

Why Christians Do not Circumcise but Do Baptize

Joshua 5:2-5:15

This passage is very odd to contemporary Americans: almost an entire chapter spent on two rituals, circumcision and Passover. Not only that, but the first contains a long digression, explaining why everyone had not yet been circumcised. Not only that, but repeatedly in the Old Testament we see that circumcision was surprising essential in the Jew's relationship with God. None of this makes much sense in a culture where rituals typically tend to be considered meaningless ('dead ritual'), or associated with pranks (as in fraternities), or with exclusive, secretive and bizarre groups (such as Free Masonry or the Knights of Columbus). So this week we look at the role of circumcision and Passover in Joshua 5 and in the Bible more widely, as well as their relevance for Christians.

Day 1: Genesis 17:1-14 Circumcision as a sign and seal of the covenant

God promised three blessings to Abraham in Genesis 12 (descendants, land, and to be a blessing to the nations). He reaffirmed that promise, making a covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15. Then a third time, in Genesis 17. This third time he requires a two-fold response from Abraham: (a) to live uprightly (17:2), and (b) to circumcise all his descendants, as well as all members of his household, for all generations (17:9-14). "Any uncircumcised male ... will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant" (17:14). These are the options: cut off the foreskin or be cut off from the people of God. Circumcision is a matter of life or death: circumcising seals the covenant and confirms the blessings of God; refusing to circumcise excludes from salvation.

Circumcision was not new to Abraham or unique to the Hebrews. Egyptians and various Semitic ethnic groups also performed circumcisions, though generally as a rite of passage around the time of puberty. Other ethnic groups, such as the Philistines, did not. For the Jews, circumcision was to be a ritual of religious identity as soon as feasible after birth (8th day, because the mother was considered 'unclean' from the process of childbirth for the first seven days) (Lev 12:1-4). Much like wedding rings, the circumcised organ serves as a 'sign', a constant visual reminder to both parties, of the commitment made. But more than that. Much like a wedding, the act of circumcision 'seals' a commitment to another. Unlike a wedding ring, circumcision cannot be removed. It symbolizes and establishes a permanent commitment to God. To make this commitment, the Jews visibly, physically, and permanently alter their bodies.

While circumcision is no longer required of God's people in the New Testament, the character of God has not changed. He still requires permanent, irrevocable commitment. As Jesus says, "No one who puts his hand to the plow

and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62).

Day 2: Exodus 4:1-26 Circumcision as a matter of life or death

Initially, this episode seems entirely incongruous. God has just recruited a reluctant Moses to deliver Israel from captivity in Egypt. He has promised to empower him to perform impressive miracles and to speak eloquently. Moses finally submits, says goodbye to his in-laws, and starts off to confront Pharaoh. Suddenly one night, mid-journey, God confronts Moses and threatens to kill ‘him’ (likely Moses’ son, Gershom, rather than Moses; see NIV footnote). Somehow, his wife Zipporah diagnoses the problem. Since Midianites also practiced circumcision, she knows what to do and removes the offense. So the Lord permits the child to live, and the crisis passes.

Why did God threaten to kill the child? This is exactly as he warned Abraham all the way back in Genesis 17: “Cut off the foreskin or be cut off from the people of God.” This admittedly seems bizarre to us, who almost invariably in matters of leisure or faith (!) are marked by informality and casual indifference. Pray, or let it slide. Read the Bible, or not. Arrive to church on time, or drift in late. Get baptized or don’t. Get married before living together, or not. Pursue purity, or live loosely. We invoke grace to cover our sloppiness, but our spiritual forbearers considered it one of the seven deadly sins (sloth). In any event, what matters is not how we view it, or how early Christians did, but how God does. And at least some things he takes very seriously: in this case, circumcision. We may dismiss it as ‘mere ritual’, but clearly God did not. He told Abraham – and he showed Moses – that he considered it deadly serious. While circumcision is no longer required of God’s people in the New Testament, the character of God has not changed. We do well to take seriously what he takes seriously.

Day 3: Deuteronomy 30:1-10 Circumcision as necessary but not sufficient

Necessary but not sufficient: logic makes much of the distinction between these two sorts of conditions. As in: gasoline is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for a car to run. Or a high score on the SAT is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition to gain entrance to an Ivy-League college. Or being a Bible nerd is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for landing a godly spouse. So Genesis 17 and Exodus 4 affirm that circumcision is a necessary condition for being numbered among the people of God. But over time, Israel slipped into thinking that circumcision was a sufficient condition.

Moses had anticipated the dangers of dead ritualism. In his last speech, he warns that disobedience will bring judgment and exile from their homeland (Deut 29:16-28). But if, in exile, they repent and return to the Lord, and obey

him with heart and soul, then he will rescue them, and return them to both land and prosperity. At this time, it is not merely they who will circumcise their baby boys, but God who will circumcise their adult hearts. With hearts circumcised, they will love and obey him, so that they live long and prosper (Deut 30:6-9). Still, we do well to note that the answer to 'dead ritualism' is not to dispense with the ritual; God's answer is revival with ritual.

The apostle Paul makes a similar point in his letter to the Romans: "A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit" (Rom 2:28-29). While, as we shall see, physical circumcision is no longer required of God's people in the New Testament, spiritual circumcision – circumcision of the heart – still is. And it expresses itself in faith and obedience.

Day 4: Joshua 5:1-12 Circumcision as a matter of life or death

Which brings us to Joshua 5. This passage is significant in two respects.

For one, the order of the two rituals: first, circumcision; then, Passover. Why the need to perform circumcision before celebrating Passover? Because God set up this requirement prior to the first Passover celebration. "No uncircumcised male may eat of it. The same law applies to the native-born and to the alien living among you" (Exod 12:48-49). Circumcision was the initiatory rite which introduced Jews to membership among the people of God. Passover was the continuing rite, celebrated each year by the people of God, to commemorate the central act of their salvation. First one enters the covenant through circumcision; then, one continues in the covenant through Passover.

For the other, the long digression explaining why circumcision was even necessary at this point: it turns out that the last generation in Egypt, the generation which wandered in the wilderness until they had all died off, they were circumcised, but, for whatever reason, they had never circumcised their own children. Now the next generation is about to celebrate the Passover. They are about to appeal for God's intervention to conquer the new land. All the while, because they are uncircumcised, they are under threat of being cut off from God. and prohibited from celebrating Passover. The long digression explains how this perilous condition arose – perilous not from enemies but from God – and how it was resolved. Circumcision is no 'mere ritual', neither is Passover. Both are fundamental expressions of commitment to God, essential for all who purport to be his people.

Both these Old Testament ordinances are replaced – neither simply disappears – in the New Testament. That is, God still has an initiatory rite, though it is no longer circumcision, but is now baptism. Similarly, God still has a

continuing rite, though it is no longer Passover, but is now communion. Each remains, though perhaps in a weaker sense, a matter of life or death (on baptism, see Acts 2:38; on communion, 1 Cor 11:27-32). And the order remains: first, baptism; then, circumcision. These are not 'mere formalities', but signs and seals of relationship with God.

Day 5: Acts 15:1-29 The end of circumcision but not the end of baptism

In the Great Commission, Jesus institutes baptism as the Christian rite of initiation: "Make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt 28:19). His followers did just that: on the day of Pentecost, as Peter preached, he urged his listeners to a decision, "Repent and be baptized ... for the forgiveness of sins" (Acts 2:38). Yet while they recognized that baptism was the appropriate rite of Christian initiation, they did not yet realize that it rendered circumcision redundant. When the first gentiles – Cornelius and his household – came to faith in Christ, the apostles baptized them (Acts 10:48). As more came to faith, the question inevitably arose: Do they need to be circumcised? Given God's directives to Abraham (Gen 17:12) and Moses (Exod 12:48), the answer seemed obvious: "Of course they must be circumcised. God told Abraham and Moses so!" In the end, after a long and contentious meeting of the early Church, the decision was "no". So Christians today need not be circumcised. Notably, though, the New Testament never applies a similar caveat to baptism. The latter is the command of Christ, and the invariable practice of the earliest Church. Christians need not be circumcised, but they are to be baptized.

Day 6: Galatians 5:2-11 What ultimately matters

Before the edict of Acts 15, the church of Galatia was unsettled by Jewish believers in Christ insisting that gentile Christians need to be circumcised if they are to be saved. Paul spends his entire letter to the Galatians opposing and refuting them. In the course of his argument, he explains what does matter: "In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love" (Gal 5:6). The absoluteness of this statement is subject to abuse if extended beyond what Paul intends in this context. Many other things do matter, including the rites of baptism, communion, holiness, and hope in Christ. But this much is true with respect to any rite, including baptism and communion: they are worthless without faith, and faith is worthless if it does not result in love.

So, in obedience to Christ, let all be baptized. In commemoration of Christ, let the baptized celebrate communion. And in keeping with our baptism and our participation in communion, let our faith express itself in love.