit. 3:5-6, God is said to have “saved us . . . by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Regeneration is by the Holy Spirit and through Jesus Christ and all is connected to God’s act in saving us. The Holy Spirit is the effective agent of regeneration; however, He is, nonetheless, the Spirit of Christ and God. In the economy of redemption, He convicts of sin and glorifies Christ by bringing the fruits of His redemption to the souls of elect sinners. And He does this as Christ’s emissary. The application of redemption is God’s act through Christ by the Spirit. Therefore, the genitive of possession option can be viewed in a way that encompasses the subjective genitive contention. It is Christ’s circumcision, as opposed to Moses’, the fathers’, or anyone else’s. It is Christian or

²⁵ Cf. Calvin, *Colossians*, 184 and Eadie, *Colossians*, 151.

²⁶ Murray, *Selected Lectures*, 171.

²⁷ Harris, *Colossians & Philemon*, 102. This is also Peter T. O’Brien’s view in David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, eds., *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 44, Colossians, Philemon* (Waco, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1982), 117-118.

²⁸ Callow, *Semantic Structure*, 141.

New Covenant circumcision because it is under the authority and administration of Christ. He commissions the Holy Spirit to perform it, yet can be viewed as the author. As God uses means to save us, so Christ uses means to circumcise us.

An important observation to make at this point is that Christian circumcision, the circumcision of the heart, is the counterpart to physical circumcision. Harris says:

. . . v. 11 presents spiritual circumcision, not baptism, as the Christian counterpart to physical circumcision. A contrast is implied between circumcision as an external, physical act performed by human hands on a portion of the flesh eight days after birth and circumcision as an inward, spiritual act carried out by divine agency on the whole fleshly nature at the time of regeneration.²⁹

Just as everyone who was physically circumcised under the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants became covenant members, so all who are spiritually circumcised become members of the New Covenant. Physical circumcision is replaced by spiritual circumcision under the New Covenant.

The *fourth* thing Paul tells us about this “circumcision made without hands” is its subsequent, spiritual concomitant or attendant. We are introduced to v. 12 by an aorist, passive participial clause, συνταφέντες αὐτῷ ἐν τῷ βαπτισμῷ (“having been buried with Him in baptism”). The participle, συνταφέντες (“having been buried”), finds as its antecedent verb περιετμήθητε (“you were circumcised”) of v. 11.³⁰ It indicates a further and subordinate explanation of the “circumcision made without hands.” Wallace calls this a dependent, adverbial, temporal participle.³¹ Wallace defines this type of participle as follows:

In relation to its controlling verb, the temporal participle answers the question, *When?* Three kinds of time are in view: antecedent, contemporaneous, and subsequent. The *antecedent* participle should be translated *after doing*, *after he did*, etc. The *contemporaneous* participle should normally be translated *while doing*. And the subsequent participle should be translated *before doing*, *before he does*, etc. This usage is common.³²

The antecedent option would translate Col. 2:12a as “you were circumcised *after* being buried with Him in baptism.” This would make the “circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ” causally dependent upon baptism and, therefore, a result of it. This would argue for post-baptismal (whether water or spiritual baptism) regeneration in the case of the Colossian believers. This seems far-fetched in light of our discussion thus far.

The contemporaneous option would translate Col. 2:12a as “you were circumcised *while* being buried with Him in baptism.” This would argue either for baptismal regeneration or that burial with Christ in baptism is synonymous with and exegetical of the circumcision made without hands. This should be discarded for the reasons mentioned in connection with the antecedent option above. As we shall see, aorist participles subordinate to aorist main verbs are not always contemporaneous. And equating circumcision and baptism is not warranted from this text as we have noted and will become more evident as our discussion proceeds.

The subsequent option would translate Col. 2:12a as “you were circumcised *before* being buried with Him in baptism.” This view is best for the following reasons. *First*, according to Dana and Mantey, aorist participles subordinate to aorist verbs can express subsequent action.³³ *Second*, the burial referred to in this verse is subsequent to the death of the old man in v. 11,

²⁹ Harris, *Colossians & Philemon*, 103.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 622-627.

³² *Ibid.*, 623.

³³ H.E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1955), 230.

effected by circumcision. Eadie says, “It is plain that the spiritual circumcision is not different from regeneration, or the putting off of the old man and putting on the new.”³⁴ Though Paul does not use the same terminology as Eadie in this text, “the removal of the body of the flesh” effected by the “circumcision made without hands” does transform the old man into a new man, and thus implies the death of the old man (Col. 2:20; Rom. 6:6-7; Tit. 3:5). *Third*, this view maintains the death, burial, and resurrection motif of other Pauline texts (Col. 2:12, 20; 3:1, 3; Rom. 6:3-8). *Fourth*, this view comports with the rest of the verse, which sees faith as the means through which resurrection with Christ is effected (see the discussion below). *Fifth*, this view does not get one into the difficulties mentioned above in the other views. This argues for a causal relationship between circumcision and burial with Christ in baptism. The burial with Him in baptism was brought about causally subsequent to the circumcision. The subsequent, spiritual concomitant or attendant to spiritual circumcision, therefore, is burial with Christ in baptism. Burial with Christ in baptism came to the Colossians after being “circumcised with a circumcision made without hands.”

The application of redemption is a complex of interrelated and interdependent divine redemptive acts. Our text has shown this to be the case thus far with the relationship between heart circumcision and burial with Christ. This leads us, however, to another question. What does Paul mean by burial with Him in baptism? Lightfoot takes the position that Paul is referring to physical, water baptism.

Baptism is the grave of the old man, and the birth of the new. As he sinks beneath the baptismal waters, the believer buries there all his corrupt affections and past sins; as he emerges thence, he rises regenerate, quickened to new hopes and a new life.³⁵

Commenting on συνταφέντες αὐτῷ ἐν τῷ βαπτισμῷ (“having been buried with Him in baptism”), A.S. Peake says:

This refers to the personal experience of the Christian. The rite of baptism, in which the person baptized was first buried beneath the water and then raised from it, typified to Paul the burial and resurrection of the believer with Christ.³⁶

Peake makes a crucial distinction that is necessitated by the flow of our discussion thus far. He does not equate burial with Him in baptism with water baptism, as did Lightfoot. He says, “The rite of baptism [i.e., water baptism], in which the person baptized was first buried beneath the water and then raised from it, *typified* to Paul the burial and resurrection of the believer with Christ (emphases added).” Lightfoot links regeneration with emerging from baptismal waters. Peake says that water baptism *typifies* burial and resurrection with Christ. We have seen that the “circumcision made without hands” is the presupposition of and causal prerequisite to burial with Christ in baptism. On this ground we must reject Lightfoot’s view. The baptism in view here, though typified by water baptism, is not to be equated with it.³⁷

Another important and related question also arises at this point. Since the circumcision the Colossians underwent was “without hands,” was the burial in baptism they underwent and their being “raised up with Him” also without hands? In other words, is the baptism Paul refers to here water baptism or that which water baptism signifies – burial and resurrection with Christ or union with Christ in His burial and resurrection? From our discussion thus far, it seems obvious that it

³⁴ Eadie, *Colossians*, 151.

³⁵ Lightfoot, *Colossians and Philemon*, 182.

³⁶ A.S. Peake, *The Epistle to the Colossians in The Expositor’s Greek Testament*, vol. 3, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 525.

³⁷ I am not claiming that Peake holds the view I’m advocating. I am using the distinction he makes and may be applying it in a different way than he would have.

must be the latter. Paul is not teaching that burial with Christ in *water* baptism was immediately preceded by their “circumcision made without hands.” How could he know that? How could he know that they were *water* baptized immediately upon their regeneration? He could not. However, he could know that all who are circumcised of heart are buried with Christ in spiritual baptism and raised with Him spiritually, typified by their water baptism, effected through faith (see the discussion below). We must agree with Ross, when he says:

It is important to say at this point that in both verse 11 and verse 12 Paul is not speaking of any physical rite or ceremony. The baptism in view in verse 12 is just as spiritual as the circumcision in verse 11. The physical rite of baptism signifies and seals that believers are raised up with Christ by faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead, but water baptism in and of itself does not accomplish this.³⁸

Paul could know that the Colossians were buried with Christ causally subsequent to their “circumcision made without hands” because he knew that all regenerate persons immediately express faith and are vitally united to Christ in His burial and resurrection. Murray gives eloquent comment to this:

...there is an invariable concomitance or co-ordination of regeneration and other fruits of grace. ...As we shall see later, this is a very significant emphasis and warns us against any view of regeneration which abstracts it from the other elements of the application of redemption.³⁹

We must not think of regeneration as something which can be abstracted from the saving exercises which are its effects. ...The regenerate person cannot live in sin and be unconverted.⁴⁰

There are numerous other considerations derived from the Scripture which confirm this great truth that regeneration is such a radical, pervasive, and efficacious transformation that it *immediately* registers itself in the conscious activity of the person concerned in the exercise of faith and repentance and new obedience [emphasis added].⁴¹

Paul knew that regeneration was logically and causally prior to faith and is its immediate precondition. He knew that those circumcised of heart immediately expressed faith in the Son of God. This is why he tells the Colossians that upon being spiritually circumcised they expressed faith that united them vitally to Christ. This view is further substantiated when we understand the function of the next clause in the text.

The next issue is what to make of the ἐν ᾧ καὶ clause, translated “in which you...also ... (NASB)” of v. 12. Is it to be viewed as a second, parallel clause with the one in v. 11? If so, the Colossians’ completeness in Christ is argued first from their “circumcision made without hands” and second from their being “raised up with Him.” This view seems strained for several reasons. *First*, a general rule of the Greek language is that clauses and phrases modify the nearest antecedent, unless there is good reason in the text to go further afield. There is no compelling reason to go further than the immediate antecedent ἐν τῷ βαπτισμῷ (“in baptism”). While some argue that the ἐν ᾧ καὶ clause of v. 12 is grammatically parallel with the ἐν ᾧ καὶ clause of v. 11⁴² (that’s the only apparently substantial argument for this view), grammatical (formal) parallels are not necessarily syntactical (functional) parallels. A *second* reason why this view is strained is because the ἐν ᾧ καὶ clause of v. 12 continues with language normally connected to

³⁸ Mark E. Ross, “Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals” in Strawbridge, ed., *Infant Baptism*, 103.

³⁹ Murray *Redemption*, 101.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 104-105. Murray’s comments come after discussing Jn. 3 and 1 Jn. concerning regeneration and its effects.

⁴² Abbott, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 251. This is Meyer’s view according to Abbot.

what precedes it. Paul continues, ἐν ᾧ καὶ συνηγέρθητε (“in which you were also raised up with Him”). Paul is completing his thought begun in the beginning of the verse. The fact that Paul often speaks of burial, baptism, and resurrection with Christ together leans us in the direction that this clause is subordinate to ἐν τῷ βαπτισμῷ (“in baptism”). Just as the Colossians were buried with Christ in baptism, so they were raised with Him in baptism.⁴³

The rest of v. 12, then, is subordinate to τῷ βαπτισμῷ (“baptism”). Paul says that in spiritual baptism συνηγέρθητε διὰ τῆς πίστεως (“you were also raised up with Him through faith”). The prepositional phrase διὰ τῆς πίστεως (“through faith”) indicates the means through which the Colossians were raised with Christ. Meyer says:

Paul is describing the *subjective medium*, without which the joint awakening, though objectively and historically accomplished in the resurrection of Christ, would not be appropriated individually... The unbeliever has not the blessing of having risen with Christ, because he stands apart from the fellowship of life with Christ, just as also he has not the reconciliation, although the reconciliation of all has been accomplished objectively through Christ’s death.⁴⁴

Clearly, the faith here is that expressed by the Colossians. This is the first mention of human response in the text and this response comes as a result of being circumcised “without hands.” Those who already possess the circumcision “made without hands” experience this complex of spiritual events, being buried and raised with Christ in baptism through faith. This is another reason why Paul cannot be speaking of water baptism in the text. For many who are water baptized do not have faith. But the ones described here exercised faith as a means or instrument through which they were united to Christ in His burial and resurrection. Commenting on Eph. 2:5ff and Col. 2:12, Gaffin says, “being raised with Christ is an experience with which faith is associated in an instrumental fashion.”⁴⁵ Being raised with Christ, as with being buried with Him, is causally dependent upon being “circumcised with a circumcision made without hands.” As the Colossians’ circumcision was without hands, so was their burial and rising with Christ.

The final words of v. 12 are subordinate to διὰ τῆς πίστεως (“through faith”). There are two ways to understand the words τῆς ἐνεργείας τοῦ θεοῦ (“in the working of God”). The question concerns the function of the genitive τοῦ θεοῦ (“of God”). Either it is subjective or objective. If subjective, then Paul is saying that their faith is the effect of God’s working in them. God gave them faith. God worked faith in them. If objective, then their faith was in the power exercised by God in the resurrection of Christ. The working of God’s power in the resurrection of Christ, according to this view, is the object of their faith. The final participial clause of v. 12, τοῦ ἐγείραντος αὐτὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν (“who raised Him from the dead”), is subordinate to τοῦ θεοῦ (“of God”). God is the one who raised Christ from the dead by His power. Though it is certainly true that faith is the effect of God’s working in the soul, it is best to understand τῆς ἐνεργείας τοῦ θεοῦ (“in the working of God”) here as objective, as the thing believed or the content of their faith. One reason for this view is that “the genitive after πίστις [“faith”], when not that of the person, is always that of the object.”⁴⁶ Also, elsewhere Paul makes the resurrection of Christ effected by God the object of saving faith (cf., Rom. 10:9).

Christians are complete in Christ because they have received a circumcision made without hands – regeneration. Regeneration produces faith that vitally unites souls to Christ in the efficacy of His burial and resurrection. This vital union with Christ in burial and resurrection is a

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Hand-Book to the Epistles to the Philippians and Colossians, and to Philemon* (reprint ed., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1983), 301.

⁴⁵ Gaffin, *Resurrection*, 129.

⁴⁶ Abbott, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 252. Cf., Eadie, *Colossians*, 156; Harris, *Colossians & Philemon*, 105; Lightfoot, *Colossians and Philemon*, 183; Peake, *Colossians*, 526.

spiritual baptism. Vital union brings believing sinners into the orbit of redemptive privilege and power. Every sinner circumcised in heart immediately expresses saving faith in God's power in raising Christ from the dead. Burial and resurrection with Christ in baptism cannot be abstracted from its causal prerequisite – regeneration. If one has been buried and raised with Christ in baptism, it is only because one has been circumcised “without hands.” The result of regeneration, faith, is the instrumental cause of union with Christ. And the union with Christ of Col. 2:12 ushers the believer experientially into the complex of redemptive privileges purchased by the Lord Jesus Christ for the elect. In other words, this is the experience of all believers, though not of all those water baptized. All of this may be typified by water baptism, though it is not effected by it. Christians are complete in Christ because of regeneration and its effects in the soul.

Colossians 2:11-12 in *The Case For Covenantal Infant Baptism*

The Scripture index to *The Case For Covenantal Infant Baptism* contains 17 entries for Col. 2:11-12. Space does not permit us to discuss every entry. However, we will examine a few of the uses in light of the exposition above.

Mark Ross, in his chapter “Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals,” says:

It is imperative that we look more closely at this verse in the Greek text. Colossians 2:12 is a continuation of verse 11, which itself is a continuation of the sentence begun in verse 9. Verse 12 is a series of participial phrases, all of which are related to the main verb in verse 11, “you were circumcised.” Thus, in verse 12 Paul is explaining more fully just how it is that the Colossians have been circumcised in this circumcision made without hands. They were circumcised, “having been buried with [Christ] in baptism.” Thus, verse 12 explains how the Colossians were “circumcised.”⁴⁷

Colossians 2:12 in fact contains only two participles. The first, *συνταφέντες* (“having been buried with”), is the first word of the verse and is immediately subordinate to the main verb *περιετμήθητε* (“you were circumcised”). The second is *τοῦ ἐγείραντος* (“who raised [Him from the dead]”) and is immediately subordinate to *τοῦ θεοῦ* (“of God”). Though it is remotely related to the main verb, it is not in an immediate, adverbial relationship to it. Ross’ statement makes it appear so but it is not. He oversimplifies the syntax. Further, he claims that the participle *συνταφέντες* (“having been buried with”) begins Paul’s explanation of “how the Colossians were ‘circumcised.’” However, we have seen that Paul already explained how the Colossians were circumcised before he got to v. 12. They were “circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ” (v. 11). Verse 12 reveals to us the subsequent, spiritual concomitant of their circumcision, not “how the Colossians were ‘circumcised.’” It tells us *when* the Colossians were buried and raised with Christ in baptism.

On the next page, Ross says, “The baptism of Colossians 2:12 can only be the reality of the Spirit’s working to regenerate the heart and free the soul from the dominion of sin.”⁴⁸ But, as we have seen, v. 12 speaks of a spiritual, vital union with Christ effected through faith. This presupposes regeneration (v. 11). If both verses are describing regeneration, then Paul could be paraphrased as saying, “You were regenerated when you were regenerated.” This would certainly be a cumbersome tautology and does not respect the syntax of the text. The Bible uses other words and phrases to describe regeneration that Paul could have used here (i.e., born from above). However, it is clear from the exposition above that Paul is not speaking about regeneration in v. 12. He is speaking about the fruit of regeneration – union with Christ in burial and resurrection, effected through faith.

⁴⁷ Ross, “Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals” in Strawbridge, ed., *Infant Baptism*, 102.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 103.

Cornelis Venema, in his chapter “Covenant Theology and Baptism,” says:

...it is not surprising to find the apostle Paul treating baptism as the new covenant counterpart to circumcision (Col. 2:11-13). ...Baptism now represents the spiritual circumcision “made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh” (Col. 2:11).⁴⁹

Venema offers no exegesis, only assertions. Our exegesis above has made it clear that Col. 2:11-12 does not warrant such statements. The New Covenant counterpart to physical circumcision is spiritual circumcision. Venema’s claim, in essence, is that water baptism represents regeneration. The baptism of Col. 2:12, however, is spiritual baptism that represents vital union with Christ. Regeneration is presupposed and effects burial and resurrection with Christ in baptism through faith. Venema is assuming that baptism has replaced circumcision by this statement. Our exegesis has shown this to be an unwarranted implication of the text.

In a context discussing the household baptisms of the New Testament, Joel Beeke and Ray Lanning say:

Similarly, children of believing parents are addressed as members of churches at Ephesus (Eph. 6:1-4) and Colossae (Col. 3:20). These children were also baptized, as Paul affirms in Colossians 2:11-12, where he calls baptism “the circumcision of Christ.”⁵⁰

This appears to claim that Paul is speaking of water baptism in Col. 2:11-12. If this is what the authors are claiming, it contradicts what we have seen Ross claim later in the book, where he says, “It is important to say at this point that in both verse 11 and verse 12 Paul is not speaking of any physical rite or ceremony. The baptism in view in verse 12 is just as spiritual as the circumcision in verse 11.”⁵¹ Also, we have already seen that all who are spiritually circumcised are spiritually buried and raised with Christ, effected through faith. Beeke and Lanning’s statement would then imply that all the children Paul was addressing were also regenerated. But, of course, they do not advocate that. The main problem with their statement comes in its final sentence. “These children were also baptized, as Paul affirms in Colossians 2:11-12, where he calls baptism ‘the circumcision of Christ.’” They equate circumcision with baptism. But, as we have seen clearly, Paul does not do this.

Pertinent Conclusions

Baptism does not replace circumcision as the sign and seal of the covenant. We have seen clearly that spiritual circumcision, not baptism, replaces physical circumcision. Baptism in Col. 2:12 (i.e., vital union with Christ) is a result of spiritual circumcision. Burial and resurrection with Christ is not equivalent to but causally subsequent to spiritual circumcision. Physical circumcision has been replaced by spiritual circumcision under the New Covenant. The correspondence between the two, however, is not one-to-one. Paul tells us this by saying that New Covenant circumcision is “a circumcision made without hands.” Though physical circumcision and spiritual circumcision are related they are not equivalent. One is physical and does not affect the heart; the other is spiritual and does not affect the body. Both are indications of covenant membership. But only the circumcision of the heart guarantees one’s eternal destiny, for all the regenerate express faith and “are protected by the power of God through faith” (1 Pet. 1:5).

We must take issue with those who argue from this text that baptism replaces circumcision. The Lutheran scholar Eduard Lohse asserts, “Baptism is called circumcision here... The

⁴⁹ Cornelis P. Venema, “Covenant Theology and Baptism” in Strawbridge, ed., *Infant Baptism*, 222.

⁵⁰ Joel R. Beeke and Ray B. Lanning, “Unto You, and to Your Children” in Strawbridge, ed., *Infant Baptism*, 52.

⁵¹ Mark E. Ross, “Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals” in Strawbridge, ed., *Infant Baptism*, 103.

circumcision of Christ which every member of the community has experienced is nothing other than being baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ.”⁵² We have seen, however, that the only replacement motif in this text is between physical circumcision and spiritual circumcision. Spiritual circumcision is not equivalent to baptism. Baptism (i.e. union with Christ) is the sphere in which burial and resurrection with Christ occurs, which is effected through faith, and a result of spiritual circumcision.

The Reformed commentator William Hendriksen says:

Evidently Paul in this entire paragraph magnifies Christian baptism as much as he, by clear implication, disapproves of the continuation of the rite of circumcision if viewed as having anything to do with salvation. The definite implication, therefore, is that *baptism has taken the place of circumcision*. Hence, what is said with reference to circumcision in Rom. 4:11, as being a sign and a seal, holds also for baptism. In the Colossian context baptism is specifically a sign and seal of having been buried with Christ and of having been raised with him [emphasis Hendriksen’s].⁵³

We take issue with Hendriksen’s view on several fronts. *First*, Paul is not magnifying Christian baptism in this text. He is magnifying Christian circumcision. This is evident by the fact that “you were also circumcised” is the regulating verb to which the rest of vv. 11 and 12 are subordinate. *Second*, there is not a “definite implication ...that *baptism has taken the place of circumcision*.” Our exegesis has shown us this clearly. *Third*, it is not true that “what is said with reference to circumcision in Rom. 4:11, as being a sign and a seal, holds also for baptism.” This is so because Paul is not arguing for a replacement theology between physical circumcision and water baptism and because the seal of the New Covenant is the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13; 4:30). *Fourth*, Paul says nothing in Col. 2:11-12 about baptism being “a sign and seal of having been buried with Christ and of having been raised with him.” He does say that the subsequent, spiritual concomitant of spiritual circumcision is spiritual burial and resurrection with Christ in baptism effected through faith. There is no hint of baptism being a sign and seal as argued by Hendriksen. It is of interest to note one of Hendriksen’s footnotes to these statements. Notice the concession he makes.

I am speaking here about a clear *implication*. The surface contrast is that between *literal* circumcision and *circumcision without hands*, namely, the circumcision of the heart, as explained. But the implication also is clear. Hence, the following statement is correct: “Since, then, baptism has come in the place of circumcision (Col. 2:11-13), the children should be baptized as heirs of the kingdom of God and of his covenant” (*Form for the Baptism of Infants in Psalter Hymnal of the Christian Reformed Church*, Grand Rapids, Mich., 1959, p. 86). When God made his covenant with Abraham the children were included (Gen. 17:1-14). This covenant, in its spiritual aspects, was continued in the present dispensation (Acts 2:38, 29; Rom. 4:9-12; Gal. 3:7, 8, 29). Therefore the children are still included and should still receive the sign, which in the present dispensation, as Paul makes clear in Col. 2:11, 12, is baptism [emphases Hendriksen’s].⁵⁴

Hendriksen’s concession that “The surface contrast is that between *literal* circumcision and *circumcision without hands*” surely sheds doubt over his initial claim of “speaking here about a clear *implication*.” Again, we have seen that Paul is not arguing that water baptism replaces physical circumcision as a sign and seal of the covenant. It does not follow, then, that “the children should be baptized as heirs of the kingdom of God and of his covenant.” Paul does not say or imply that the sign of the covenant is baptism. Instead, the sign of the covenant is regeneration. All who are spiritually circumcised are immediately buried and raised with Christ in

⁵² Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 101, 102.

⁵³ William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Galatians, Ephesians, Philipppians, Colossians and Philemon* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 116.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 116, n. 86.

baptism, effected through faith. Colossians 2:11-12 is about the application of redemption to elect souls and does not imply infant baptism, some of which are not elect. If it implies anything about water baptism, it implies that it ought to be administered to those who have been circumcised of heart and vitally united to Christ through faith as a symbol of these spiritual blessings.

All who are circumcised of heart are buried and raised with Christ through faith immediately subsequent to their heart circumcision. Regeneration cannot be abstracted from its immediate fruits. All regenerate souls are immediately united to Christ through faith. This is what Col. 2:11-12 clearly teaches. Our exegesis argues for an *ordo salutis* as follows: regeneration, then union with Christ through faith. And this experience is that of all the regenerate and has nothing to do with the act of water baptism in itself.

This text neither teaches baptismal regeneration nor implies infant baptism. In context, it is displaying the completeness *believers* have in Christ. It does not apply to unbelievers or to all who are baptized by any mode and by properly recognized ecclesiastical administrators. It has to do with the spiritual realities that come to souls who are Christ's sheep. It has to do with the application of redemption to elect sinners. It has to do with regeneration, faith, and experiential union with Christ. These are the aspects of completeness in Christ Paul highlights here. We should gain much encouragement from these things. They were revealed to fortify believers against error. They were written to strengthen saints already in Christ. They were not revealed as proof for the subjects of baptism. They were not revealed to teach us that water baptism replaces physical circumcision as the sign and seal of the covenant. God gave us Col. 2:11-12 to display this fact: When you have Jesus, you have all you need!