

# **Biblical Circumcision Today**

By Ralph Boersema

The Bible is one. God's history of salvation is one. The new covenant is new, but it is still part of the unity of God's work. Christ has come and accomplished his work of salvation. Gone are the bloody animal sacrifices, the temple of stone and gold, the levitical priesthood, and the prophetic order. We are now under the new covenant in the blood of Christ, but not under a new plan of salvation. We are part of an all new development in the history that started with the old covenants. All the essential elements of the old are fulfilled in the new. The old prepared for the new, and the old was already full of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone – Christ as presented in shadows and types. This unity of God's work is clearly seen in that when Jesus and the apostles preached from the Scriptures, they did so from the Old Testament. Christ himself showed how all the Old Testament Scriptures spoke of him: "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself." (Luke 24:27) We can see this unity also when we study the Bible's teaching about circumcision. Circumcision is not just a thing of the past. Outward circumcision with human hands has been done away, but still today we receive the circumcision of Christ and rejoice in it (Col. 2:11).

## **Circumcision Signifies Heart Commitment to God**

It seems that circumcision was known among other peoples, even at the time of Abram. Nevertheless, God chose it as the special sign of his covenant with Abraham and his descendants (Gen 17:10-14 - It was not the practice of the Philistines). The significance of the use of circumcision for Abraham and his male descendants was the significance of the covenant. In Genesis 17 that covenant referred to: 1) Abram walking blamelessly and God multiplying him (Abraham would become the father of a multitude of nations); 2) an everlasting covenant to be a God to Abraham and his seed after him; 3) God would give the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession. We see in this chapter that the covenant has both physical and spiritual dimensions. The physical is seen in the promise of the land and partly in the multiplication of the offspring. The spiritual is seen in the requirement to be blamelessly obedient, in the fathering of many nations (which is through faith in Christ, Rom 4:11), and especially in the Lord's promise to be Abraham's God and the God of his offspring. In the overall context of Israel's history, we see that the physical blessing is dependent on the spiritual keeping of the covenant. The Lord takes the productivity of the land and even the land itself away from his people when they turn away from him and it is always the believing among his people with whom God continues his covenant. The heart of the covenant is surely that God sets his undeserved love on his covenant people and they are to embrace him with a love that is with their whole heart, strength and mind (Deut 6). Circumcision, then, is a sign of heart commitment and not physical descent or being part of the Israelite nation. In Genesis 17 we see this expressed by what God teaches about Ishmael and Isaac. Ishmael is circumcised on the same day as Abraham. God makes his covenant with him as Abraham's son. God gives him significant blessings of princes and a great nation born from him (vs. 20). However, the covenant will not continue with Ishmael, but with Isaac

(vs. 21). The covenant is established with Abraham and all his seed, but in time, the unfaithful seed is removed from the covenant, receiving its curse and not its blessing.

Circumcision, then, has its full meaning only in full heart obedience. For the disobedient, their circumcision becomes uncircumcision (Rom 2:25,26). Further, this obedience is not an expression of human works righteousness. It is not at all the case that Israel was saved or blessed on the basis of human works of the law, while the New Testament church is saved by faith. Paul's discussion about salvation by faith rather than by works is not directed against the correct Old Testament teaching, but against the Jewish perversion of the Old Testament covenant. This is very clear from Genesis 15:6 where Abraham's faith is counted to him for righteousness. Also the sacrifices taught that God's people are sinners and need the sacrifice of Christ to remove their guilt. They are one with God, not through works of their own righteousness, but through the sacrifice provided by God. God wants blameless heart commitment and covenant obedience to the law is required all through the Old Testament. However, the people's obedience is not itself the righteousness that brings fellowship with God. It is obedience that God works in them by which they express their response to the covenant. But their true righteousness depends on one that is provided by the Lord himself, and, therefore, is a righteousness by faith.

### **God's People in the Old and New Covenants Are One**

The Old Testament people of the Lord and the New Testament people are one. In the same way as God was the God of his Old Testament people and they his people, so it is in the New Testament. Hebrews 11 and 12 encourage the New Testament people by teaching them to be mindful of the faith of their Old Testament fathers. They are clearly treated as one people of the Lord. Their forgiveness of sins and union with the Lord are through the same means. New birth, regeneration through the Holy Spirit, is not something new of the new covenant. When Jesus talked to Nicodemus in John 3 he was not introducing a contrast between the old covenant and the new. He was speaking about something the Jewish leaders should have known, but were not seeing at the time. Jesus spoke to Nicodemus in terms of what was necessary for a man at that time, still under the old covenant, and then also said, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things (John 3:10)?" He expected that Nicodemus could have known about the new birth. It was known to the old covenant people. David spoke of it in Psalm 51 and through that psalm, the teaching was constantly before the people of Israel as they sang it throughout a thousand years until the coming of Christ. When he confessed his sin, David prayed to the Lord to create in him a clean heart and to renew in him a right spirit (Ps 51:1-10). He clearly saw that his salvation was by grace alone as he called out for God's mercy in the first verses of the psalm. He was fully conscious that he was not saved by works of the law as he said, "For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise (Psalm 51:16-17)." The old covenant people understood that all the sacrificial laws were only signs – means by which God taught them about repentance and forgiveness through God's work. At the same time, they were means by which the people expressed their faith by obediently using these symbols – just as today we obediently use baptism and the Lord's Supper as expressions of faith. The heart of the covenant between God and his people (both in the

old and the new covenant) is, “I will be a God unto you and you will be my people.” To effect this relationship, God’s people are called to “repent and believe” – they are to have a pure heart-commitment to God, and that is also the meaning of circumcision.

### **Circumcision Signifies Putting Off the Sinful Nature**

Probably not for Abraham and Israel of old, but for us today, it is easier to see the significance of baptism than of circumcision. The water of baptism immediately brings to mind the idea of washing, cleansing, purification, since we normally wash with water. There is disagreement among Bible students about what is the symbolism expressed in circumcision. The idea of cutting seems to be involved, and then a “cutting off”. The old ways, the old commitments, the old heart are to be cut off. There are several passages that use circumcision to express repentance, conversion – a heart that has put off impure commitments.

One such passage is Leviticus 26:40-42:

But if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers in their treachery that they committed against me, and also in walking contrary to me, [41] so that I walked contrary to them and brought them into the land of their enemies — if then their uncircumcised heart is humbled and they make amends for their iniquity, [42] then I will remember my covenant with Jacob, and I will remember my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land.

Here the unbelieving heart is called an uncircumcised heart. Such a heart must humble itself before the Lord and confess its sin. Thus we see that circumcision is meant to refer to heart commitment – a heart that confesses its sin, humbles itself before God and makes amends, i.e., changes its ways. The same meaning is clear in the following verses:

Deut. 10:16:

Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.

Deut. 30:6:

And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.

Isaiah 52:1:

Awake, awake, put on your strength, O Zion; put on your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city; for there shall no more come into you the uncircumcised and the unclean. [Note the association of uncircumcised with unclean.]

Jeremiah 4:4:

Circumcise yourselves to the Lord; remove the foreskin of your hearts, O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem; lest my wrath go forth like fire, and burn with none to quench it, because of the evil of your deeds."

Jeremiah 6:10:

To whom shall I speak and give warning, that they may hear? Behold, their ears are uncircumcised, they cannot listen; behold, the word of the Lord is to them an object of scorn; they take no pleasure in it.

Jeremiah 9:25-26:

"Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will punish all those who are circumcised merely in the flesh— [26] Egypt, Judah, Edom, the sons of Ammon, Moab, and all who dwell in the desert who cut the corners of their hair, for all these nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart." [In the same way as many millions today are baptized only physically so there were many in Israel who were circumcised only in the flesh. These are punished by the Lord.]

Ezekiel 44:9:

"Thus says the Lord God: No foreigner, uncircumcised in heart and flesh, of all the foreigners who are among the people of Israel, shall enter my sanctuary.

Acts 7:51:

"You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you...."

Philip. 3:3:

For we are the real circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh—

From these and a number of other references, it is clear that God never intended his covenant with Israel, nor circumcision, the sign of that covenant, to signify mere physical descent or physical possession of the land. Circumcision was not just a sign of belonging to Israel as a nation. The Lord gave circumcision as a sign of purifying of the heart, just as baptism was never meant to merely signify outward membership in the church, but a true turning of man to God. It is as Paul says in Romans 2:28-29:

For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. [29] But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is

a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.

### **Physical Circumcision Put Away in the New Covenant**

The New Testament tells us of the putting away of circumcision. Acts 15 describes a discussion that arose in the church because some thought that circumcision should still be continued. It is important to see that the issue in this discussion was not just circumcision – it was circumcision, received as a sign of keeping the whole law of Moses (vs. 5). That it was not circumcision by itself is evident from the fact that well after this discussion and after Paul had often taught against circumcising believers, he still had Timothy circumcised in order to avoid a problem with the Jews (Acts 16:3).

At the council in Jerusalem in Acts 15, Peter gives his reason for opposing circumcision, saying, “Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear (Acts 15:10)?” The Mosaic system of law was designed to teach how man is always unable to remedy his sinfulness and it pointed man to Christ. After Christ fulfilled the law, keeping the old laws that pointed to him and his salvation no longer makes sense. If we now, after Christ’s atonement, continue to keep these laws, then we are rejecting them as pointers to Christ, and we make them into means of establishing our own works righteousness. But we cannot perfectly keep the law. That is a burden that no one has ever been able to bear. For this reason, all the laws that were shadows and types of Christ’s salvation work are now void. They are old and have passed away. When God gave circumcision to Abraham and his seed, it did not symbolize works righteousness, but if now, after Christ’s atonement on the cross, we apply circumcision, then we reject it as a pointer to Christ and then it comes to symbolize human works righteousness. Paul discusses this further in Romans and Galatians.

### **Circumcision, Seal of the Righteousness of Faith**

The true meaning of circumcision is clearly taught in Romans 4, a passage that blesses us by showing the importance of Abraham for us today. God made him the father of all who believe (vss. 11, 16). Both Old Testament and New Testament believers are united as descendants of Abraham because we are true children, not by physical descent, but by sharing in the same faith. Verses 11 and 12 clearly state that Abraham is the father of both those who believe without having been circumcised and of those who were circumcised if they believe. The Old Testament covenant promises were not received through physical descent or earned by keeping the law of Moses, but in the same way as we receive God’s grace today – through the righteousness of faith: “For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith (vs. 13).”

The main point of Paul’s discussion here is that Abraham was heir to God’s covenant by faith and not by works of the law:

What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? [2] For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. [3] For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."

Given that Abraham's righteousness was by faith and not by works, it is not at all surprising that the sign of circumcision which he received was a seal of that righteousness of faith. Paul says that clearly:

He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well.... (Romans 4:11)

Indeed, circumcision was always a sign that taught about faith and repentance, as we already saw from the references cited above. Nor should we think that this was different for Israel after they received the law of Moses. The various references about the need to circumcise the heart make this clear. In Romans 4, Paul also quotes David (who was under the law of Moses) to show that righteousness with God is by faith (vss. 6-9). All through history, after Adam's sin, the only righteousness with God has been through faith in God's work for us. Through faith, God enables us to put off the old man of sin and put on the new creation in Christ Jesus. The true meaning of circumcision is to depict that truth.

### **Baptism, Sign of the Circumcision of Christ**

We see this even more clearly in Col. 2:11-13:

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, [12] having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. [13] And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses....

The Bible makes a distinction between the sign circumcision, made by human hands, and the real circumcision which it symbolizes. The real circumcision is the circumcision of Christ which every true believer receives. It is the "putting off the body of the flesh" and being made alive from the death of sin: "And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses...."

The Colossians passage also shows another way in which circumcision is important for believers today. It shows that circumcision and baptism have the same meaning. It blends both together into one sentence to describe one reality: the dying of the sinful person and the birth of the new man. Baptism is also not just outward (Cf. 1 Peter 3:21), nor just

formal membership in the church. It symbolizes the circumcision of Christ, his transformation of the heart and person of those who are in him.

### **The Sign of Regeneration to be Given to Covenant Infants**

Because baptism symbolizes regeneration and conversion, many conclude that it should be given only to those who have already repented and believed. This view is understandable, but it does not have the support of Scripture when we take into account all that Scripture teaches. Since circumcision is not strictly a thing of the past and since it is not meant to symbolize works righteousness, but rather means the very same as baptism, we cannot ignore the Bible's teaching about circumcision when we seek to have a complete understanding about baptism.

It is not just baptism that presents us with the necessity of repentance and faith before it is to be administered. Abraham was circumcised only after he believed. In the Old Testament, circumcision was applied to adult men only after they confessed their faith. Also, the circumcised who were not true to God, to keep his ways, were cut off from the covenant – as is the case for the baptized who are unfaithful in the New Testament. Nevertheless, circumcision was not only done to men who had confessed their faith and made a heart commitment to the Lord. God commanded that all the males who belonged to the one with whom He was making his covenant were also to be circumcised. He was making his covenant with them as well – with the believer and his offspring (as is often emphasized in Scripture).

Whatever problem may arise in our minds with regard to what baptism can mean for a child that has not yet come to repentance and faith, the same problem exists for understanding circumcision in the old covenant. We must not turn things around and say, "Since circumcision was a seal of the righteousness Abraham had by faith, therefore his sons could not be circumcised before they confessed their faith." Rather, Scripture teaches us that circumcision was a seal of the righteousness of faith and it teaches us that infant males were also to be circumcised when eight days old. If we want to think scripturally, we must understand baptism in the same way. Baptism is the circumcision of Christ, so it is to be applied to those who believe and to their children – unless... unless the Bible expressly states that baptism is distinct from circumcision in this respect and children are not to be baptized. It does tell us that now women are to be baptized (Acts 8:12), but it does not say that children are not to be baptized.

The Bible does not expressly teach us that children are not to be baptized, to the contrary. It teaches that the kingdom of God belongs to infants (Luke 18:15,16), that we are called to repent and be baptized since the promise is to those who believe and their children (Acts 2:39), and households were baptized (Acts 10:2, 11:14; Acts 16:15; Acts 16:31-33; Acts 18:8; 1 Cor 1:16). Whether or not anyone can prove that there were little children baptized in these households, makes no difference. What we see, is that baptism is repeatedly associated with households, which shows that the Old Testament idea of God dealing not just with individuals, but with households, continues in the New. The Christian Jews, who naturally thought of circumcising their baby boys, would also naturally think of baptizing babies when they heard the apostles speak of baptizing

households. If this was not the will of God, he surely would have stated that children are not to be baptized. It is understandable that people think babies should not be baptized, if they look only at the passages that speak about baptism signifying regeneration, repentance and faith, but it is not understandable if all the Bible's teaching is taken into account. Although Rome perverted the teaching about baptism, the baptism of infants itself was not a Romish perversion. It came directly from Bible times.

It is important to remember that in covenant-making God takes the initiative. Circumcision and baptism are not so much the sign of a believer professing his faith (although that is not excluded), as the sign of God making his covenant with the believer and his seed. The emphasis is on what God seals to the believer and not on the believer's action in being baptized or circumcised. Baptism is into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is baptism into Christ. The emphasis is on what the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit do in and for us through Christ. And what he does for us he also wants signified to our children. He not only takes possession of us, but also of all that belongs to us, especially our children. We therefore praise him that our children are not unclean, but holy (1 Cor 7:14) and not like the world's children: "separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world." (Ephes. 2:12).

How wonderful! We share in the one faith, hope, and love that God has been giving to his people for some 6000 years. We too, by his grace, have our sinful hearts cleansed as they are circumcised through the circumcision of Christ. We are assured of this when this circumcision is symbolized and sealed to us in the washing of water in baptism.