

Was Circumcision a Sacrament, a Means of Grace?

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I.

We begin our study of this topic by considering what our Lutheran Confessions have to say about circumcision. The only references to it in the Confessions are found in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the first time in Art. III, Trigl. p. 147, 87f. It is stated there that since Abraham and David had the command of God concerning circumcision, if any works justified, this would also be true of circumcision. Yet they were justified not by the precepts of a good life, but by faith in Jesus Christ.

In the same article, p. 153-155, the point is made that according to Gal. 5:6 circumcision avails nothing, but faith which works by love. This passage is also adduced by the Confessions to show that love ought to and must follow faith, even though that love in no way justifies. Later on in the same article, the Apology (p. 175) points out that according to Romans 4:9, "Abraham received circumcision, not in order that by this work he might be justified; for by faith he had already attained it that he was accounted righteous. But circumcision was added in order that he might exercise faith and by which also he might confess his faith before others, and by his testimony might invite others to believe."

In Art. XIII of the Apology our Confessions again refer to Romans 4:9, indicating that Abraham was not justified by circumcision, but circumcision was rather "a sign presented, for exercising faith." The fifth reference to circumcision in our Confessions is found in Article XXIII of the Apology, where it is pointed out that in Acts 15:10ff the apostles "strove against those who required circumcision and endeavored to impose the Law of Moses upon Christians." The sixth and last reference to circumcision in the Confessions is found in Art. XXVII of the Apology, where it is mentioned merely in passing, the trend of thought at that point being that, "just as circumcision or the slaying of victims would not be a service of God now, so the rite of the Nazarites ought not be presented now as a service, but it ought to be judged simply as an adiaphoron," Trigl. p. 439.

It is evident then that our Confessions do not specifically deal with circumcision as to its force and purpose in Old Testament times when the Laws concerning this rite had not as yet been abrogated, but refer to it merely to show that the act of circumcision was a fruit of faith and that, when considered as a fruit of faith or a good work required by God, it never served to justify, since also in Old Testament times the believers were justified by faith alone. Since that is all that our Confessions say about circumcision, they do not, even by implication, take a position on the question assigned to this essayist, namely, "Was Circumcision a Sacrament, a Means of Grace?"

II.

Yet, the fact that the Confessions fail to touch upon the topic which we are about to discuss, does not mean that this is not a doctrinal matter, or that the Bible fails to answer our question. Our Lutheran Confessions never attempted to take a positive on every teaching in the Bible, but only on those which the confessional writers considered necessary in fulfilling the purposes which the Confessions were to serve. However, once we have defined what we mean with the non-Scriptural term "sacrament", we will find that God's Word is very definite in answering the question: "Was Circumcision a Sacrament?" and that Scripture leaves no doubt as to where it stands on this matter.

Since all of us, committed unalterably as Lutheran Christians and also through our ordination vows, as Lutheran pastors to God's Word as the *norma normans*, the primary and only real source and foundation of doctrine, it should not be difficult for us to reach 100% wholehearted agreement on this matter. We must present a united front over against anyone who may try to break down the authority and perspicuity (clarity) of Scripture when it speaks on this matter. Here in a matter of lesser importance, as in every other doctrinal matter, Scripture speaks with such authority and clarity, that it requires our complete acquiescence to what it teaches.

Here too, we find a clear "Thus saith the Lord." To that dictum of God Himself we should give our wholehearted agreement.

Before taking up the question what the Bible does say in answer to our question: "Was Circumcision a Sacrament?" it would no doubt be best to define our terms, in this case, the word "sacrament". Since this word does not occur in the Bible, we have no right to insist on any particular definition as the only correct one. We know, of course, that the Reformed and Roman Catholic definitions of this word differ widely from our own. Most of us are no doubt acquainted with the fact that to the ancient Romans "sacrament" meant a soldier's oath of allegiance, his vow of faithfulness; or it meant the earnest money or deposit of money put down by two men entering upon a court case. In general it signified the thing by which a person obligated himself, and still later, it meant any vow or oath. The word "sacramentum" comes from the verb "sacrare", which means "to render sacred". It is helpful also to keep in mind the close connection which exists etymologically between the word "sacrament" and "sacrifice", both of which are sacred acts.

In church usage we find that the Roman Catholic Church employs the word in a rather loose manner, apparently unwilling to define their understanding, of the term, the emphasis being mainly that there be *seven* sacraments, no more and no less for no more reason than the one mentioned by the Jesuit writer Scherer who claims that there *must* be *seven* sacraments "because no man so far has cursed by fewer than seven sacraments". If there are other reasons why the Roman Catholic Church insists on seven sacraments beyond the vague claim that it has decreed that there are seven sacraments (Council of Florence 1439); or if that church has a definite description of a sacrament; the writer is not aware of it. At any rate the Roman Catholic position that there are seven sacraments is so important to them that to this day it still curses all who teach that there are fewer than seven.

While the Reformed Churches generally hold with us that there are only *two* sacraments, they define a sacrament as "an outward ceremony of the Church, ordained as a visible sign of an inward or spiritual grace; specifically, a holy rite regarded as a sign of the union of the soul with God" (Winston). As all of us realize, this definition of "sacrament" as used by many of the Reformed, fits neither Baptism nor the Lord's Supper, and also explains how, in late years, especially many Methodist and other Reformed denominations in increasing numbers speak of matrimony as a "holy sacrament". The reason is not that they are drifting toward the Roman Catholic Church in their view of the sacraments. It is just that their arbitrary definition of Baptism and Holy Communion fits marriage and any other religious acts, even those not established by God.

However, it is not difficult to see how the word "sacrament" is being used in our topic "Was Circumcision a Sacrament?". If it has been meant in a very loose sense, or even only in the sense of an act ordained by God and nothing more, there would have been no need to ask a brother to prepare a paper on such a topic. A quick reference to a few passages in Genesis, especially Genesis 17:7,10 would have settled the matter in a few moments of time.

No, it was rather the desire to determine whether circumcision was a sacrament in the sense in which we understand this word to apply it to Baptism and the Lord's Supper. The fact that bretheren of this conference expressed differing positions on this matter reportedly prompted the assignment of the topic of this paper. In other words, you have asked me specifically whether in Old Testament times circumcision fit the definition of "sacrament" found in our Synodical Catechism, namely, "a sacred act, ordained by God, wherein He by certain external means, connected with His Word, offers, conveys and seals unto men the grace which Christ has merited".

I shall point out, especially toward the end of this paper, that devoting a conference paper to this topic should by no means be placed into the category of rather useless or even dangerous striving about words against which the apostle warns. However the important Biblical teachings as well as the hermeneutical principles which will have to be referred to and applied, will make this paper far more than simply an answer to an historical question about a rite which God Himself abrogated and abolished many years ago. In answering this question, it will be especially necessary to point out not only the self-evident points of similarity between circumcision and Baptism but also the far more precious nature of Baptism in comparison with circumcision .

This should help all of us ministers of the Word to appreciate and value more highly than we often do the sacraments in use in the New Testament times in which live. We will be encouraged to understand how much clearer, brighter and more glorious the sacraments of the New Testament are than the means of grace with which the Old Testament ministers of the Word had to be content to operate and carry on their work. We will draw a comparison between circumcision and Baptism and realize how much more richly we are blessed than the people of the Old Testament in being permitted to use the New Testament sacraments in connection with the work of our ministry. This ought to help us realize the greatness of the treasure we possess and which God Himself has asked us to distribute among those to whom we minister. There should be instilled in us a much greater enthusiasm to bring home to our hearers with sincerest convictions as to their eternal value and worth all the wealth of God's grace which has been entrusted to our weak hands in the Sacraments which we are called upon to administer.

May the vastly superior riches and glory of Baptism and the Lord's Supper as compared with the Old Testament circumcision and Passover serve as a stern warning against the ever-present tendency to become professional, cold or casual in our administration of Baptism and Holy Communion. May we by God's grace catch a fresh realization of the unspeakable love of a God who has given us these mysteries of the House of God, so that we administer then, with increased unction and fervor, and preach and teach with a new and more winsome persuasiveness about the importance and eternal value of these sacraments, without, of course, detracting in any way from the preciousness of the written and spoken Word.

I have purposely chosen to refer to these practical applications at this point, that way we can be aware of them as we develop our topic more fully and reach the conclusion which God's Word itself forces us to reach. Placing ourselves obediently under the persuasion of God's Word, let us now proceed to the question: "Was circumcision a sacrament according to the definition found in our Synodical Catechism?"

Circumcision is referred to as a rite commanded by God Himself in Genesis 17:10 where the Lord says to Abraham: "This is My covenant, which ye shall keep, between Me and you, and Thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised. And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt Me and you. And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every man child in your generations." Surely, these words state clearly that God Himself instituted circumcision. We know also from numerous New Testament texts that it remained in force as a divine institution until the Jesus abrogated or declared it as no longer binding for New Testament Christians.

In the second place, as seen from this same text, circumcision involved a "sacred act", that of the surgical removal of the foreskin; "sacred" because God Himself commanded that it be done. In this connection it may be mentioned that in circumcision the earthly or external element was the foreskin which was to be removed, even as in Baptism the external means is water, and in the Lord's Supper, bread and wine.

In the passage referred to before, Genesis 17:10, we find these words: "It (circumcision) shall be a token of the covenant betwixt Me and you". Here is God's offering of a promise in the form of a covenant between Himself and the Old Testament believers, a covenant *eternal* in its nature and its promises. Verse 7 of the same chapter states: "And I will establish My covenant between Me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an *everlasting* covenant, to be a God unto thee and to thy seed after thee." It must be remembered that when the Lord speaks of this "everlasting covenant," He makes very clear that the full Gospel promises of forgiveness of sins, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and eternal life in heaven are included, as is evident from the following Old Testament texts:

Lev. 26:12 "I will walk among you and will be your God, and ye shall be my people".

Jer. 31:33-34 "But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel.... I will be their God and they shall be my people...they shall know Me from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

These truths of the Gospel as revealed in the Old Testament, are also set forth in New Testament texts as the sum and substance of God's gracious will for all men. This will has remained the same, as indicated in such New Testament texts as Matt. 22:32: "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. God is not the God of the dead, but of the living," as well as in 2 Cor. 6:18: "And I will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty." Since the Gospel promise was attached to circumcision, this Old Testament sacrament was not in-efficient. For concerning that Gospel, whether taught in the Old or in the New Testament, it is always true what Paul says of it in Romans 1:16: "I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation to all who believe."

The efficacious nature of circumcision is also emphasized by the fact that in Genesis 17:7,10, God calls this circumcision in the flesh an eternal treaty between Himself and men. Since God makes such treaties only with regenerate men and never with the unregenerate, it is evident that circumcision was an efficacious medium of regeneration and saving faith. In Genesis 17:14 it is noted that the despisers of circumcision were to be cast out of the assembly of God. This implies that circumcision was a means by which the circumcised were taken into God's assembly and thus into the number of heirs to eternal life. We read there: "And the uncircumcised man child whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people: he hath broken My covenant." This closely parallels what our Savior said about Baptism in John 3:5: "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."

It was presupposed and understood that circumcision like Baptism was not held to bestow its blessings *ex opere operato* (that is, through a kind of merit arising from the piety of the recipient). Faith was necessary in order that the recipient could enjoy its blessings. In Romans 4, especially in verses 9 and 12, Paul makes a special point of the fact that circumcision itself, apart from faith, did not justify Abraham. His circumcision was "a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised," (v 11). So too the manner in which the spiritual blessings found in circumcision could be received, the Old Testament circumcision is the same as in the New Testament sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

III.

Finally, let us note the relationship between the Old Testament sacraments, Circumcision and the Passover, as compared with the New Testament sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. What are the differences between Circumcision and Baptism? No doubt the deepest difference is that circumcision, the external act consisting in the removal of the foreskin, concerned itself outwardly with the propagation of offspring. It was through the production of a seed blessing that the gracious covenant of God for man's salvation, at least in its preparatory form, was to be realized and attain its fulfillment. In this connection the remark of Clandish in the *Homiletic Commentary*, p. 358, is truly meaningful and significant: "Abraham is circumcised on the eve of his becoming the father of the Messiah - when the Holy Seed is to spring from him; and all the faithful are to be circumcised till the Holy Seed come."

This is one reason why the introductory seal of the covenant is superseded and another sacrament has been ordained in its place. Circumcision significantly pointed to the future birth of Christ, who was to be the seed of Abraham. The birth being accomplished, the propriety of circumcision as a sacrament ceases. Any corresponding rite now must not be prospective, but retrospective. It must not look forward to the beginning of the Messiah's work and the coming righteousness of God because in His birth He was shown to be His Holy One by His miraculous conception in the Virgin's womb. It must look back to the end of His work; back to his burial, and back to the declaration that He was the Son of God with power by His resurrection from the dead. Such a rite baptism is, as explained by the apostle when he says, "We are buried with Him by baptism into death; that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life," (Romans 6:4). Our Baptism signifies our engrafting into Christ, as not merely born, but buried and risen again. It refers not to His entrance into the world, but to His leaving it. It is the symbol, not merely of His pure and holy birth, but of the purifying and cleansing efficacy of His precious blood shed upon the cross and the power of His resurrection from the dead to His life and glory - both Circumcision and Baptism denote

the purging of the conscience from the dead works or from the condemnation and corruption of the old nature through the real and living union of the believer with Christ - with Christ about to come into the flesh, in the one case; with Christ already come in the other. While we must reject Fairbairn's presentation of the Reformed view of the sacraments, his comparison between the Old and New Testament sacraments is very well expressed and explained.

A second difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament sacraments is the distinction between the image and the reality. This is meant in this sense that the Passover Supper gave the meat of the Passover lamb as a symbol of Christ (who was to come); whereas the Lord's Supper offers and gives the true body and blood of Christ (who came). So also, Circumcision pointed forward to the Savior who was to accomplish the cleansing from sin offered and conveyed in this Old Testament sacrament. Baptism, offering and conveying the same forgiveness of sins, points at the Christ who was in the process of or had already offered Himself for the forgiveness of the sins of the world. This difference is referred to by implication in the words of the apostle in Hebrews 10:19ff: "Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which He has consecrated for us - and having an High Priest over the house of God; let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering, for He is faithful that promised."

A third significant difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament sacraments lay in the comparative amount of grace and truth respectively exhibited in and through them. It must be said that in the Old Testament sacraments and other typical ceremonial acts then in force, the Old and New Dispensations come nearest to each other. We might even say that the Old and New Dispensations stand formally upon the same level. Yet the amount of divine grace and truth shown and exhibited in the sacraments of both dispensations differ very much. This difference, however, is nothing more than a reflection of the difference in grace and truth manifested generally between the Old Testament and New Testament times in all other respects as well. This difference in the amount of light of divine grace manifested in no way detracts from the fact that also the Old Testament sacraments were true sacraments in the full sense of the word, as indicated in part III of this paper.

In his *Examen Concilii Tridentini, Pars Secunda, De Sacramentis*, Sectio II p. 236 ff Chemnitz presents in detail a comparison between the Old and New Testament sacraments. For the sake of brevity, we will quote only the following short excerpts: "The institution and use of the sacraments did not begin in the time of the New Testament; but the fathers in Old Testament times, even before the giving of the Law, had certain signs or sacraments of their own, divinely instituted for this use, which were seals of the righteousness of faith. (Romans 4.) When the doctrine of the *opus operatum* was fabricated, they (the scholastics) invented this distinction between the sacraments of each Testament, that through the former (Old Testament sacraments) grace was only signified, but not shown and conferred, even to those who received them in the proper way (rite); while through the latter (New Testament sacraments) grace is truly shown and conferred, even if there be no good interior motive in the recipient. Now this view directly point blank opposes Paul, who in Romans 4 expressly teaches and affirms that Circumcision did not justify Abraham *ex opere operato*, or through a kind of merit; but that it was a seal or assurance of the righteousness of faith, which has this property that it is the blessedness of that man to whom as to one who believes, not one who works, God according to His grace imputes righteousness without works, Romans 4." Gerhard, in his *Loci Theologici*, p. 175-208, also goes into this matter very thoroughly, reaching the same general conclusions.

Now, are there any teachings of doctrinal and practical importance to us as Christians and as Christian pastors which can be derived from our discussion of our assigned topic: "Was Circumcision a Sacrament?" As indicated earlier in this paper, there are divine truths of major importance for our faith and for the office of the Holy Ministry which even this topic, not dealing directly with our salvation, can teach us. For one thing, the very fact that the New Testament presents the doctrines of our salvation in Christ Jesus, who was born, suffered, died and rose again for our redemption in a much more complete and clear manner than does the Old Testament, ought to cause all believing Christians of New Testament times to appreciate ever more fully how

truly fortunate we are in this respect in living "*anno domini*" after Christ, instead of "B.C," before Christ. Since we are called upon by the Lord to administer the sacraments of the New Testament which are so much clearer, brighter, richer, and more glorious than those of the Old Testament, let us also be sure to bring home to our parishioners and to all who hear us what an abundance of divine grace are present and are conferred in Holy Baptism and in the Lord's Supper.

When we ourselves receive the Sacrament of the Altar (do we pastors and teachers receive it as often as we should?) let us do it with the full realization that we need this Sacrament more desperately than perhaps many of our members (if one can speak properly of one needing Holy Communion more than another believer). We often fail so miserably in our feeble efforts to fulfill and carry out faithfully the many duties of our sacred office. Let us also prepare ourselves for the reception of this Sacrament at least as fully as we encourage our members to do so. We need this preparation also because the danger of viewing it mechanically as an *ex opere operato* matter is at least as much present with us as it is with our members.

Finally, whenever we administer either Holy Baptism or the Lord's Supper, may it always be with the full realization that it is nothing less than the fulness of God's grace which has moved the Lord to call upon us—sinful and weak and insufficient though we be—to use our weak hands to bring to other poor sinners the limitless treasures of God's grace and forgiveness so unsearchable that even the angels desire to look into them (I Peter 1:12). What a high and holy privilege and responsibility has been given to us as ambassadors of Jesus Christ! May we often turn to God in prayer for guidance and help for carrying out the manifold duties of the highest and holiest calling that anyone can receive on this earth.

I thank Thee, Lord, for using me
For Thee to work and speak,
However trembling is the hand,
The voice however weak;
For those to whom through me
Thou hast some heavenly guidance given,
For some, it may be, saved from death
And some brought nearer heaven.
O honor higher, truer far
Than earthly fame could bring
Thus to be used, in work like this,
So long, by such a King!

("A Preacher's Prayer")

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