

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL QUARTERLY



Volume 88:1

January 2024

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Old Testament Circumcision: Sacramental?

Lowell S. Sorenson

Christians informed by the apostle Paul's Epistle to the Galatians generally view circumcision as a legal requirement of the Old Testament, an abolished ritual. Central to Paul's argument in Galatians is that Old Testament ceremonies, including but not limited to the rite of circumcision, do not have the power to elicit faith or to confer righteousness in God's sight (Gal 3:1–9). In Galatians, Paul clearly regards circumcision as a work that cannot bring justification. But what are we to make of the Old Testament injunction to circumcise and its meaning for the faith of the patriarchs and Israelites? Was circumcision merely a matter of legal or ritual observance, or was the gospel promise of Israel's covenant God central to this Old Testament rite? The fact that circumcision was commanded by God and required by the Torah (Lev 12:3) does not make Old Testament circumcision a mere ritual ordinance. Baptism is commanded in the New Testament, and yet this sacrament also concerns the promise of God's forgiveness.

Circumcision was important in the Old Testament economy of God's grace. Failing to deal adequately with circumcision's sacramental character may result in a less robust basis for our doctrine of the New Testament sacraments, specifically Baptism. The thesis of this essay is that circumcision is in fact central to the gospel content of the Torah; it was an Old Testament sacramental seal of the righteousness that is by faith (Rom 4:11). Indeed, we may go astray if circumcision is viewed only through the lens of Paul's polemic in Galatians. Circumcision became an abolished rite only through Christ's fulfillment of the Old Testament sacraments. Baptism, commanded by God for his church, is the New Testament rite replacing circumcision as the sacrament of initiation into the family of God.

I. Circumcision and the New Perspective on Paul

Contrary to the classic Protestant understanding of Galatians, the New Perspective on Paul sees the problem of the Judaizers not in terms of soteriology (i.e., the question of how humans are saved from sin, death, and hell), but rather in terms of how Gentiles are given inclusion in the church apart from Jewish ceremonies. It is therefore imperative for us to answer this question: Is Paul in Galatians dealing with the law in a comprehensive manner in terms of all works that are done in an attempt to merit God's favor, or is Paul simply concerned with Jewish ceremonies that were

inhibiting the full inclusion of Gentiles in God's mission? In other words, were Paul's "works of law" simply religious "boundary markers" between Jew and Gentile in the first century?¹

Krister Stendahl is credited with laying the foundation for the New Perspective on Paul, but he was really following the path of Albert Schweitzer in questioning the centrality of justification by faith, that doctrine Lutherans have proclaimed as the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*.² Surely Solomon was right: "There is nothing new under the sun" (Eccl 1:9).³ Centuries ago, John Calvin wrote of "the error, or rather the delusion, of those who imagine that Paul is depriving only ceremonies of the power to justify." This approach to Paul is refuted, maintained Calvin, "since Paul expressly lays the blame on ourselves, and declares that he finds no fault in the doctrine of the Law."⁴ Paul's eschatological approach to justification makes it clear that he was not thinking merely of Gentile inclusion in the church. At the judgment, neither Jews nor Gentiles may claim righteousness as doers of the will of God (Rom 1:18–3:20).⁵ Ernst Käsemann was correct in arguing that the Pauline doctrine of justification must not be reduced to a matter of the equality of Jews and Gentiles in the church, for "God's Basileia is the content of the Pauline doctrine of justification."⁶ "This justification," avers Peter Stuhlmacher, "is concerned with the survival of Jews and Gentiles in front of God's throne of judgment at the end of time."⁷ The New Perspective on Paul simply cannot do justice to justification apart from works as a soteriological or eschatological category in the Bible. This is important for our topic

¹ Peter Stuhlmacher, *Revisiting Paul's Doctrine of Justification: A Challenge to the New Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 44.

² On justification by faith as the "article by which the church stands or falls," see Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Psalms of Degrees* (1532–33/1540), in *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* [Schriften], 73 vols. (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–2009), 40/3:351 (hereafter cited as WA); *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–), vol. 66 (forthcoming) (hereafter cited as AE); cf. *Commentary on Psalm 117* (1530), AE 14:37; *Disputation for Palladius and Tilemann: On the Works of the Law and of Grace* (1537), WA 39/1:205.2–5 (AE 72).—Ed.

³ Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations are from the ESV.

⁴ John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, trans. Ross Mackenzie, eds. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, Calvin's New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 158–159.

⁵ Stuhlmacher, *Revisiting Paul's Doctrine of Justification*, 42.

⁶ Ernst Käsemann, "Rechtfertigung und Heilsgeschichte im Römerbrief," in *Paulinische Perspektiven* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1969), 133 (108–39); see Stuhlmacher, *Revisiting Paul's Doctrine of Justification*, 52.

⁷ Stuhlmacher, *Revisiting Paul's Doctrine of Justification*, 10.

of circumcision. Paul not only deprives circumcision and other Old Testament ceremonies of the power to justify, but also rejects all legal observance for the purpose of attaining salvation (Rom 3:28; Gal 2:21; Eph 2:8–9; Titus 3:5).

II. The Sacrament of Circumcision and Its Connection with Baptism

Insisting on circumcision for the New Testament church is contrary to the gospel and is an attack on the very heart of justification by faith alone; yet in the Old Testament, circumcision was indeed connected with the righteousness of faith for the people of God. Abraham, who was credited with righteousness through faith (Gen 15:6), was given by God a sacramental “seal of the righteousness of faith” in his circumcision (Rom 4:11, my translation). One discovers in Genesis 17 that the circumcision God enjoined upon Abraham and his descendants has all the characteristics that Lutherans have typically used in defining the sacramental nature of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper: the institution of God, a visible element, and the promise of God’s grace.⁸

The institution of the sacrament of circumcision is clear, for God says: “This is my covenant [בְּרִיתִי], which you shall keep, between me and you, and your seed after you; every male child among you shall be circumcised” (Gen 17:10, my translation). The sacrament has a visible sign: “And you shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin” (Gen 17:11, my translation). Circumcision also has the promise of grace attached: “It shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you” (Gen 17:11). This is stated more fully in the seventh verse of the same chapter: “And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your seed after you in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto you and to your seed after you” (my translation).⁹ It simply will not do to relegate circumcision to the category of legal demand in opposition to the gospel when we seek to understand circumcision in the economy of Old Testament salvation history. J. T. Mueller helpfully articulated the gospel content of circumcision: “To the act of circumcision was attached the divine promise of grace: ‘I will be their God,’ Gen. 17, 8, that is, their gracious God, who out of pure love freely forgives sin. This is evident from the fact that in the New Testament St. Paul calls the sign of circumcision ‘a seal of the righteousness of faith,’ Rom. 4, 11.”¹⁰ Lest someone be inclined to view circumcision simply as an empty

⁸ F. R. Zucker, “Circumcision and Baptism,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 15, no. 4 (1944): 247.

⁹ Zucker, “Circumcision and Baptism,” 248. That circumcision is referred to in Scripture as an “everlasting covenant” (לְבְרִית עוֹלָם) does not mean that it is without end in an absolute sense. Eternity may also refer to a “long, indefinite period of time.” See Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 3 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950–1953), 1:445–446.

¹⁰ John Theodore Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), 466.

token in no way truly connected with the fulfillment of the promises of God, Genesis 17 clearly teaches that those who refused circumcision broke the covenant of YHWH; they were to be “cut off from his people” (Gen 17:14). Meredith Kline, the late Reformed New Testament scholar, argued that the nature of this mark itself pointed to the danger of being “cut off” from the covenant relationship with YHWH. Physical circumcision thus pointed beyond itself to the consecration or circumcision of the heart (Jer 4:4).¹¹ Circumcision is a “searing” of the electing God “into the flesh of Israel.”¹²

The apostle Paul instructs us that Abraham was righteous by faith before he received the covenant sign of circumcision (Rom 4:9–12). However, this does not make circumcision an empty ritual of symbolic orientation. The apostle clearly teaches in Romans 4 that Abraham received circumcision as a “seal of the righteousness of faith” (4:11, my translation). The appositional genitive in Romans 4:11, *σημεῖον περιτομῆς*, “circumcision-sign,” is amplified by the noun, *σφραγίδα*, a “seal.” Circumcision is a seal attesting Abraham’s righteousness by faith. Seals speak to the genuine nature of a document; the Christian’s salvation is attested by the seal of the Holy Spirit (Eph 1:13; 4:30).¹³ Romans 4:11 involves an objective genitive: “a seal of the righteousness of faith” (my translation). “Circumcision seals Abraham’s righteousness to him. He has not only this righteousness but also this seal stamped upon it, this attestation to its genuineness, this attestation from God to him, for he ‘received’ it from God.”¹⁴ Whereas in Galatians circumcision is a law that is not binding on the Christian, in Romans 4 circumcision deals with the gospel content of the Old Testament; circumcision was nothing less than the seal of that righteousness that Abraham received by faith. “Abraham believed the LORD and it was credited [reckoned] to him as righteousness” (Gen 15:6, my translation).

Would this seal of the righteousness of faith have any value for females, considering the mark was placed on the male body? A sacrament that applies to only one gender does indeed seem strange to contemporary readers. Victor Hamilton has

¹¹ Meredith G. Kline, *By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 43.

¹² Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: God in the People Israel* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1983; repr., San Francisco: Harper, 1989), 67.

¹³ R. C. H. Lenski, *Interpretation of the New Testament*, 12 vols. (Columbus, OH: Wartburg, 1932–1946; repr. as *Commentary on the New Testament*, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), 6:302.

¹⁴ Lenski, *Interpretation*, 6:303.

made the intriguing suggestion that only males needed circumcision because husband and wife become “one flesh” in marriage (Gen 2:24).¹⁵ The covenant sign applied to wives and daughters through their fathers and husbands.¹⁶ Women married husbands who bore the sacramental sign; daughters were born into families in which the fathers bore the mark. Circumcision reminded God’s people, both male and female, that the hope of Israel was based on that singular seed of Abraham who would come to defeat the devil (Gen 3:15; Gal 3:16). The birth and circumcision of Christ are thus the fulfillment of Abraham’s circumcision. The promise of the Messiah is the distinctive significance of this mark that is so tied to human reproduction and progeny.¹⁷ What better outward sign could there have been—one that was appreciated by both sexes—that served as a reminder that in Abraham all the families of the earth would be blessed through the coming of the Savior into the world as the culmination of that line that stretches from the ancient patriarchs to the Redeemer himself?

In Genesis, Abraham is the first to receive this mark at the command of God; furthermore, the Torah commanded this sacrament be administered to infants, who entered the covenant of circumcision on the eighth day after birth (Gen 17:12; Lev 12:3). It is somewhat analogous to the situation in the Book of Acts in which adults came to faith through the preaching and teaching of the gospel and then received the sacrament of Baptism; yet these very same converts brought the sacrament of Baptism to their households (Acts 11:14; 16:15, 33). The early Christian households would certainly have included families with children. The established church still follows this pattern: infants are baptized as adult believers bring the Christian faith to their families. Joachim Jeremias concludes that the language of primitive Christian Baptism, in particular the New Testament οἶκος formula, was taken from Old Testament cultic language, in particular the ritual language related to circumcision.¹⁸ With reference to the household formulas in the Book of Acts and in 1 Corinthians, Jeremias notes that the word οἶκος meant as much as ὅλος ὁ οἶκος, πᾶς ὁ οἶκος (“the whole house”) and οἱ αὐτοῦ ἅπαντες (“all of his”). Thus, no members of the οἶκος were excluded, and children were certainly included in this term.¹⁹

¹⁵ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 62–64.

¹⁶ Albertus Pieters made a similar observation in his book *The Seed of Abraham: A Biblical Study of Israel, the Church, and the Jew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 17.

¹⁷ John Goldingay suggests that because men are inclined to fall into sexual sin—even men like David and Solomon—circumcision impresses upon males the need for discipline with regard to their sexuality. See “The Significance of Circumcision,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 25, no. 88 (2000): 16.

¹⁸ Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*, trans. David Cairns (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), 21.

¹⁹ Jeremias, *Infant Baptism*, 20.

Circumcision was rightly received by all Israelite male infants, but other males who had not received the mark needed it in order to have admission to the Old Testament community. In terms of the order of word and sacrament as it applies to adults and children, Martin Chemnitz explains,

Therefore, just as in the Old Testament both was [*sic*] commanded, to teach and to circumcise, and adults were first taught then circumcised (Gn 17), but infants were circumcised first (Gn 17:12) and taught later, at a time when they were old enough to understand and ask questions (Dt 6:20; Ex 12:26), so also does the whole ministry of the New Testament consist in the Word and the Sacraments. And when adults are first converted, teaching precedes and Baptism follows. Acts 2:41; 8:12, 35–38; 10:44–48. And regarding the infants of Christians, the same order of teaching and baptizing is observed as was of old followed in the Old Testament in teaching and circumcising. For what circumcision was in the Old Testament, the same is now Baptism in the New Testament. Cl 2:11–12. Thus John, writing to children of believers, that they might know the heavenly Father, gives [them] this comfort first, that they have forgiveness of sins through His name, 1 Jn 2:12–13; this applies to them, since they are baptized in the name of Christ for the remission of sins, Acts 2:38; for that promise pertains also to little children, Acts 2:39; Is. 49:22.²⁰

III. Circumcision and Sacrifice

The Old Testament sacrament of circumcision was connected with the shedding of blood and sacrifice. In this respect, circumcision, like so many Old Testament realities, is an adumbration of Christ's shedding of blood for the life of the world, as even the Savior's circumcision attests (Luke 2:21). With Christ's circumcision, the first few drops of blood were shed for the redemption of humankind.

Circumcision's relationship to sacrifice and the shedding of blood is evident in the most mysterious circumcision passage of all in the Hebrew Bible: the incident in which Zipporah circumcises the son of Moses (Exod 4:24–26). The New King James Version translates the text as follows: "And it came to pass on the way, at the encampment, that the LORD met him and sought to kill him. Then Zipporah took a sharp stone and cut off the foreskin of her son and cast it at Moses' feet, and said, 'Surely you are a husband of blood to me!' So He let him go. Then she said, 'You are a husband of blood!'—because of the circumcision." The questions needing to be asked of this passage might seem to outweigh anything of clear dogmatic significance. The lack of antecedents in the Hebrew text makes it hard to know which

²⁰ Martin Chemnitz, *Ministry, Word, and Sacraments: An Enchiridion*, trans. Luther Poellot (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), 118.

agents are being described. Was God seeking to kill Moses for failing to circumcise his son, or was God seeking to kill the son because of his lack of circumcision? What is meant by “husband of blood” or “blood-bridegroom”? Whose “feet” are being touched by Zipporah? Is “feet” being used euphemistically for genitalia?

The problems of the passage have been resolved in ways too numerous to be listed in this essay, although some general remarks are in order. There is no proof for the Wellhausen thesis that this episode explains how a rite usually associated with puberty became necessary for children in Israel. According to this interpretation, it was Moses who was uncircumcised and Zipporah circumcises her son as a substitute, thus rendering child circumcision the normative practice.²¹ The theory of H. Kosmala posits that the text is dealing with a case in which a Midianite deity wanted to claim Moses’ son, but Zipporah saved her child by performing the circumcision and designating the child, in Arabic, the “blood-circumcised one.” But the proof is lacking for such a Midianite tradition or for the transmission of the Arabic root in the manner suggested by Kosmala.²² Another purely speculative suggestion is that the episode represents a woman threatened with the prospect of *droit du seigneur*.²³ There is even a Freudian analysis of this text that interprets it through the lens of the Oedipus complex, with a symbolical castration carried out by a son-hating mother!²⁴ Against all such speculation, Brevard Childs rightly affirmed the wisdom and common sense of the precritical understanding of the text.²⁵ However, even Childs maintained that the final collector of the material could not have understood the enigma in Zipporah’s words—“blood-bridegroom”—or whether these words refer to Moses or his son.²⁶ Rudolf Meyer asserts that the developed stage of the narrative we find in the Hebrew Bible, which Meyer attributes to the J source, involves the redemption of the child when his mother circumcises him and offers the “apotropaic cry”: “A bridegroom of blood art thou to me!”²⁷

The precritical consensus, from both ancient Jewish sources (Targums and Midrashim) as well as Jewish medieval and Christian commentaries, is that Moses had failed to circumcise his son by the eighth day as God had prescribed. This is the

²¹ Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 97.

²² Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 97–98.

²³ B. Embry, “The Endangerment of Moses: Towards a New Reading of Exodus 4:24–26,” *Vetus Testamentum* 60, no. 2 (2010): 181.

²⁴ Andrew Peto, “The Development of Ethical Monotheism,” *Psychoanalytical Study of Society* 1 (1960): 311–376.

²⁵ Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 101.

²⁶ Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 104.

²⁷ Rudolf Meyer, “περιτέμνω,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–1976), 6:76.

approach taken also by Martin Chemnitz.²⁸ It was Moses himself who was spared from death through the blood of the circumcision of his son.²⁹ Zipporah circumcised the boy and touched Moses' feet³⁰ with the smeared blood. Keil and Delitzsch suggest that Moses failed to circumcise his son because of his Midianite wife's revulsion to the procedure.³¹ At any rate, the most natural reading of the text is that Moses was the bloody husband; Moses was touched with the blood of Gershom's circumcision and was spared from death. Moses was purchased anew as a husband by the blood of his son.³² Thus, the episode teaches us that circumcision entailed a covenant relationship with God through the shedding of blood, a shedding ultimately connected with being espoused to YHWH, who stands as the bridegroom of his Old Testament church.³³

John Goldingay connects the need for Moses' cleansing with the bloodguilt incurred by Moses by his killing of the Egyptian. Goldingay argues that the application of circumcision blood points to expiation.³⁴ But perhaps the more immediate reason for God to pursue Moses was that he had failed to circumcise Gershom as was prescribed by the Torah. G. Stöckhardt follows this interpretation and even uses Moses' failure to circumcise his son as a warning to those who would despise the grace of Baptism, the parallel sacrament to Old Testament circumcision: "The sign of the New Testament covenant is baptism, and he who despises baptism, despises the covenant and grace of God, and excludes himself from life and salvation. With this historical account our God has shown us that it is not a trifle with Him when His covenant of grace in His sacraments are delayed and despised."³⁵

In the Book of Joshua, we discover that circumcision had not been carried out on the males who were born during the time in the desert on the journey to the

²⁸ Chemnitz, *Ministry, Word, and Sacraments*, 119.

²⁹ Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 95–96.

³⁰ Or genitals? See Judg 3:24; 1 Sam 24:3; Ezek 16:25.

³¹ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, trans. James Martin et al., 25 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1857–1878; repr., 10 vols., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 1:298. Citations refer to the reprinted volumes.

³² Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 1:299.

³³ Patrick Fairbairn, *The Typology of Scripture: Viewed in Connection with the Entire Scheme of the Divine Dispensations*, 3rd ed., vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Martien, 1859), 272.

³⁴ He directs the reader to the LXX and the Targum for proof. Goldingay, "The Significance of Circumcision," 10–11; see also W. H. Propp, "That Bloody Bridegroom," *Vetus Testamentum* 43 (1993): 501–506; Geza Vermes, "Baptism and Jewish Exegesis," *New Testament Studies* 4 (1957–1958): 308–319; and Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1993), 50–52.

³⁵ Georg Stöckhardt, *The Biblical History of the Old Testament* (Swanville, MN: Wisdom for Today, 1969), 74.

Promised Land.³⁶ While many possible reasons have been suggested for this failure to administer the sacrament, the most compelling suggestion simply points to Israel's apostasy from the Lord's word. While the fathers died in the wilderness without experiencing the Promised Land, the sons were later consecrated to God before their entry into Canaan.³⁷ Thus, Joshua was directed to use flint knives and circumcise the Israelites at Gibeath Haaraloth ("hill of foreskins"). The "reproach of Egypt" was rolled away by God only once Israel was consecrated to YHWH in the Promised Land by rightly receiving the sacrament of circumcision (Josh 5:1–9). The "reproach" removed by God is the Egyptian assertion and taunt that YHWH had brought the people out of Egypt only to kill them in the desert (Exod 32:12; Num 14:13–16; Deut 9:28); this "reproach" plagued Israel in her restless wilderness wandering.³⁸ While Joshua 5:2 uses the words שְׁנִיִּת ("the second") and וְשׁוּב ("and again"), this means not that men were re-circumcised but rather that the nation as a whole needed to be reconsecrated to YHWH, especially because the males under forty had not rightly received the sacrament in the desert.³⁹

IV. A Controversial Rite

The basic verb for "circumcise" in the Hebrew Bible is מוּל, meaning "to cut off." It is used to refer not only to the removal of the foreskin but also cutting in a more general sense. In Psalm 58:8, the verb is found in the Hithpael Imperfect (יִתְמַלְּלֵי) to refer to the blunting of arrows. In Psalm 118:10–11, it refers to the cutting off (or annihilation) of enemies.⁴⁰ The Greek verb for circumcision is περιτέμνω, which literally means "to cut around."⁴¹

³⁶ The Old Greek text implies that circumcision had not been properly carried out in Egypt, but the Masoretic Text assures the reader that the failure in sacramental practice concerns the time of the wilderness journey. See Goldingay, "The Significance of Circumcision," 5.

³⁷ Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 2:40.

³⁸ Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 2:43.

³⁹ For another argument, see J. M. Sasson, "Circumcision in the Ancient Near East," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 85 (1966): 473–76. Sasson argues that a more thoroughgoing operation is in view in Josh 5. Rather than the Egyptian procedure of slitting the foreskin, Sasson maintains that the "second circumcision" of Josh 5 involved the total removal of the foreskin.

⁴⁰ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 557–558.

⁴¹ Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Christian Literature*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979), 652. On the surgical practice, see Erich Isaac, "Circumcision as a Covenant Rite," *Anthropos* 59, no. 3/4 (1964): 453. Isaac refers to J. Hastings, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. 3 (New York: Scribner, 1951), 660; see also Charles Weiss, "Worldwide Survey of the Current Practice of Milah (Ritual Circumcision)," *Jewish Social Studies* 24, no. 1 (1962): 31.

Circumcision has not been without controversy in the history of its practice. In the Hellenistic context, some Jewish men even sought to reverse their circumcisions (see 1 Macc 1:15).⁴² Conflicts of religion under Antiochus IV (215–164 BC) resulted in a ban placed on the practice of circumcision. In fact, mothers who had their children circumcised were subject to execution along with their family members and those who performed the operations. The babies receiving the sacrament were killed by being hanged around their mothers' necks. In this context, circumcision became a clear mark of confession for which the true believer was willing to lay down his or her life (1 Macc 1:60–64).⁴³

Further conflict came during the period after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Jews found themselves at odds with Roman imperial power under Hadrian (117–138), who banned circumcision throughout the empire. This was perhaps one of the contributing factors that led to the famous Jewish rebellion known as the Bar Kokhba Revolt. Both Greeks and Romans regarded circumcision as “indecorous” and “perverse.” It was compared to castration by Hadrian and was punishable as murder.⁴⁴ Even after the suppression of the Bar Kokhba Revolt, the ban on circumcision was enforced. The Jews found liberty in regard to circumcision with the edict of toleration issued by Antoninus Pius in AD 138.⁴⁵

The conflict with Hellenism reveals how seriously the Jewish leadership and Jewish believers were regarding the importance of circumcision as a critical ritual of their faith. As Rudolf Meyer noted,

The theological significance of circumcision is that it is a precondition, sign and seal of participation in the covenant which God made with Abraham. He who invalidates this sign by ἐπισπασμός breaks the covenant and loses the salvation mediated thereby.⁴⁶ If he is to be accepted again, he must submit afresh to circumcision. Circumcision is also a confessional sign for whose sake Israel accepted bloody martyrdom.⁴⁷ The blessing which accrues to Israel therefrom is as follows: Because of it God undertook to protect His people and gave them the land of Israel. The life-giving power of circumcision is everywhere at work

⁴² On methods of reversing circumcision in the ancient world, see Robert Hall, “Epispasm: Circumcision in Reverse,” *Bible Review* 8, no. 4 (1992): 54.

⁴³ Meyer, “περιτέμνω,” 77.

⁴⁴ Meyer, “περιτέμνω,” 78–80.

⁴⁵ Meyer, “περιτέμνω,” 80.

⁴⁶ Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, 6 vols. (Munich: Beck, 1922–1961), 4/1:34, cited in Meyer, “περιτέμνω,” 81.

⁴⁷ Strack and Billerbeck, *Kommentar*, 4/1:37–38, cited in Meyer, “περιτέμνω,” 81.

in the universe and in history. In the coming aeon Israel will be redeemed from Gehinnom in virtue of it, and will participate in the joys of the Messianic age.⁴⁸

V. Circumcision and Lutheran Theology

For Lutheran theology, circumcision is not simply an outdated legal requirement of the Old Testament. It belongs to the gospel of the Old Testament, for it was a true means of grace, “offering and conveying the forgiveness of sins.”⁴⁹ Yet this does not mean that circumcision is equivalent to New Testament Baptism. Lutheran dogmatic theology teaches the superiority of the New Testament sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper in comparison to circumcision and Passover. Baptism is superior to circumcision in that it belongs to the era of the fulfillment of God’s promises to Abraham and ancient Israel. New Testament Baptism, moreover, has been instituted for “all nations” and is to be administered for the purpose of making disciples unto the end of the age (Matt 28:19–20). Circumcision was applied only to boys and men, but Baptism is received by both sexes. Martin Chemnitz stresses the value of circumcision as a sacrament while also affirming the superiority of Baptism, which supersedes the old sacrament:

Baptism of the New Testament succeeded circumcision of the Old Testament, Cl 2:11–12. Therefore, just as in the Old Testament the covenant of divine grace was applied and sealed through circumcision not only to adults but also to infants, Gn 17:10, 12, so also now in the New Testament that grace should rightly be applied and confirmed as by a seal both to infants as well as adults through Baptism, since the grace of God was made not less but rather more abundant and richer in the New Testament.⁵⁰

The caution is certainly in order against a semi-Marcionite understanding of Old Testament sacramental theology wherein the Old Testament sacraments are received as “mere signs” while the New Testament sacraments are considered to be “effective signs.”⁵¹ The Lutheran fathers, in particular Quenstedt, insisted that the Old Testament sacraments, while not demonstrating the grace of Christ as clearly, fully, perfectly, or abundantly as those of the New Testament, were still God’s means to present and convey grace.⁵² Luther taught that it is a mistake to think that the

⁴⁸ Meyer, “περιτέμνω,” 80–81. At the conclusion of this paragraph, Meyer again cites Strack and Billerbeck, *Kommentar*, 4/1:38–40.

⁴⁹ Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics*, 466.

⁵⁰ Chemnitz, *Ministry, Word, and Sacraments*, 117.

⁵¹ Peter J. Leithart, “Old Covenant and New in Sacramental Theology New and Old,” *Pro Ecclesia* 14, no. 2 (2005): 177.

⁵² Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, rev. 3rd ed., trans. Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 536.

sacraments of the New Testament differ from those of the Old in terms of their force and meaning as divinely appointed means of grace. The same function is to be found in both Testaments of Scripture.⁵³ Writing of the new and old sacraments, the reformer maintained the following:

What both signify is equally efficacious, for the same God who now saves us through Baptism and the Lord's Supper saved Abel through his sacrifice, Noah by means of the rainbow, Abraham by circumcision, and all the others through His appointed signs. . . . But our signs and the signs of the patriarchs have a Word of promise attached which calls for faith and cannot be fulfilled by any other work. Therefore they are signs or Sacraments of justification, for they are Sacraments of justifying faith and not of a work to be performed. Therefore their entire efficacy consists in faith itself, not in the doing of a work; for whoever believes them fulfills them even if he performs no work at all.⁵⁴

On the basis of the Old Testament's fulfillment in Christ, Christians are not bound to circumcision and other sacraments or ceremonial laws of the Old Testament. Such matters have been brought to completion and abrogated by Christ.⁵⁵ Christ's fulfillment of the law has made circumcision an indifferent ceremony for Christians.⁵⁶ However, such an indifferent matter ceases to be truly indifferent when the enemies of the gospel seek to enforce it as a matter of righteousness in God's sight. This was the error of the Judaizers with whom Paul contended in the Epistle to the Galatians. In such cases, the Christian is duty bound to resist that which is being imposed, for the very truth of the gospel is at stake (Gal 2:4–5; 5:1; FC SD X 12–13).

Yet the Lutheran Confessions also maintain that for Abraham, who received circumcision after his justification (Rom 4:9–22), circumcision was a matter not of the law but of the gospel. Abraham was justified by faith, but “circumcision was added to give him a sign written in his body by which he might be reminded and grow in faith, and through this witness testify to his faith before others and induce them to believe” (Ap IV 201).⁵⁷ According to Francis Pieper, circumcision was given

⁵³ Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics*, 467.

⁵⁴ Ewald Plass, comp. and trans., *What Luther Says: A Practical In-Home Anthology for the Active Christian* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 1236 (Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* [1520], AE 36:65–66).

⁵⁵ Chemnitz, *Ministry, Word, and Sacraments*, 49.

⁵⁶ Chemnitz, *Ministry, Word, and Sacraments*, 52.

⁵⁷ Theodore Tappert, ed. and trans., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 134.

to Abraham as a “sign presented for exercising faith.”⁵⁸ Moreover, at the divine institution of circumcision, God held forth the promise of the resurrection of the body.⁵⁹

In his *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Martin Luther stresses that circumcision was nothing less than a mark of Abraham’s justification by faith.⁶⁰ While the word of God is the testament, God has given signs as sacraments.⁶¹ Testament and sacrament belong together. Luther further insists that the Roman church had erred in regard to the sacraments by converting them into good works and teaching the fiction of *opus operatum*.⁶² The Apology asserts that the sacraments do not confer grace *ex opere operato*; rather, faith receives the promises to which the sacraments are signs (Ap XIII 18–20).⁶³ Luther teaches that the mass is not a good work that can be presented to God on behalf of oneself or others; rather, the mass involves the promise of God whereby the testament (word) has been sealed with the sacrament (sign).⁶⁴

That God works sacramentally is not an innovation of the New Testament era. God has throughout history attached his word to certain visible means with the promise of his grace. The Old Testament signs were just as effective as the New Testament signs, yet the New Testament signs surpass the Old even as the fulfillment of prophecy surpasses and completes prophecy. The God who saved Abraham by circumcision saves us today by Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Thus Martin Chemnitz wrote of God’s sacramental dealings with his creation throughout the history of the world:

God, in all ages of the world, by giving a certain Word, revealed His will concerning the mystery of redemption to the human race, concerning the gratuitous reconciliation and acceptance of believers to life eternal through faith, because of the sacrifice of His Son as Mediator. He also added to the Word, by His own divine institution, certain external signs, by which to seal and confirm more clearly the promise of righteousness by faith. The institution and use of the Sacraments did not, therefore, first begin in the time of the New Testament; but the fathers in the time of the Old Testament, even before the publication of the Law, had their certain signs or Sacraments divinely instituted for this use, which were the seals of the righteousness of faith. Rom. 4. But though it is the same God, the same Mediator, the same grace, righteousness, promise, faith,

⁵⁸ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 3:114.

⁵⁹ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 3:535.

⁶⁰ Luther, *Babylonian Captivity*, AE 36:44.

⁶¹ Luther, *Babylonian Captivity*, AE 36:44.

⁶² Luther, *Babylonian Captivity*, AE 36:37, 44, 47.

⁶³ Tappert, *The Book of Concord*, 213.

⁶⁴ Luther, *Babylonian Captivity*, AE 36:47.

salvation, etc., yet those external signs or seals are sometimes changed for others, substituted in their place by divine institution, so that the mode of revelation was constantly rendered more clear, which at first was like a lamp shining in a dark place; afterwards the morning star succeeded, until at length, the night being past, the Sun of righteousness arose.⁶⁵

Luther was careful to distinguish between Old Testament sacramental signs and legal symbols connected with the Mosaic law. The legal signs, including such things as “priestly usages concerning vestments, vessels, foods, houses, and the like,” are vastly different from both Old and New Testament sacraments, for a sacrament has a promise that requires faith. While the Mosaic ordinances were not given for the sake of justification, circumcision was a seal of the righteousness of faith (Rom 4:11). Thus Luther writes,

Our signs or sacraments, as well as those of the fathers, have attached to them a word of promise which requires faith, and they cannot be fulfilled by any other work. Hence they are signs or sacraments of justification, for they are sacraments of justifying faith and not of works. Their whole efficacy, therefore, consists in faith itself, not in the doing of a work. Whoever believes them, fulfils them, even if he should not do a single work. This is the origin of the saying: “Not the sacrament, but the faith of the sacrament, justifies.” Thus circumcision did not justify Abraham and his seed, and yet the Apostle calls it the seal of the righteousness by faith [Rom. 4:11], because faith in the promise, to which circumcision was added, justified him and fulfilled what the circumcision signified. For faith was the spiritual circumcision of the foreskin of the heart [Deut. 10:16; Jer. 4:4], which was symbolized by the literal circumcision of the flesh. In the same way it was obviously not Abel’s sacrifice that justified him, but it was his faith [Heb. 11:4] by which he offered himself wholly to God, and this was symbolized by the outward sacrifice.⁶⁶

Luther preached that the circumcision of Christ marks the end of the old ceremonial requirements and their power to condemn us.⁶⁷ God used the male member precisely because the organ of generation points to human corruption and original

⁶⁵ Martin Chemnitz, *Examen Concilii Tridentini*, 2:18, quoted in Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology*, 536.

⁶⁶ Luther, *Babylonian Captivity*, AE 36:65–66.

⁶⁷ Eugene F. A. Klug, ed., *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, vols. 5–7 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 5:188.

sin.⁶⁸ Furthermore, if Christ had not been born, we would still be under the requirement of circumcision.⁶⁹ Yet, “Christ has abolished this ordinance and instead commands that we believe and be baptized, if we truly want to be God’s children and be eternally saved.”⁷⁰

Circumcision is connected with Luther’s (and the Bible’s) theology of the cross, for what kind of God commands circumcision to a ninety-year-old man and an eight-day-old child? This was an offense to the Gentiles. The ridiculous character of God’s circumcision command may be compared with the seemingly unreasonable idea that in the Lord’s Supper the Christian receives the body and blood of Christ. It further offends against reason that a child should be dipped in water and thereby his sins are washed away.⁷¹ And yet, this is the truth of God. “Abraham,” says Luther, “could have said after receiving the circumcision command, ‘Dear Lord, how can this contribute to salvation if on the eighth day after birth a little bit of skin is cut away from the body?’ That’s how reason speaks and thinks when it wants to be really brilliant!” For Luther, the word must be believed above all else: “As soon as we begin asking why God has commanded this or that, the devil has already won, as is plain from the case of Eve in Paradise! She had the command not to eat from a certain forbidden tree. When she lost sight of that command, and lent an ear to the devil’s explanation of God’s motives, she was already guilty of that terrible disobedience from which we all still suffer today.”⁷²

VI. Circumcision and Christology

The sacraments of the Old Testament cannot be rightly understood apart from their fulfillment in Christ.⁷³ According to Gerhard, the Old Testament sacraments “signified and prefigured” Christ, while the sacraments of the New Testament currently tender and give the present Christ.⁷⁴ Circumcision prefigured Christian Baptism (Col 2:11–12), even as the Old Testament Passover lambs were a prefigurement of the slain Messiah himself (1 Cor 5:7), “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

Circumcision was given to Abraham as a sign of the blessing in his Seed. When Christ came, this sign could no longer continue to function as it once did. Christ

⁶⁸ John Nicholas Lenker, ed., *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, vols. 1–4 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 1.1:310–311.

⁶⁹ Klug, *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, 5:178–179.

⁷⁰ Klug, *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, 5:179.

⁷¹ Klug, *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, 5:179.

⁷² Klug, *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, 5:180.

⁷³ David P. Scaer, *Law and Gospel and the Means of Grace*, Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics 8, ed. John R. Stephenson and John A. Maxfield (St. Louis: Luther Academy, 2008), 128.

⁷⁴ Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology*, 536.

himself is the Seed who was coming; therefore circumcision stands fulfilled.⁷⁵ Christian parents may choose circumcision for their sons, but only as a matter of freedom. It would be wrong to carry out circumcision from a sense of religious obligation or from a failure to recognize that the promises given to Abraham have been fulfilled in Christ. The true spiritual offspring of Abraham have a different sign, that of Baptism.⁷⁶

Already with his circumcision on the eighth day after birth (Luke 2:21), the infant Lord was given the name of salvation, Jesus (Matt 1:21). This name was thus connected with the spilling of blood for the forgiveness of sins already in the Lord's circumcision. For early Christians, Christ's circumcision became a sign of Christian identity.⁷⁷ While mystics reflected on the theme of Christ's circumcision, heretics denied Christ's circumcision and even removed Luke 2:21 from their Gospels. This included Marcion and the later Julianists or Aphetartodocetists.⁷⁸ Although "salvific properties" were superstitiously tied to the holy foreskin, and even alleged relics of the holy prepuce appeared in many places, it is clear that the early Christians made the connection between Christ's circumcision and his shedding of blood for their salvation.⁷⁹

While one might imagine that a "Jewish mark" on the Christian God could potentially "Judaize" the Christian faith, Andrew Jacobs has argued that the truth is just the opposite. He maintains that the circumcision of Jesus "covertly signals to its readers (in Luke) the 'past-tenseness' of the Jewish Temple and covenant, and therefore its obsolescence."⁸⁰ Jacobs teaches that for early Christian identity, Christ's reception of the covenant mark of the Jew was both a "recuperation" of the otherness of the Jews and simultaneously a rejection "at the deepest levels of religious identity, inscribed on and within the body of the founder himself."⁸¹ Thus in Justin Martyr's *Dialogus cum Tryphone*, Christ's keeping of the law is not about establishing Moses but rather bringing Moses to fulfillment.⁸² While Trypho argues that by obedience to the law Jesus would have earned his messianic status, Justin asserts that Christ's obedience to Moses has brought a radical departure from Moses. Justin writes,

⁷⁵ Lenker, *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, 1.1:315.

⁷⁶ Lenker, *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, 1.1:315.

⁷⁷ Andrew S. Jacobs, "The Kindest Cut: Christ's Circumcision and the Signs of Early Christian Identity," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (2009): 99.

⁷⁸ Jacobs, "The Kindest Cut," 99n7.

⁷⁹ Jacobs, "The Kindest Cut," 99n8; see Severus, Epistle 97, in *A Collection of Letters of Severus of Antioch*, ed. E. W. Brooks, *Patrologia Orientalis* 14.1 (Paris: Firmis-Didot, 1920), cols. 194/364–199/369.

⁸⁰ Jacobs, "The Kindest Cut," 101.

⁸¹ Jacobs, "The Kindest Cut," 117.

⁸² Jacobs, "The Kindest Cut," 102.

I have confessed it, and I do confess: but I confessed that he underwent all of these things not as if he were made righteous (*dikaïoumenon*) through them, but bringing to fulfillment (*apartizonta*) the dispensation that his Father—creator of all things, Lord, and God—wished. For likewise I confess that he underwent fatal crucifixion and that he became a human being and that he suffered as many things as those members of your people arranged for him.⁸³

Other early church figures employed Christ's circumcision in a variety of ways. In the fourth century, Ambrose of Milan argued that the circumcision of our Lord was a sign that God wanted to convert the Jews. Christ "was born under the Law (*factus est enim sub lege*; cf. Gal 4:4) so that he might win those (*lucrifaceret*) who were under the Law."⁸⁴ But the law has no rightful claim on him. Christ's circumcision was not a Jewish rite per se, even though it was supposed to benefit the Jews. In like manner, Jesus had no actual need of a Baptism for the forgiveness of sins, and yet he did it for our sake.⁸⁵ Cyril of Alexandria stressed Christ's fulfillment of the law; thus, Cyril provides a resolution between the Old Testament command to circumcise and Paul's affirmation that "circumcision is of no benefit."⁸⁶

The circumcision of Christ also would become significant in the christological debates of the early church. Clearly the meaning of Christ's circumcision can have salvific import only if the consubstantialist position (that the Son is of the same substance, *ὁμοούσιος*, with the Father) is upheld. Thus, in the same way that deity cannot be said to die, and yet in the divine-human person of Christ deity can be said to die, so also it follows that circumcision cannot be ascribed to bare divinity, yet in Christ Jesus, God himself embraced the humiliation of circumcision for the benefit of our salvation. Saint Athanasius taught that "indeed in the body being circumcised, and being carried around, and eating, and tiring, and affixed to the tree, and suffering, was the impassible and bodiless Word of God."⁸⁷

Against the heretical Ebionites who insisted on circumcision because Christ was circumcised, Epiphanius gave four theological reasons for Christ's reception of circumcision:

⁸³ Justin Martyr, *Dialogus cum Tryphone* 67.5, *Patristische Texte und Studien* 47, ed. Miroslav Marcovich (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997), 185; translation from Jacobs, "The Kindest Cut," 102n18.

⁸⁴ Ambrose, *Expositio evangelii secundam Lucam* 2.55 (Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina 14:54 [hereafter cited as CCSL]); translation from Jacobs, "The Kindest Cut," 105n35.

⁸⁵ Ambrose, *Expositio evangelii secundam Lucam* 4.6 (CCSL 14:107); see Jacobs, "The Kindest Cut," 106.

⁸⁶ Cyril of Alexandria, *Homilia 3 in Lucam* (= *Homiliae 12 diversae*), in *Patrologiae cursus completus, series graeca*, 162 vols., ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris: Migne, 1857–1886), 77:1041B; see Jacobs, "The Kindest Cut," 107n39.

⁸⁷ Athanasius, *Epistula ad Epictetum* 5, in Epiphanius, *Panarion* 77.7.7, in *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller* (Leipzig: Hinrich, 1891–), 37:422–423 (hereafter cited as GCS); translation from Jacobs, "The Kindest Cut," 112n52.

First, to prove that he had actually taken flesh, because of the Manicheans, and those who say he has (only) appeared in a semblance. Then, to show that the body was not of the same nature as the Godhead, as Apollinarius says, and that he had not brought it down from above, as Valentinus says. And [third] to confirm the fact that the circumcision he had given long ago served legitimately until his advent, and [fourth] to deprive the Jews of an excuse; for, if he had not been circumcised, they could have said, “we could not accept an uncircumcised messiah.”⁸⁸

The sacramental theology of circumcision reached its high point with the Anglo-Saxon theologian the Venerable Bede. While Augustine was the first Latin father who seemed to suggest that circumcision remitted original sin, Bede developed further the connection between Baptism and circumcision. While Bede mistakenly taught that the Old Testament saints were not permitted access to heaven until Christ had risen from the dead and ascended on high,⁸⁹ he nevertheless taught the following:

Circumcision offered the same help of health-giving treatment against the wound of original sin that now, in the time of revealed grace, baptism is wont to do, except that they [who were under the law] could not yet enter the gate of the heavenly kingdom, until by his coming he who gave the law would give his blessing . . . and so, consoled in the bosom of Abraham by a blessed rest after death, they awaited with blissful hope their entry into heavenly peace.⁹⁰

Bede asserted a threefold function of the sacrament of circumcision: it was a seal of Abraham’s righteousness by faith; it was a prophecy concerning the cleansing to be provided by Christ; and it was a gift of remission from the sin of Adam’s transgression.⁹¹ In his *On Luke*, Bede argued that John 3:5 and Genesis 17:4 are essentially the same divine command: “For he who now says ‘unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God’, then said ‘The male,

⁸⁸ Epiphanius, *Panarion* 30.28.2–4 (GCS 25:371); translation from Jacobs, “The Kindest Cut,” 116n72.

⁸⁹ Bede, *Libri quatuor in principium Genesis usque ad nativitatem Isaac et eiectioem Ismahelis adnotationum* 4 (CCSL 118A:206). For an English translation, see Bede, *On Genesis*, trans. Calvin B. Kendall (Liverpool: Liverpool Univ. Press, 2008), 284.

⁹⁰ Bede, *Homelieae evangelii* I.11 (CCSL 122:74); translation from Bede the Venerable, *Homilies on the Gospels*, vol. 1, *Advent to Lent*, trans. Lawrence T. Martin and David Hurst (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1991), 104–105.

⁹¹ Conor O’Brien, “Bede’s Theology of Circumcision, Its Sources and Significance,” *The Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s., 67, no. 2 (October 2016): 596. See Bede, *In Lucae evangelium expositio* I (CCSL 120:56).

whose flesh of his foreskin shall not be circumcised, that soul shall be destroyed out of his people: because he hath broken my covenant'.⁹²

The search for proof texts to support Bede's contention of circumcision remitting original sin might seem to be in vain. But actually, a scriptural argument can be logically deduced. If it is true that Baptism is concerned with the remission of sin (Acts 22:16), and if it is also true that circumcision is the Old Testament counterpart to New Testament Baptism (Col 2:11–12), then Bede's convictions regarding circumcision do not seem so untenable. Indeed, Bede's understanding of Augustine became the standard explanation for the theology of circumcision. By the time of Thomas Aquinas, the doctor could assert in his *Summa Theologiae* that "it is commonly admitted by all that original sin was remitted in circumcision."⁹³ Commentators of the Middle Ages looked to Augustine's *On Marriage and Concupiscence*, an anti-Pelagian text, for the patristic support to buttress their contention. Aquinas, Gratian, Peter Lombard, and Peter Abelard all made use of Augustine's material, though it is debatable to what degree Augustine was rightly understood by them.⁹⁴ Bede's theology represents a development of Augustinian thought that was filtered through the claims of Gregory the Great.⁹⁵ As Gregory wrote in his *Moralia*, "Whoever is not absolved by the water of regeneration, is held bound by the guilt of the original bond. Because that which the water of baptism achieves amongst us, amongst the ancients either faith alone for children or the power of sacrifice for their elders, or, for those who had come from Abraham's line, the rite of circumcision achieved."⁹⁶

For the church of the Augsburg Confession, circumcision is comprehended in Christ. Luther taught that even as the eighth day follows the Sabbath after a week of work, so Christ's circumcision on the eighth day has brought to us a new day of

⁹² Bede, *In Lucam* 56 (CCSL 120:56); translation from O'Brien, "Bede's Theology of Circumcision," 596.

⁹³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3, q. 70, a. 4, co.; translation from St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 57, *Baptism and Confirmation*, trans. James J. Cunningham (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1975), 167.

⁹⁴ O'Brien argues that it was more of an assumption that Augustine taught that circumcision removed original sin ("Bede's Theology of Circumcision," 603). Augustine wrote that circumcision was "to signify" (*ad significationem*) the cleansing of original sin, rather than "to sanctify" (*ad sanctificationem*) as Aquinas thought. See O'Brien, "Bede's Theology of Circumcision," 599; Peter Abelard, *Sic et Non* 109.1; and Augustine, *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* 2.9.24 (Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 42:276–277). It is doubtful whether Lutherans would draw such a hard line between cleansing and the signification of cleansing.

⁹⁵ O'Brien, "Bede's Theology of Circumcision," 603.

⁹⁶ Gregory, *Moralia in Iob* 4pref.3 (CCSL 143:160); translation from O'Brien, "Bede's Theology of Circumcision," 602.

grace.⁹⁷ With his circumcision, Christ began to fulfill what was spoken by the Christmas angel and what Simeon proclaimed concerning the Savior.⁹⁸ Even though Christ did not need this mark for himself, and even as he did not need to die on the cross for his own person, yet Christ subjected himself to his very own law in our place, for “we needed a sinless one to keep the Law in our stead and thus appease the wrath of God, otherwise we would be under the curse of the Law forever.” Thus, the circumcision of Christ already involved Christ seeking our adoption as sons (Gal 4:4–5).⁹⁹

While Abraham bore the mark of circumcision as a sinner, Jesus received the mark without guilt, as the Lord of the law. Luther proclaimed of Christ that he “takes away the Law’s authority and power; yes, tears the Law to pieces so that it can no longer ensnare and condemn those who believe in him.”¹⁰⁰ Luther also taught that the law “overreached itself” in the case of Christ. Because of this, the law has become the servant of Christ for seeking to rob Christ of his innocence and authority. Therefore, Christ can share his triumph over the law with us.¹⁰¹ When the innocent Savior suffers circumcision, then this mark receives a meaning far above the meaning it had under the old law. It becomes a sign of Christian salvation on the body of Jesus. While Jews were once known by circumcision, the Christian is known by Baptism and the body of Christ.¹⁰²

The new Israel is constituted by the New Testament Christian church (Gal 6:16), and God’s grace is no longer mediated by circumcision. The blessed apostle makes the point in 1 Corinthians 7:18 that in coming to the Christian faith, the uncircumcised need not seek circumcision; those having been circumcised need not seek to undo their circumcisions. This was a controverted point in the early Christian community. The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:3–21) addressed the matter of the Antiochian Jewish Christianity’s insistence that circumcision be observed. But Paul claims in Galatians that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has value for the new Israel; what matters is faith expressing itself through love (Gal 5:6). Those who constitute the new Israel actually are the people of real and genuine circumcision as they worship God in spirit (Phil 3:3).

Clearly Lutherans speak of circumcision as an Old Testament legal requirement at times and as an Old Testament means of grace at other times. Concerning the promises of God to the patriarchs, circumcision is gospel. Regarding the Messiah who was to come, circumcision is gospel. Yet, with reference to circumcision as an abolished Old Testament ceremony—a ceremony whose intent was corrupted by

⁹⁷ Klug, *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, 5:181.

⁹⁸ Klug, *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, 5:181.

⁹⁹ Klug, *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, 5:182.

¹⁰⁰ Klug, *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, 5:182.

¹⁰¹ Klug, *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, 5:185.

¹⁰² Lenker, *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, 1.1:310.

the Judaizers—circumcision is a wrongful legalistic requirement. The same paradox is clearly evidenced in Scripture itself (compare Rom 4:11 with Gal 5:3!). In terms of Christ’s act of being circumcised, this is clearly good news for the church in the same way that Christ being baptized or being nailed to the cross is gospel. While one could preach the law from Christ’s circumcision (or his crucifixion) in terms of man’s failure to keep God’s commands, this would be according to Christ’s alien work rather than his proper office—the preaching of the gospel of grace (FC Ep V 10).

We may speak of Christ’s circumcision in terms of all three categories (*genera*) of the communication of properties. In that Christ’s circumcision involved the Son of God being circumcised for us in and through his assumed human nature, it is rightly maintained that the Son of God suffered circumcision for our benefit (category of properties, *genus idiomaticum*). This suffering of Christ’s human nature is always in communion with the divine nature. Since the assumed human nature of Christ possesses the divine gifts imparted to it, the circumcision of Christ involves the shedding of Christ’s life-giving blood, a blood that can be ascribed to no other mere man (category of majesty, *genus maiestaticum*).¹⁰³ The blood of Christ’s circumcision is the blood of the Son of God and has the power to cleanse from sin (1 John 1:7). Furthermore, it is the whole person of Christ who received circumcision, with each nature performing that which is peculiar to it; yet, the two natures are in constant communion with each other, and therefore Christ’s circumcision is part of the “one undivided theanthropic action” (category of accomplishments, *genus apotelesmaticum*).¹⁰⁴

Francis Pieper affirmed the connection between Christ’s circumcision and his work of saving sinners. Indeed, Christ was the Messiah for us also in his circumcision.¹⁰⁵ We may rejoice in Christ’s circumcision as if it were our own, for Christ’s circumcision has a vicarious character.¹⁰⁶ It was done not for the benefit of himself, but to fulfill God’s command in our place. It was in fact here that Christ first spilled his blood for our redemption. As the old hymn text by Sebastian Besnault, translated by John Chandler, proclaims,

O blessed day when first was poured
The blood of our redeeming Lord!
O blessed day when Christ began
His saving work for sinful man!

¹⁰³ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:220.

¹⁰⁴ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:247.

¹⁰⁵ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:331.

¹⁰⁶ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:332.

While from His mother's bosom fed,
 His precious blood He wills to shed;
 A foretaste of His death He feels,
 An earnest of His love reveals.

Scarce come to earth, His Father's will
 With prompt obedience to fulfill,
 A victim even now He lies
 Before the day of sacrifice.¹⁰⁷

VII. Circumcision and Baptism: Colossians 2:11–13

The key passage in the New Testament dealing with the relationship between circumcision and Baptism was probably written with the threat of Judaizers in mind, although perhaps not such Judaizers that made circumcision the *sine qua non*, as was the case with Paul's opponents in Galatia.¹⁰⁸ Both Baptism and circumcision are concerned with initiation.¹⁰⁹ In Colossians 2, Paul writes of the fullness of the Godhead that dwells bodily in Christ Jesus (v. 9), and then goes on to declare the following:

In connection with whom you also were circumcised with a circumcision not done by hand, in the putting off of the body of the flesh, in the circumcision of Christ, having been jointly entombed with him in Baptism, in which you were also jointly raised up with him through faith by God's working, as one who raised him up from the dead. And you, being dead in the transgressions and in the uncircumcision [foreskin] of your flesh, he made alive together, you with him, having forgiven us all the transgressions. (Col 2:11–13, my translation)

In view of the Judaizing heresy that posed a threat to the faith of the Colossians, Paul here contrasts the inferiority of a mere physical circumcision with the spiritual removal of the ethical flesh in holy Baptism. It is not a rejection of Abraham's circumcision, which was to have both physical and spiritual significance. However, the problem with the Judaizers, especially those with whom Paul contended in Galatians, was that they failed to understand the gospel of Old Testament circumcision, and instead made of it "a mere legal rite that was disconnected from justification by

¹⁰⁷ Sebastian Besnault, "O Blessed Day When First was Poured," trans. John Chandler, in *The Lutheran Hymnal*, ed. The Intersynodical Committee on Hymnology and Liturgics for the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941), no. 115:1–3.

¹⁰⁸ Lenski, *Interpretation*, 9:103.

¹⁰⁹ John Albert Bengel, *Bengel's New Testament Commentary*, 2 vols., trans. Charlton T. Lewis and Marvin R. Vincent (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1981), 2:461.

faith.”¹¹⁰ Furthermore, as has been previously argued, the circumcision Christ received on the eighth day points to the fulfillment and abolition of the Old Testament sacraments.

When Paul writes of the “circumcision of Christ” (περιτομή τοῦ Χριστοῦ), the exegete must consider whether he is dealing with a subjective or an objective genitive. R. C. H. Lenski preferred the subjective—i.e., “the circumcision he (Christ) inaugurated by baptism.”¹¹¹ It is possible, but far less likely, that the objective is in mind—i.e., the circumcision that Christ underwent by “putting off” his body in death.¹¹² As Paul E. Deterding concludes, the whole context speaks in favor of this “circumcision” being experienced by the baptized believers Paul was addressing.¹¹³ Paul reveals how the Baptism instituted by Christ is shown to be vastly superior to the physical circumcision in which the Judaizers boasted.¹¹⁴

Theological passives dominate Colossians 2:12. The Colossians were circumcised by God himself in Baptism. With echoes of Romans 6:3–5, we read that Christians “have been entombed with Christ in Baptism” (συνταφέντες αὐτῷ ἐν τῷ βαπτισμῷ), and also “have been raised up” (συνηγέρθητε) by faith that comes as a gift of God. In both Romans 6 and Colossians 2, we are not dealing with merely symbolical language but the real theological truth of what happens in holy Baptism. We enter Christ’s tomb with him; we are also raised up with him. We die to sin and are given new life through the resurrection. Baptism brings us into connection with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The distances of time and space are overcome. Paul’s use of συν- in συνταφέντες entails nothing less than the actual impartation of all the benefits of Christ’s death and resurrection.¹¹⁵

Baptism involves an actual spiritual circumcision. The word and promise of God is present along with God-given faith to receive what God extends to us in grace. This is why Paul connects our resurrection not only with Baptism but also with faith. Luther regarded the genitive here to be a genitive of cause (τῆς πίστεως τῆς ἐνεργείας τοῦ Θεοῦ). That is, it is God’s operation (see KJV). It is “the faith that God works.”¹¹⁶ So, Bengel wrote, “Faith is of *Divine working*, and divine working is in believers; Eph. i.19, ii.8; 1 Thess. ii.13.” Yet most modern translations prefer the objective genitive—i.e., “faith in the working of God.”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁰ Lenski, *Interpretation*, 9:105.

¹¹¹ Lenski, *Interpretation*, 9:105.

¹¹² Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary 44 (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 116–117.

¹¹³ Paul E. Deterding, *Colossians*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 104.

¹¹⁴ Lenski, *Interpretation*, 9:105.

¹¹⁵ Lenski, *Interpretation*, 9:107.

¹¹⁶ Lenski, *Interpretation*, 9:109.

¹¹⁷ Bengel, *Bengel’s New Testament Commentary*, 2:461.

The state of being in spiritual “uncircumcision” (*ἀκροβυστία*) entails the depravity of humans under the corruption of the fall.¹¹⁸ This is why it is vital to receive the “circumcision of Christ,” the “circumcision not hand-made” (*περιτομῆ ἀχειροποιήτω*). In this circumcision, which comes by holy Baptism, the sinful nature is “cut off” (*ἀπεκδύσει*) and a new status is given. In John’s Gospel, it is the new birth of water and the Spirit (John 3:5). Once being dead, the baptized are made alive together with him (*συνεζωποίησεν ὑμᾶς σὺν αὐτῷ*) in Baptism, God having forgiven us of all the transgressions (*χαρισάμενος ἡμῖν πάντα τὰ παραπτώματα*). The fact that circumcision stands parallel with Baptism in this passage is compelling evidence that infants are proper recipients of Baptism. If infants received God’s grace in the time of the Old Testament through circumcision, who may rightly doubt that they should receive his grace in the time of the New Testament through the sacrament of Baptism?

VIII. Conclusion

Circumcision and the promises connected to it are part of the gospel content of the Torah. It was not a mere legal rite but a sacrament whereby Abraham and his physical and spiritual progeny throughout the Old Testament era were given God’s grace. Circumcision was a seal of the righteousness of faith (Rom 4:11). It was not simply a ceremony to be required, but was connected with faith in God’s promises and the consecration of one’s heart (Jer 4:4). Old Testament circumcision has reached its christological fulfillment with the circumcision of Jesus, his death and resurrection, and the Baptism he instituted for all nations at the culmination of his earthly ministry (Matt 28). As Christ was given the name “Jesus” in connection with his circumcision, a name that points to the soteriological intent of his person and work (Matt 1:21), so he has instituted a new circumcision in connection with his death and resurrection, the sacrament of holy Baptism. Lutherans would do well not to simply relegate circumcision to the category of an outmoded legal requirement based solely on the reading of Galatians and other New Testament references, but rather to discover that circumcision was strongly connected with the promises of God’s grace to Abraham and his progeny, a grace that finds its apex in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

¹¹⁸ Deterding, *Colossians*, 106.