

CIRCUMCISION AS A SHADOW OF CONVERSION

BY DAN NEHRBASS

With some commandments in the Bible, God's reasoning seems obvious. We can understand why God is so passionate about murder and the need to punish offenders of this crime. Similarly, we understand why theft is against God's law. The crime is deserving of attention and punishment.

Less obvious is God's reason for commanding circumcision. What's more, it almost seems as if God's people pay a disproportionate amount of attention to the matter. The main theme of Galatians is circumcision. Paul writes at length about circumcision in Romans 2-4. The practice is also mentioned in 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, Philippians 3, Colossians, and Titus. Circumcision was an extremely important and divisive issue among the early church according to Acts 15, Galatians, and Philippians. Some early Christians were expecting Gentile converts to be circumcised, but others felt this was a burden that was too great for them to bear (Acts 15:28). Paul refers to those who would enforce the circumcision of Gentiles as dogs, evildoers, mutilators of the flesh (Phil 3:2); he wishes these legalists would emasculate themselves (Gal 5:12).

Clearly, the issue of circumcision is important in the Bible, and therefore of great importance also to God. And it's not just a fleeting era in Jewish history, either, since the subject occupies such great space in both the Old and New Testaments. So the last time I read through Acts I asked myself: Does the controversy of circumcision have relevance today? I believe that it does. In fact, there seem to be four concepts rooted in circumcision which make it pertinent to the Jewish people, to the early believers, and to us today. Though the New Testament makes it clear that Gentile converts do not need to become circumcised, we can still glean some important ideas from the practice. For instance, though God's command of keeping the Passover applies to Jews, the principle of redemption is of uni-



versal application. Likewise, the concept of circumcision illustrates four points of application to every Christian's conversion.

Circumcision and Conversion Are Both Painful

First, it goes without saying that circumcision is painful. "On the third day, when they were still in pain" (Gen 34:25) describes the aftermath of the Shechemites' circumcision. The Greek word means "to cut around" and it necessitates blood and pain. If the Old Testament law was a teacher, meant to convey certain spiritual lessons, then God used circumcision to teach about the relationship between entrance into God's family and pain.

Those who really understand conversion also know about this relationship of pain and new life. Jesus said, "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple" (Lk 14:27). Likewise Paul encourages believers to "present your bodies as a living sacrifice" (Rom 12:1). When things are sacrificed, they bleed, they hurt, and they die. Any new believer who is touched by the Holy Spirit will be enlightened to some things in her or his life that must be cut off. Jake, a teen in our church youth group, recently gave his life to Christ and felt compelled to abandon his CDs. At first he wanted to sell them at a swap meet, but that seemed like only a partial sacrifice. So he decided to break them and throw them in the trash. No doubt, this was one painful step that would later bear rewards.

The circumcision was supposed to occur on the eighth day (Lk 1:59). Though there may have been other reasons for an early circumcision, it must have been less painful than waiting until the child was older. In the same way, it is best for believers to be "circumcised in the heart" close to birth. Less pain will be involved than if the believer develops bad habits for years and then later needs a part of her or his life cut off.

Pain is not easily forgotten. Have you ever had a game of "top this" as you go around the room and point out your scars, scabs, and battle wounds? Often a physical sign is left on our bodies to remind us of these injuries. Similarly, if a Christian makes a painful sacrifice when converting to Christ, this conversion will not be easily forgotten. When someone asks about this conversion, he or she will have more than a place and a date, but will also have a story about the pain experienced as he or she took up the cross and followed Christ.

Circumcision and Conversion Are Both Public

Though Jesus was born in Bethlehem, he was taken to Jerusalem to be circumcised in the Temple. His circumcision was witnessed by "Simeon . . . righteous and devout" and "a prophet, Anna" (Lk 2:25, 36). Circumcision was not a private practice but an event celebrated by the community. In the same way, it is valuable for one's conversion to Christ to be public. Many conversions in the Bible were marked with an immediate public acknowledgment. When Peter spoke before thousands in Jerusalem, Luke states that, "those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added" (Acts 2:41). The baptism of three thousand people would have been an incredible public image of conversion. When Zacchaeus decided to follow Christ he said, "Half of my possessions . . . I will give to the poor" (Lk 19:8). Such giving would hardly have gone unnoticed by the public. Unfortunately

the rich ruler was unwilling to give all that he had and follow Jesus. Imagine, however, the incredible public testimony the man could have made had if he had been willing to follow Jesus completely.

The altar call became popular in the 19th century in America because of its effectiveness in bringing people to a point of decision and making their conversion public. Today some altar calls are often preceded with "every head bowed and every eye closed." Walking down the aisle to an altar, getting baptized, and giving money do not inherently effect salvation. What each of these things does is provide a forum for one's conversion to have an impact on others. This public display has two advantages. First, it has a contagious effect upon others. A radical change in one person's life can have a great impact on those who know her or him. The other advantage is that a public acknowledgement of one's conversion etches within that believer's heart a memory that can serve as a pillar. In the Old Testament people built altars or pillars of stone in order to remember that something significant occurred in that place. In the same way, when a new convert makes a public profession of faith, he or she builds a memorable pillar.

Circumcision and Conversion Are Both Permanent

Circumcision effects a permanent change. It cannot be undone. When a Hebrew boy was circumcised, he would know forever to which ethnic group he belonged. Circumcision allowed for no ethnic identity crises among the Jews. This was, of course, intentional. There were times in Jewish history when God commanded that they not intermarry with other ethnic groups in order to remain ethnically and religiously distinct. When the Jews disregarded the Lord's command and intermarried with neighboring peoples, they inevitably began to accept the gods of these other people.

There were also times when the Jews, because of exile, lost some of their cultural distinctiveness. According to Nehemiah, during the Babylonian

exile the Jews ceased to practice Passover, read the Torah, or offer sacrifices. Nehemiah reports that these long-practiced traditions were lost for more than one generation. But despite the neglect of many other traditions while in exile, circumcision remained as an obvious, permanent reminder that they were Jewish. Even when their actions were not Jewish, they had a permanent, physical reminder that they still had a special calling.

Paul also speaks of the permanent marks of Christian conversion: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: . . . see, everything has become new" (2 Cor 5:17). A real, permanent change occurs when someone believes in Christ. Before conversion, one is a mere human, but after conversion he or she is "God's temple" (1 Cor 3:16). The writer of 1 John states that before conversion one is a sinner, but "those who are born of God do not sin, but the one who was born of God protects them" (1 Jn 5:18). In other words, conversion is not a change in the quantity of one's sin, where someone is continually becoming a better person. Instead, conversion is change of the quality of one's substance, where someone's very essence is changed from one kind to another. Just as a tree is permanently changed into ash and various gases when it is burned, so too is a believer is permanently transformed from a mere human to a temple of God.

Circumcision and Conversion Are Both Peculiar

Circumcision is a peculiar – distinctive – thing to do. I'm not so sure that it is a self-evident or intuitively obvious practice. It has not been practiced among all ethnic groups, nor is it necessarily the norm in Western culture, though it may be the norm in America. The peculiarity of the practice, therefore, may be part of the reason why the Lord instructed Abraham to employ it. It certainly would be an effective way to identify Jews. And the Jews maximized the effect of peculiarity in other customs in order to remember the significance of some spiritual event. In addition to circumcision, the Hebrews became a peculiar

people in regard to their dress, their diet, their holidays. Jewish children ask during the Passover: Why is this night different from any other night? Why on this night do we eat vegetables dipped in saltwater, but on other nights we do not dip our vegetables in saltwater? In the same way, the first Jewish boys must have also wondered why they were different from others. The difference was peculiar enough to spark interest, conversation, and education. God made this distinction among the Hebrews so that as foreign nations perceived them as unique, they would associate them with their God who was also unique.

Scripture speaks of the peculiarity of God's people with the word *holy*. The word means "set apart for the service of God." All the articles in the Temple were to be holy, including the priests' clothing, the basins, the utensils, the altar, and even the wick trimmers. Likewise, God's people are to be peculiarly set apart, or holy. Conversion is similar to circumcision in that believers acknowledge that they are different from the rest of the world. They are now to live peculiar lives. They no longer are to live the lives they once did as unbelievers, nor to live any longer as a mere human. Instead, they are to be set apart.

The author of Hebrews describes the customs of the Law in the Old Testament as earthy, visible signs – "only a shadow of the good things to come" (Heb 10:1). Circumcision is one such shadow of a heavenly reality. Circumcision is painful; it is done in public; it has permanent results; it sets a person apart as peculiar. Perhaps this ancient practice shadows the reality that at conversion a believer pays a painful price, has a public transformation, incurs a permanent change, and is set apart for a peculiar new life.

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