

## **A Continued Convention of Covenantal Continuity:**

### **Circumcision and Baptism in Patristic Thought**

The debates over the relationship (or lack thereof) between circumcision and baptism form deep theological waters, which an individual can be immersed in, or just receive a light sprinkling before moving on. “Reformed paedobaptism generally argues from continuity with the Abrahamic covenant, situating infant baptism as a continuation of infant circumcision”,<sup>1</sup> whereas many contest whether the continuity of these covenants is legitimately drawn from Scripture.<sup>2</sup> When weighing in on this debate, many have either gone directly to Scripture, or failed to engage with a wider historical tradition than that since the Reformation.<sup>3</sup> For example, John Piper states “For 400 years a fairly elaborate argument has been made that baptism replaces circumcision as the sign of the covenant,” largely drawn from passages such as Colossians 2:11-12.<sup>4</sup> While Scripture is our highest authority, we would be wise to learn what we can from the rich tradition of Scriptural interpretation of who have gone before us, and when we do so, we should cast our eyes back beyond the Reformers.

I am not seeking here to discuss the nature of the relationship between circumcision and baptism. Nor am I offering an exploration of such a relationship’s application to infants in the church today. I am simply investigating, *what relationship did the Church Fathers see between*

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<sup>1</sup> Gavin Ortlund, “Why Not Grandchildren? An Argument Against Reformed Paedobaptism.” *Themelios* 45, no. 2 (2020): 333–46, 333.

<sup>2</sup> See Martin Salter, “Does Baptism Replace Circumcision? An Examination of the Relationship between Circumcision and Baptism in Colossians 2:11-12,” *Themelios* 35, no. 1 (2010): 15-28.

<sup>3</sup> For an example of the former, see Martin Salter, “Does Baptism Replace Circumcision?”. For an example of the latter, see Gavin Ortlund, “Why Not Grandchildren?”.

<sup>4</sup> John Piper, “How Do Circumcision and Baptism Correspond?”, *Desiring God* (1999).  
<https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/how-do-circumcision-and-baptism-correspond>

*baptism and circumcision?* Is this parallel a reformation hobby horse, or the product of nearly two millennia of church scholarship? Moreover, if the Fathers did see this relationship, did they see it in Colossians 2:11-12?

In this essay I will endeavor to display that the church Fathers did indeed see and write about this parallel, dating back to the middle of the second century, and frequently appealed to Colossians 2:11-12 when they did so. Firstly, I will conduct a broad overview of the church Fathers who did see this parallel between circumcision and baptism, working backward from the turn of the fifth century to the middle of the second century.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, and briefly, I will be specifically examining the use of Colossians 2:11-12 in patristic thought with regards to this continuation of sacramental signs.<sup>6</sup>

## **Circumcision and Baptism in the thought of the Church Fathers**

### **I. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers**

On the topic of baptism, a man such as Augustine, possessing a “rich sacramental theology,”<sup>7</sup> who “influenced Protestants and Catholics, paedobaptists and Baptists in similar and strikingly different ways”<sup>8</sup> is the ideal starting point for this investigation. Augustine discusses baptism in his writings against both of his major opponents, Pelagius and the Donatists. In *On Baptism and Against the Donatists*, written at the turn of the 5th century, Augustine extensively parallels the signs of circumcision and baptism, notably stating that “the sacrament of baptism in the case of

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<sup>5</sup> Like most people, I appreciate things to be in chronological order. However, I believe for the purposes of this investigation working backwards will prove an exciting way in which to see, in the words of Morpheus in *The Matrix*, “how deep the rabbit hole goes.”

<sup>6</sup> I will not be offering my own interpretation or exegesis of Colossians 2:11-12, only what I believe the Church Fathers understood it to mean.

<sup>7</sup> Lewis Ayres and Thomas Humphries, “Augustine and the West to AD 650”, in Hans Boersma and Matthew Levering, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 156.

<sup>8</sup> Steven McKinion, “Baptism in the Patristic Writings”, in Thomas S. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, *Believers Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2006), 184.

infants, from the parallel of circumcision”, is something “handed down by apostolic authority”.<sup>9</sup> This is very significant for our study, as Augustine states that this practice is “not as instituted by Councils,”<sup>10</sup> but a parallel with its roots in the Apostolic tradition, handed down over generations. Augustine elaborates on this parallel, noting that just as Abraham was counted righteous before receiving the sign of circumcision, “Cornelius also was enriched with the gift of the Holy Spirit before he was baptised,”<sup>11</sup> thereby distinguishing in both cases between the sign and that which is signified.

A few years earlier, in a letter to one Maximin, Augustine again parallels and then connects baptism and circumcision as signs of the covenant. He first states that just “as circumcision was abolished by the first coming of the Lord, so baptism shall be abolished by his second coming”, then adds that “circumcision of the heart and cleansing of the conscience” is “the [heavenly] reality to which both ordinances prefigure”.<sup>12</sup> This explicit connection of the two signs is at the heart of the covenant theology: one overarching covenant of grace, under differing administrations in the Old and New Testaments. Augustine closes his remarks on these two signs by drawing a final parallel between circumcision and baptism, that just as circumcision is unrepeatable, so is baptism.<sup>13</sup>

At a similar time to Augustine’s letter to Maximin, John Chrysostom was delivering his homilies on 2 Corinthians. In a series of counterparts, Chrysostom simply states that the New

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<sup>9</sup> Augustine, *On Baptism Against the Donatists*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. J.G. Cunningham, vol. 1, First Series (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), 4.32. <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/14084.htm>

<sup>10</sup> Augustine, *On Baptism Against the Donatists*, 4.32.

<sup>11</sup> Augustine, *On Baptism Against the Donatists*, 4.32.

<sup>12</sup> Augustine, “Letter 23,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. J.G. Cunningham, vol. 1, First Series (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), section 4. <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102023.htm>

<sup>13</sup> Augustine, “Letter 23,” section 4. This connection is particularly fascinating, as to argue for the singular administration of the sacrament of baptism upon an individual from the necessarily singular administration of circumcision is to directly connect the the two signs, not just as of similar nature under differing administrations, but having a fundamental continuity and consistency from circumcision through to baptism.

Testament believers have, “Instead of circumcision, baptism.”<sup>14</sup> Earlier in the same series of homilies, Chrysostom parallels that which Christians receive in baptism, “the earnest of the Spirit”, to the “seal” of Jewish circumcision.<sup>15</sup> Everett Ferguson believes that Chrysostom distinguishes between baptism and “what takes place in baptism; the seal is either the Spirit himself or the spiritual circumcision he imparts in connection with baptism.”<sup>16</sup> It would seem, however, that Chrysostom is paralleling that which is received in circumcision, or that which is signified, and that which is received in baptism, or that which is signified. Chrysostom parallels the sign with the sign, and the substance with the substance. Additionally, in his homilies on Colossians, which will receive further attention below, Chrysostom again finds the Christian circumcision in baptism.<sup>17</sup>

Five more Ante-Nicene Church Fathers drew from Colossians 2:11-12 to connect circumcision and baptism. Jerome, ten years prior to Chrysostom’s homilies, was penning his commentary on Galatians, and makes a passing reference to Colossians 2:11-12, noting that as those who have “risen together with Christ in baptism [...] should serve neither the ‘circumcision nor uncircumcision.’”<sup>18</sup> Ten years before Jerome, at approximately AD380, Ambrose of Milan, in his work *On Abraham*, draws a parallel from what was achieved in circumcision, and what is achieved in baptism. Just as circumcision is a cutting off of flesh, baptism cuts away “bodily excesses” from the mind.<sup>19</sup> At an estimated similar time, Asterius the homilist draws upon the

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<sup>14</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on 2 Corinthians*, in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Talbot W. Chambers, vol. 12, First Series (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), 11.4 on 2 Cor 5:18. <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/220211.htm>

<sup>15</sup> Chrysostom, *Homilies on 2 Corinthians*, 3.7 on 2 Cor 1:21-22. <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/220203.htm>

<sup>16</sup> Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 560.

<sup>17</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Colossians*, in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. John A. Broadus, vol. 13, First Series (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), 6 on Col 2:11. <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/230306.htm>

<sup>18</sup> Jerome, *Saint Jerome’s commentaries on Galatians, Titus, and Philemon*, trans. Tomas P. Scheck (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2010), 6.15 on Gal 5:6, 273.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Peter Cramer, *Baptism and Change in the Early Middle Ages, c. 200 - c. 1150*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 118-119.

same passage, “using the parallel with circumcision as a warrant for infant baptism.”<sup>20</sup> Basil the Great draws a parallel of the immediacy of application of circumcision to infants to the immediacy of application of baptism, simultaneously linking Colossians 2:11-12 with John 3:5, and being born of “water and Spirit.”<sup>21</sup> Lastly, Ephraem the Syrian directly equates “the circumcision of Christ” to baptism, noting that “the circumcision of Christ” has replaced “the circumcision of the Hebrews.”<sup>22</sup> These five uses of Colossians 2:11-12 will be further explored in the second part of this essay.

To finish our overview of the Post-Nicene Fathers, Saint Aphrahat the Persian, writing at around 343, sees circumcision and baptism as linking from a different Scripture. Aphrahat connects baptism with both Israel’s crossing of the Red Sea in Exodus 14, and then again with the next generation crossing the Jordan in Joshua 3. Here he quotes 1 Corinthians 10:1, “[Israel were] baptised in the clouds and the sea.”<sup>23</sup> He then builds on this connection to the Israelites, saying “they find life who are circumcised in their hearts and who circumcise themselves a second time on the true Jordan, the baptism of the forgiveness of sins.”<sup>24</sup> The second circumcision, is a reference to Joshua 5:2-5, the circumcision by what Aphrahat calls “knives of stone,” which he highlights happened once they had crossed the Jordan (i.e. been baptized). Aphrahat again parallels the outward sign of circumcision to the outward sign of baptism, and the inward intention, “circumcision of the heart”, to Christian circumcision, by “the knife which is his word that is sharper than the two-edged sword.”<sup>25</sup> Similarly to Chrysostom’s distinction between the signing and the sealing, Aphrahat distinguishes between the physical sign (whether circumcision or baptism), and that which is signified: circumcision of the heart, by the word.

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<sup>20</sup> Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 577.

<sup>21</sup> Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 589.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 501.

<sup>23</sup> Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 490.

<sup>24</sup> Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 490.

<sup>25</sup> Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 490.

## II. Ante-Nicene Fathers

In a discussion on the causative relationship of the parallel between circumcision and baptism and the practice of infant baptism, David Wright argues that it was only in the third century that the circumcision-baptism parallel became influential in patristic thought.<sup>26</sup> Certainly, as we shall see, it was present in the third century, but as we trace this argument backwards in time we will find ourselves in the writings of one of the second century apologists.

One of the most explicit links found in the writings of the Ante-Nicene Fathers is in a letter from Cyprian of Carthage to bishop Fidus.<sup>27</sup> Fidus had written to Cyprian, reasoning that just a circumcision was administered on the eighth day after birth, so should baptism be. Cyprian responds, “ordering Fidus *not* to delay baptism till the eighth day”, which H. F. Stander and J. P. Louw take to be Cyprian’s means of dissociating baptism from circumcision.<sup>28</sup> However, Cyprian does not reject the premise of Fidus’s argument, only the strict application of it. Cyprian believes that the “Jewish circumcision of the flesh [was] a sacrament given beforehand in shadow and in usage,” that circumcision’s eighth day observance (“that is, the first day after the Sabbath”) foreshadowed Christ’s resurrection on the first day after the Sabbath, whereby “*spiritual circumcision was given to us.*”<sup>29</sup> This spiritual circumcision Cyprian equates with baptism, as he resumes his argument, “that spiritual circumcision ought not to be hindered by carnal circumcision”, and therefore baptism ought not to be restricted until the 8th day, but ought to be

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<sup>26</sup> David Wright, 'The Origins of Infant Baptism-Child Believers' Baptism?', *SJT* 40, (1987): 1-23, 19.

<sup>27</sup> Cyprian is of course also noteworthy for his conflict with Stephen amidst the controversy over “rebaptism” due to the “schism caused by Novatian’s ‘church of the pure’”, Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, p381. However, such a topic is beyond the scope of this essay, although Cyprian’s requiring of rebaptism by those baptized by schismatics or heretics relates to his views on the efficacy of a baptism administered by schismatics or heretics, not on whether baptism, like circumcision, ought only to be administered once. On the contrary, Cyprian frequently refers to “the one baptism” in *Letter 74*, but holds that only the true church may administer this “one baptism,” not heretics or schismatics. Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 385.

<sup>28</sup> H. F. Stander and J. P. Louw, *Baptism in the Early Church* (Leeds: Evangelical Press, 2004), 108.

<sup>29</sup> Stander and Louw, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 107.

administered sooner.<sup>30</sup> Far from dissociating the two sacraments, Cyprian sees baptism as the fulfillment of circumcision, and *more inclusive* than circumcision, as the sacrament of the New Testament. This heightened inclusivity again is significant in Reformed Covenantal Theology, though not the aim of this essay.

Origen Adamantius “often brings baptism into association with circumcision.”<sup>31</sup> While Jean Daniélou interprets Origen’s thought to be that “the sacrament itself of baptism for which circumcision is the figure,” whereas Ferguson, as he did with Chrysostom, “nuances” the interpretation to see “the gift of the Spirit in baptism as the spiritual counterpart to physical circumcision.”<sup>32</sup> However, drawing a “spiritual counterpart” from a physical sign ignores that the physical sign had a spiritual counterpart in the first place, circumcision of the heart, as is clear in Origen’s thought. Origen speaks of true circumcision as belief and true “uncircumcision” as unbelief, and parallels the “uncircumcision of unbelief” to the baptised member of the church who becomes a transgressor of God’s law. Once again, a distinction between the sign and that which is signified is clear in Origen’s thought, with regards both to circumcision and baptism. Origen, like Aphrahat will go on to, interprets Joshua 5:2 and the circumcision by knives of flint in terms of 1 Corinthians 10:1-5, namely, a circumcision by Christ the Rock.<sup>33</sup> Whether he influenced Aphrahat is unclear, but having delved back to the middle of the third century, this would be the earliest influential argumentation of connection between the two signs, if Wright’s claim is correct.

Unsurprisingly, it is in the lengthy dialogue between Justin Martyr and Trypho, a Jew, that many of the earliest discussions regarding baptism and circumcision emerge. Justin’s

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<sup>30</sup> Stander and Louw, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 107.

<sup>31</sup> Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 416.

<sup>32</sup> Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 416.

<sup>33</sup> Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 416.

understanding of these two sacraments is most interesting for our study for many reasons. Firstly, he appears to disprove Wright's theory that it is only from the middle of the third century that the parallel becomes influential. Secondly, Justin also provides one of the fullest comparisons between the two signs, drawing not only from Colossians 2, but also the aforementioned 1 Corinthians 10 alongside Joshua 5 argument. Thirdly, Justin sees an expansion of the inclusivity of the covenant under the New Testament, signified by baptism replacing circumcision, using a form of explicit typology in his understanding.

Justin's comments regarding baptism and circumcision are mixed in with comparisons between Christian baptism and Jewish baptismal rituals as well.<sup>34</sup> Justin contrasts Jewish "baptism" and Christian baptism, alongside a contrast between Jewish circumcision and "our circumcision."<sup>35</sup> At first these may seem to be a separation between Christian baptism and Christian circumcision. However, Justin's later identification of Christian baptism with spiritual circumcision<sup>36</sup> would instead point towards Justin discussing Jewish baths or "baptisms" within the context of proselyte baptisms, which would be entirely fitting for Justin, a gentile, to be referring to in conversation with Trypho, a Jew. Ferguson notes in *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* that proselyte baptisms were likely well established before the first century, hence providing a significant background for this dialogue.<sup>37</sup> Further, Ferguson identifies that with regards to proselytes, controversies arose as to whether Jewish baptism or circumcision should be the requirement upon "becoming Jews."<sup>38</sup> As such, when Justin, a Gentile, in dialogue with a

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<sup>34</sup> Ferguson notes that while Justin occasionally uses other words for bathing, such as *balneion* for a secular bath, and *loutron* for a religious bath, he also uses *baptisma* for Jewish baptism. Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 268.

<sup>35</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, in Ante-Nicene Fathers, eds. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. Marcus Dods and George Reith, vol. 1, (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), 19. <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/01282.htm>

<sup>36</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 43. <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/01283.htm>

<sup>37</sup> Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 548.

<sup>38</sup> Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 547.



Jew, speaks of Jewish baptism, it is more than reasonable to think of this as analogous to Jewish circumcision, just as later Christian baptism is explicitly made analogous to “Christian” or “spiritual circumcision”.<sup>39</sup> With this established, Chapter 19 and its contrasts between Jewish and Christian baptism, and Jewish and Christian circumcision, can be recognised to be an example of Justin making the same statement twice, with differing foci. The next explicit parallel of circumcision and baptism occurs in Chapter 29 of *Dialogue with Trypho*, where again Justin describes circumcision as “that other baptism,” which he has no need of, having “been baptized with the Holy Ghost.”<sup>40</sup>

Justin then picks up the theme again in Chapter 43, with language from Colossians 2:11-12, which we shall discuss below, after examining Justin’s typology in Chapter 114 and his application of this onto the circumcision-baptism parallel, which is worth quoting at length.

Justin writes:

For the Holy Spirit sometimes brought about that something, which was the type of the future, should be done clearly; sometimes He uttered words about what was to take place, as if it was then taking place, or had taken place. And unless those who read perceive this art, they will not be able to follow the words of the prophets as they ought. For example's sake, I shall repeat some prophetic passages, that you may understand what I say. When He speaks by Isaiah, 'He was led as a sheep to the slaughter, and like a lamb before the shearer,' He speaks as if the suffering had already taken place.’<sup>41</sup>

Justin clearly sees an understanding of the use of “types” in the Old Testament to be invaluable for good hermeneutics of both Old and New Testaments, particularly with regards to events spoken of in the past tense in the Old Testament, which then take place in the New Testament. The example he goes on to give in Chapter 114, having established the fulfillment of the suffering servant in Christ, is the use of the term “stone” in parables to refer to Jesus, or even

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<sup>39</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 43.

<sup>40</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 29.

<sup>41</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 114. <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/01288.htm>

Jacob or Israel “in a figure of speech.”<sup>42</sup> Justin does not offer any hermeneutical tools to discern what sort of typology one is being employed in various cases, whether the use is as a “parable,” or “figurative.” What he does do, of great interest to our study, is use his understanding of “types” to read the “second circumcision” of Joshua 5 as a circumcision not performed with “iron instruments” but by “sharp stones, by the words preached by the apostles of the corner-stone cut out without hands.”<sup>43</sup> Justin continues, “And our hearts are thus circumcised from evil, so that we are happy to die for the name of *the good Rock*, which causes living water to burst forth in the hearts of those who by Him have loved the Father of all, and which gives those who are willing to drink of the water of life.”<sup>44</sup> Justin appears to be weaving together themes of baptism, circumcision, and living water from Joshua 5, 1 Corinthians 10, and John 4, with the former two being used in a very similar manner by Origen and then Aphrahat. It would appear that contrary to Wright’s argument, the parallel between circumcision and baptism was present in patristic thought all the way back to around 155AD as Justin was writing his *Dialogue*, and if Augustine’s statement that the parallel was handed down from the Apostles is true, then this parallel is as old as the Church. Having explored the long tradition of parallels between circumcision and baptism, we shall now turn to look specifically at how the Church Fathers used Colossians 2:11-12 in drawing this parallel.

### **Colossians 2:11-12**

Martin Salter argues that the language of “circumcision” in Colossians 2 is primarily polemical, due to the “presence of Jewish elements in the false teaching” which the Colossian church was facing.<sup>45</sup> He bolsters his argument with a footnote stating that “it is worth noting that

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<sup>42</sup> Italics mine. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 114.

<sup>43</sup> The cornerstone here is naturally Jesus, the “stone the builders rejected.” See Ps 118:22-23; Matt 21:42; Acts 4:11.

<sup>44</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 114.

<sup>45</sup> Salter tries to “have his cake and eat it” on this point, as he also uses Paul’s non-employment of the circumcision-baptism parallel in Acts 15 or Galatians to imply that the parallel doesn’t exist. In the case of the Colossians, the presence of Judaizers makes Paul’s argument polemical, but according to Salter’s logic it would not

not until the mid-fourth century was Col 2:11-12 cited as an argument for infant baptism.”<sup>46</sup> However, this appeal to the application (or lack thereof) to infant baptism is a red herring. Firstly, as is held by the author of the article which Salter cites for this fact, the practice of infant baptism predated the application of the argument.<sup>47</sup> Secondly, the application of any text to the debate would likely have arisen alongside or after any controversy associated with the practice of infant baptism, rather than beforehand. Thirdly, and most significantly for us, the application of the parallel from Colossians 2:11-12 to *infant* baptism is not the only aspect which the Church Fathers drew: we shall see here that they frequently drew the parallel to baptism in general. Further to this, and fundamentally, the Fathers did not read Colossians 2 and the discussion of circumcision and baptism as “primarily polemical,” but rather in terms of either allegory, or even outright replacement/supersession.

Working forward chronologically, we begin with Justin Martyr. As with chapter 114, Justin uses language from Colossians 2:11-12 as he typologically interprets events of the Old Testament. Justin compares the New Testament believer to Enoch, having not received a “carnal” circumcision but a “spiritual circumcision,” which we received “through baptism.”<sup>48</sup> The “carnal” circumcision is the circumcision made with hands, and the “spiritual circumcision” is the “circumcision made without hands” (Colossians 2:11). This doesn’t appear to be polemical, and further, the parallel between the New Testament believer and Enoch (Genesis 5:21-24) is typical of later Reformed Theology: one covenant of grace under two administrations.<sup>49</sup>

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have been open to the charge of being polemical had he made the same argument to Judaizers elsewhere. Martin Salter, “Does Baptism Replace Circumcision?”, 28, n95.

<sup>46</sup> Martin Salter, “Does Baptism Replace Circumcision?”, 16, n7.

<sup>47</sup> J. P. T. Hunt, “Colossians 2:11-12, the Circumcision/Baptism Analogy, and Infant Baptism”, *Tyndale Bulletin* 41.2 (1990): 227-244, 244.

<sup>48</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 43.

<sup>49</sup> *The Westminster Confession of Faith* VII.4 states “There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations.”

In both Asterius the homilist and Ephraem the Syrian Ferguson recognises a direct parallel between circumcision and baptism, drawn from Colossians 2:11-12, and Asterius applies this directly to infant baptism.<sup>50</sup> Asterius, like Fidus, argues for a consequent eighth day circumcision, also noting the eight souls saved within Noah's ark (notably identified in 2 Peter 3:20-22 as a type of baptism, although Asterius doesn't explicitly state this.)<sup>51</sup> Hence, Asterius sees Colossians 2:11-12 not as a polemical argument from Paul to those being swayed by Judaizers, but rather as a statement of the parallel between circumcision and baptism, with baptism being the fulfillment of circumcision, potentially prefigured in the ark.

Basil the Great associates John 3:5 with Colossians 2:11 and Romans 6:4-5; where he identifies the "circumcision made without hands" as being "born of water and the Spirit," which occurs when "we were buried with him by baptism into death."<sup>52</sup> Again, this threefold parallel implies that Basil found Colossians 2:11-12 mutually interpretative with John 3:5 and Romans 6:4-5, as part of a wider biblical theology of circumcision and baptism, rather than a polemic argument made by Paul.

Jerome's allusion to Colossians 2:11-12 in his commentary on Galatians could certainly add strength to an argument *for* Jerome seeing a polemic use of circumcision language, given the Galatian context. However, similarly to Basil, Jerome links Romans 6:4, as well as Colossians 3:9-10, writing "We who have already now risen together with Christ in baptism, having been renewed in the new man, should serve neither 'circumcision nor uncircumcision.'"<sup>53</sup> The double usage of language from Colossians, as well as from Romans, in his commentary on a passage in Galatians would again imply that Jerome does not see Paul's use of circumcision in Colossians

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<sup>50</sup> Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 501, 577.

<sup>51</sup> Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 577.

<sup>52</sup> Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 589.

<sup>53</sup> Jerome, *Saint Jerome's commentaries on Galatians, Titus, and Philemon*, 273.

2:11-12 as polemical, but applicable to and coherent with both Galatians and Romans, and fundamental to the nature of Christian baptism. Jerome sees baptism as a replacement for circumcision, and so we “should serve neither ‘circumcision nor uncircumcision,’” for neither state is relevant, only baptized or not baptized.<sup>54</sup>

Last in our survey of Church Fathers with regards to Colossians 2 is the “golden mouthed” preacher, John Chrysostom. Chrysostom goes so far as to refer to baptism, alongside other titles, as “circumcision,” supporting this with a citation of Colossians 2:11.<sup>55</sup> Burnish also notes Chrysostom’s exposition of the same text, where Chrysostom explains that:

No longer, says St. Paul, is circumcision accomplished by the knife, but in Christ Himself, for the hand does not perform the circumcision as in the Old Law, but the Spirit circumcises not a part but the whole man. There was a body there, and there is a body here; but that body was circumcised in the flesh, this body in the Spirit; but not after the manner of the Jews, but you have put off not flesh but sin. When and where? In baptism.<sup>56</sup>

This does seem to be a case of Chrysostom drawing a link between the physical sign of circumcision and the spiritual reality achieved in baptism, similar to Ferguson’s argument on Chrysostom’s homilies on 2 Corinthians detailed above. Nevertheless, suffice it to say that Chrysostom does not appear to read Colossians 2 as a polemic, but as a real contrast of an old sign of the covenant and the new sign of the covenant, and, as Burnish summarizes, Chrysostom “saw baptism as the physical sign of the new covenant between Christ and his Church,” replacing the old sign of circumcision.<sup>57</sup>

In summary, while varying in emphases, and the extent to which the parallel applies, Justin Martyr, Asterius the homilist, Ephraem the Syrian, Basil the Great, Jerome, and John

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<sup>54</sup> Jerome, *Saint Jerome’s commentaries on Galatians, Titus, and Philemon*, 273.

<sup>55</sup> Raymond F.G. Burnish, “Baptismal Preparation under the Ministry of St John Chrysostom in Fourth-Century Antioch,” in Stanley E. Porter and Anthony R Cross, *Baptism, The New Testament and The Church*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd, 1999), 390.

<sup>56</sup> Burnish, “Baptismal Preparation under the Ministry of St John Chrysostom,” 390.

<sup>57</sup> Burnish, “Baptismal Preparation under the Ministry of St John Chrysostom,” 391.

Chrysostom all treat the circumcision-baptism parallel of Colossians 2:11-12 not as a polemical tool, but as a clear explanation by the Apostle Paul of the relationship between the two signs. While none would explain quite as elaborately as many in the Reformed tradition would go on to do, their thought seems completely coherent with the Reformed view that baptism is the sign of the covenant under the New Testament, while circumcision was the sign under the Old Testament. Justin's covenantal theology proved particularly similar to that of the Reformed tradition, with his treatment of the relationship between circumcision and baptism resembling the single covenant of grace over the Old and New Testaments.

### **Conclusion**

Having journeyed back to the second century, we have seen a consistent understanding amongst many of the Church Fathers that there is indeed some form of parallel between circumcision and baptism, and that many of them held Colossians 2:11-12 to teach exactly this. None of those who I have read argued directly against any such link, although some were silent.<sup>58</sup> None appeared to read Colossians 2:11-12 as using the language circumcision as a polemical tool. While historians differ on the extent to which the Fathers saw circumcision as replaced by baptism (such as Burnish on Chrysostom), or identified with "what the Spirit does in baptism" (such as Ferguson on Chrysostom),<sup>59</sup> the majority recognise that the Fathers saw a genuine parallel between the two signs. Potential further research on the topic could assess whether the Fathers saw a direct "replacement" of signs, or in baptism a "supersession" of circumcision.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Given Tertullian's arguments against infant baptism, it would have been fascinating to find any of his thoughts on either the circumcision-baptism parallel, or on Colossians 2:11-12, but whether he was silent or the works are lost, I came across nothing of his on the subject.

<sup>59</sup> Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 560.

<sup>60</sup> For an excellent treatment of baptism as supersession of circumcision, see David Gibson, "Sacramental Supersessionism Revisited: A Response to Martin Salter on the Relationship between Circumcision and Baptism," *Themelios* 37, no. 2 (2012): 191-208.

It is worth closing with what is beyond dispute among believers, from the first to the twenty-first century, that Christ was raised from the dead, and those in him have no need of circumcision, having been buried with him in baptism, in which we were also raised with him (Colossians 2:11-12).

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