

Dr. Meredith Kline, Prologue, Lecture 31

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The two principles: profession and parental authority

On my analysis there are two principles, one is, the one who professes the faith. So you have to have an Abraham to get the ball rolling here. Abraham therefore is one who has believed in the Lord, he has professed faith in the Lord. He has said “Amen.” In Genesis 15:6 he said, “Amen” to God’s covenant promises. So he is one who may receive the sign of membership in the covenant, one who professes the faith. Then secondly, those who are under, we can either speak of the parental, or the household, authority of the one who professes the faith. So not Abraham alone, but all of those who are under Abraham’s household authority and in particular are interested in the fact that those who are under his parental authority are entitled to this sign of incorporation within the covenant. So Ishmael is under that parental authority and he receives the sign of the covenant (circumcision) as well as Isaac.

Jacob and Esau example

In the next generation, of course, is the striking illustration of the sons of Isaac, who by now is himself a professor of the faith. His children Esau, of course, as we said earlier, as well as Jacob is circumcised. So it is recognized that Esau belongs to the covenant and obviously Esau is not then in the covenant because he is regarded as elect or as presumptively at least regenerate because before they are born the parents already know that he is not elect. In fact, they know that he is reprobate because God gives them a revelation that he has rejected Esau and that he has set his elective love rather upon Jacob. So in spite of the fact that they know Esau is not elect, still by the commandment of God they give him the sign of membership in the covenant. So we have to explain why and on what basis God ordains that even an Esau is in the covenant. We have to explain that somehow and I submit to you the only explanation going is that Esau is under the parental authority of his father who is a professor of the faith. Those are the two principles that govern it.

From circumcision to baptism

They carry over then to baptism. You can see already where it will go, is that under the new covenant as well, those who profess the faith, you have to start with that as the gospel goes out there has to be the Abraham. As new units are established and this one rises up as a believer then, together with the household; it's on the basis then that those who are under the household or parental authority of these believing new converts on the mission field on the basis of their being under that parental authority that they too are to receive the sign of baptism.

Now then again this, as I said, traditional Presbyterian argument at this point for the reception of children, is to the affect an appeal to the promise. It is because of the promise but that is a confusion because here is Esau and here is Jacob and as Paul struggles with this problem we are talking about, his whole defense of God, as a keeper of promise, is precisely to the effect that they are not all a seed of promise. The promise seed does not include all of them. Jacob is the promised seed but Esau isn't. So under the New Covenant, we can't say that the basis for the acceptance of children is the promise because the promise is the election. The Presbyterians are right in seeing the parallelism the continuity between the Old Testament practice and the New. It is precisely because we see the continuity between what is going on back there that we have to reckon with the fact that promise is not the basis for Esau's being included in the covenant. Therefore it is not the basis for the counterparts under the New Covenant. The basis for that is that Esau was the child of Isaac. He was under his parental authority. That's what is going on in the New Covenant too. Now we will have to back up, of course, and demonstrate that in the terms of the New Covenant the children of believers are still regarded as being properly members of this holy covenant community but when we do so, what I'm going to be insisting then is that we can't say that the promise is the election. Election is simply not the basis for our baptizing our children.

Problem with the Presbyterian argument and Baptist conclusion

Now that's why I have a problem with the particular language in our prescribed rituals, when we ask the parents, who come bringing the child, "do you acknowledge that

your child although born in sin is holy in Christ?” Holy, yes. Holy in the institutional sense, however. Holy as they have a right to be in the covenant, but not holy in Christ. In Christ is election language. In Christ is that you have identified with Christ in his death and resurrection, you belong to him and we don’t know that about our children. It is not because, therefore, we recognize they are holy in Christ that we submit them for baptism. It is only because we recognize that according to God’s ordinance, that he commands us when we enter into the covenant and acknowledge the lordship of the covenant, the lordship of the Lord over our lives, that we bring with us those whom God has placed under our parental authority. The big question in the administration of the household of faith, the family of Jesus, is whether God honors or dishonors the family authority structure, which he has established in creation and in general. That natural family authority structure, does God honor it in determining the membership of his holy covenant family or does he ignore it? The consistent biblical answer from the beginning right to the end is that God does not ignore but he honors the family authority structure.

So he doesn’t establish the church community in terms of the one principle of the profession of faith but he honors family authority structure. If there is a believing parent then God honors the parent’s authority over the children and he requires the parent to exercise that natural family authority he has over the children to bring them with himself, and by this right to consign them over to the lordship of Christ for that ultimate judgment, which is symbolized by circumcision and baptism.

I titled my book *By Oath Consigned* by this oath ritual which is what we are doing. We are undergoing an oath ritual in circumcision and in baptism. We are committing ourselves to that final judgment, to be exercised by Christ. We know that if we have faith in him then we know what that judgment will be for us, one of favor. When we commit ourselves and when we commit to our children we are committing them over for that final judgment with any presumption that they are saved at this point or that they will be saved. We pray for that and we work and pray with our children so that they will later on own that covenant, but that is not the basis for our giving them the sign of membership in the holy covenant.

One on this approach, doesn't face all of the awkwardness and embarrassment that we make the basis for their being baptized, that they are holy in Christ which means elect. Then later on it turns out that many of them are not so. So what was their basis of having it in the first place? The Baptists argue against that Presbyterian argument, that isn't sound and the Baptists are right. Their criticism of the traditional Presbyterian argument is correct, but the Presbyterian conclusion is the right one and the Baptists are wrong. But you have to get the reasons straight.

Baptism as death ordeal—judgment/washings

Now we have jumped over the first part of parallelism of baptism. Is baptism a sign of a death ordeal or is it just a sign of washing and so on? It's a sign of a death ordeal and here you really ought to have *By Oath Consigned* to read some of the discussion there. I don't think, if I recall, I do much with that in the *Kingdom Prologue*, but the evidence includes things like the way in which Peter, as we said, refers to the flood waters as a baptism. So clearly there the waters of baptism symbolize a death judgment, a cutting off, a circumcision and so on.

In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul speaks of the crossing through the sea on the part of the Israelites and the death of the Egyptians, that they were all baptized there into Moses. He uses direct parallels to the language of being baptized in the New Testament, baptized into Moses in the water and in the cloud. But what was the waters of the death sea? Well the Egyptians found out what that passage was, it was death and for the Israelites, who crossed over the sea in the ark as it were in Christ, for them it was a dry passage through to safety but it was a passage through the death waters again. So both Peter and Paul interpret the Christian baptism in terms of these great death ordeal judgments of the Old Testament.

Then there is all the other language going back to the baptism of John, the forerunner of Jesus, and the evidence there that he was presenting his baptism as another circumcision. It is especially the way in which John refers to the whole ministry of Jesus, that "he is going to baptize you in the spirit and fire, I baptize you with water." But he is going to baptize you with the real agents of judgment. John makes that comparison, his

baptism is only a sign, Jesus is going to do the real baptism but the point is that the real baptism is one of inflicting death judgment with fire. So even Jesus himself then during his death on the cross, he was just using the language “I have a baptism to be baptized with.” I have a death to undergo. Jesus uses the language of baptism and very often then in the New Testament, baptism is a matter of being baptized into Christ in his death and burial.

Baptism as a new flood paradigm

There is all kinds of evidence that this is the primary meaning of baptism, that it is a sign of the flood. The flood is a great paradigm. Not washing, not regeneration, washing is one of the two; see once again you have two specific fulfillments. One is that if you experience the baptism judgment in yourself, apart from Christ, that death, you are in the waters of the flood you go down. But once again, the proper meaning of this whole business is to invite you in the process to Christ, undergo in Christ this experience and then it will be for you all kinds of good things. Then it will be a washing. Then your baptism will be realized in the washing of regeneration. Then it will be realized in justification and adoption.

Then for you it will be as Paul describes it for Abraham that the baptism he received was a seal of the righteousness of faith which he had yet being uncircumcised and so on. The meaning of baptism and of circumcision are not just some superficial marks of ethnic identity as the Baptists often think. People like Paul Jewett in his book on baptism, would identify baptism with earthly territory not conceived of with any typological status. It is just an ethnic badge or something. That’s not the biblical circumcision or baptism. In the Bible it’s always this theologically esoteric thing, a seal of the righteousness of faith. All the whole rich soteriology, whatever doctrine you want to mention read Colossians especially the passage where you get the equivalent to circumcision and baptism in there. So that’s the proper meaning of baptism; the only thing I’m saying is that’s not the total meaning. You can find all kinds of evidence in the Bible to say that’s what baptism means but then you can also find other evidence that can say it means this other thing. I’m saying let’s do justice to the whole picture. So baptism

symbolizes the death waters. Undergo the death waters yourself, undergo them in Christ and it will mean vindication, justification, sanctification, adoption, and resurrection at last and so on.

Function of baptism

Of course, how does baptism function? It obviously functions as a sign of incorporation into the covenant just as circumcision did. Think then of Matthew 28, the great commission. Clearly “baptizing them” is coordinate with “the teaching them” all of what Jesus commands. So baptizing people is associated with bringing people under the lordship of Christ with a view to an ultimate judgment of their life at the end of the days whether they are in Christ or they aren’t.

The New Testament then plainly teaches, the children holy. Are the children holy? In the Old Testament, obviously, Esau is regarded as holy in the institutional sense. Esau, reprobate though he is, belongs to this holy community. Outside the holy community is the common grace, profane non-holy community. Circumcision and baptism separates you from that non-holy community into the holy institution of the Lord. So Esau belonged to that holy institution.

Romans 11 and 1 Cor. 7:14 and baptism [covenant not=election]

Should all children of believers today be regarded as holy? So here is where Romans 11 and 1 Corinthians 7:14 should settle the question for everybody. Romans 11 tells us here’s the olive tree and here’s the root. If the root is holy, then all that comes from the root is also holy, namely all of the descendants of Abraham, all who are attached to the root, are holy just as he is. This is the covenant tree. It’s not the election tree. We know it’s not the election tree because branches are broken off and no branches are broken off from an election tree. This is a covenant tree. From the covenant people are broken off, so this is the covenant tree and this is the holy covenant tree. If the root is holy, then the branches are. If the parent, Abraham, is holy, then the children are also holy. Before we are done with this tree the Gentiles have been grafted into it so it’s not just the Old Covenant we are talking about here, it’s the New Covenant.

The same principle is applied from the beginning and clearly applies all the way through into New Covenant times. What it is saying is that we are the Abrahams of the New Covenant. We are the roots and our children are the branches. If we belong to the holy covenant by virtue of our profession of faith, then our children are also holy and they belong within the covenant.

Even if only one of the parents is holy, that's the point that 1 Corinthians 7:14 brings out. Even if only one parent is holy and the other is profane then the question comes up, does the holy principle prevail over the profane? Or does the profane prevail over the holy in the marriage relationship? So when the holy spouse and the unholy spouse come together and they have children, which principle has prevailed in God's sight, with respect to the identity of the offspring of this relationship. Paul makes the point that the relationship is sanctified instead of being profaned. Therefore the fruit of that relationship is also holy elsewhere. The children aren't clean but now they are clean. So Paul makes that point that even one holy parent will serve as the holy root so that the children then will be regarded as holy. That doesn't mean that they are subjectively holy sanctified elect, we don't know that. All it can possibly mean is that they have that holy status, whereby they belong to the covenant community.

As I see it the only way you can fight that is to say that baptism is not a sign of incorporation into that covenant. I think that would be very difficult for you if you recognize that baptism is given as a sign of membership into the church. The debate is not all that difficult and complex. It boils down to the simple teaching that children are regarded as holy. It's in the new covenant. Therefore they should receive the sign that God has given rather than inventing new signs as Baptists do, where they want their children, somehow, to be part of the picture and they should be consecrated to the Lord, so they invent some ceremony of dedication or something. Why invent a new sign of dedication? God has already given us his sign of consecration to this holy community.