

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit

Circumcision is a common practice found throughout the Bible.

I've read about it, studied its history, and thought I knew what it meant theologically—
until I watched it done to my son.

I realize now that I was clueless!
But now it all makes so much more sense.

Though circumcision seems to have already been common practice in Egypt long before,
it comes to us first in the Scriptures by way of Abraham.

Circumcision was the *sign* of the promise, a sign of the covenant made with Abraham;
it was like an OT Sacrament that brought sinners into a covenant of grace with the Lord.
Luther included among the benefits of circumcision:
The forgiveness of sins,
Justification of the ungodly,
and incorporation into the people of God.¹

So we hear the Lord say to Abraham in Genesis:

**“This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your offspring
after you:**

Every male among you shall be circumcised.

You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins,

and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you” (17:10-11).

This *sign* of the covenant came to Abraham when he was 99 years old! (Gen 17:24)
But the standard rule was to circumcise from here on out on the 8th day (Gen 17:12; Lev 12:3).
Why the 8th day?

Because that's the new 1st day; the day of the new creation!

This is the day when a boy is brought into the covenant with the Lord.

8 is also significant later on, as it's the day of the Resurrection of Jesus!

8 is the Lord's Day, the new creation, the resurrection.

And the permanence of the circumcision was a sign of the permanence of the Lord's covenant.

Circumcision, then, was given to Abraham in the way of the Gospel!

It was a sign of forgiveness, of grace between God and man.

Circumcision came with the promise,

“You shall be the father of a multitude of nations” (17:4);

and again,

“I will be your God” (17:8).

¹ Martin Luther, “Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 15-20” (1538-39). *AE* 3:132-44.

Circumcision was a gift from the Lord;
it was Gospel: joy, forgiveness, life with God.

Nevertheless, even though Circumcision was God's work, God's sign of grace, God's Sacrament,
sinful man quickly turned it into Law.

Circumcision became something *you* must do so that *you* could rightly earn God's
favor—

it then came in the way of the law: works and merits and self-justification.

Already in Moses' time circumcision became merely an outward thing,
a hoop to jump through, a mindless act, a thing *I* must do to be saved.

And so Moses cries out,

“Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer impenitent”
(Deut 10:16; cf. Deut 30:6).

Jeremiah, a few centuries later says the same:

“Circumcise yourselves to the LORD; remove the foreskin of your hearts” (Jer 4:4;
cf. Jer 9:25-26).

And then comes St. Paul in his letter to the Romans:

**“For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and
physical. 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”** (Rom 2:28-29)

Circumcision was a sign of our Lord's promise to us—
and we took even the sign of His promise and turned it into something *we* must do.

Our hearts are what need the circumcision;
the stony, dark, sinful foreskin of our hearts
must be snipped-through with the scissors of God's Holy Law,
and then peeled painfully back by His work of repentance on us.

Circumcision is a painful ceremony.
And while children typically received this at only 8 days old (young enough to forget!),
I can't imagine what it was like for old man Abraham!

So, if it's so painful and obtrusive, why do it all?

And have you ever considered why that particular member of the body?

It wasn't arbitrary.

It wasn't merely for health benefits.

And it wasn't because everyone else was doing it, or not doing it.

Our Lord chose to seal His word of the covenant with a circumcision: a cutting, and peeling back
of the member by which life is created.

Dr. Luther says,

“God selects this member because He wants to point to original sin, not to actual sin.”²

This points to our real problem with sin.

The things you steal,
the cutting words you speak,
the lustful thoughts and your sleeping with others outside of marriage,
are merely symptoms of a much deeper and more heinous sin.

If God was most offended by these actions,

then instead of circumcision,
we’d have to cut off our hands, pluck out our eyes, and remove our tongues!

But God has chosen to seal His word of forgiveness with circumcision.

And the circumcision of this particular body part is most closely related to the heart.

For it’s from here that life springs, the procreation takes place, and that another little sinner comes into this world.

Original sin is passed on from the father, all the way from our father Adam.

And this original sin, this source of all evil, comes from an ungodly heart—

it comes from a lack of trust and faith in God.

So, to circumcise is to peel back the sign of sinfulness, to remove what is old and dead,

to make way for a new creation—
again, you see why it’s the 8th day!

But that brings us to the next question,

why not remember the promise some other, less painful way?
Why did God deliver His promise with a sign that was marked by blood?

And I suppose the more important question,

Why did Jesus get circumcised, too?

Jesus has no original sin—

remember we just celebrated Christmas, where Jesus is born of the Virgin.

Jesus has a pure and right heart, full of faith and trust and obedience to His heavenly Father.

So why get circumcised?

Well, Jesus receives this ancient sign of Abraham as one of us.

And most important of all, it’s here that Jesus first begins to shed His blood *for us*.

The circumcision of Jesus is all about the cross—

it forces us to see in this infant, 8-day-old child, a suffering savior.

² AE 3:136.

Remember, at the circumcision, on the 8th day, the Israelite child would also receive His name.

And this child born for us is to be called *Jesus*;
for He will save His people from their sins.

The name given to this boy is a name of salvation,
of God coming among us,
shedding His blood for us,
and by the cross, saving us.

Jesus receives this sign of blood,
He undergoes circumcision,
all for us.

And once He is circumcised, the Law of circumcision comes to an end.

Once this child's blood was shed, ours no longer needs to be shed any more!

Circumcision now is no longer law, no longer a demand, no longer the sign and seal of the promise given to Abraham—
for our sign and seal is much greater than the cutting of our flesh.

Jesus gives Himself to us.
He gives *to us* the blood that was shed *for us*!

And our circumcision is now a “circumcision made without hands.”

St. Paul says in his letter to the Colossians,

**“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,
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”** (2:11-12).

Our sign of the covenant of Grace is first the sacrament of Holy Baptism,
and second the sacrament of the Altar.

The first incorporates us into the covenant community, into the body of Christ;
it justifies us, forgives us, declares us holy, innocent, and free from the weight of the law.
The second puts that shed blood of Christ into us;
it joins us with Christ, forgives us, restores us, and heals us.

And in all of this, our Lord puts His name on us, calling us His own—
and as His name declares: God saves us!

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