

The Spiritual Work of Circumcision
by Randy Nusbaum

“For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh” (Philippians 3:3).

Here we have a New Testament scripture declaring that we are the circumcision, and yet it seems the only New Testament teaching on the subject is whether the Gentile should be circumcised (Galatians 2:3; Acts 15). Yet the scriptures declare us to be something that we know very little about. Do you ever get a desire to really get in the Scriptures and dig out the truth of the Lord? When the Scriptures declare us to be something, should we just accept it in blind faith or should we seek to know what it means so that we might be motivated by it in our daily walk? “No confidence in the flesh”—that’s what I want! In an attempt to search out this subject, I found that the truth of circumcision is throughout the Old Testament and there I began my search.

The first mention of circumcision is in Genesis 17 where the Lord appeared to Abraham. At this time the Lord established His covenant with Abram and changed his name to Abraham. The covenant God struck with Abraham is far reaching, but the very heart of it is circumcision. “This is my covenant, which ye shall keep between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised” (verse 10).

Circumcision was the covenant. If you were circumcised, then you stood as one of God’s covenant people. To become a Jew you had to be circumcised. If there was no circumcision, then there was no covenant relationship with God. No one could approach God without being circumcised.

So circumcision played a major role in the daily thought of Israel. This was seen clearly when Goliath came out to fight against Israel. He walked out in front of the army of Israel standing nine feet tall, carrying a spear the size of a weaver’s beam and in boldness challenged the Jews. And all of Israel shivered for fear of this huge man and yet little David walked up and wanted to know what was going on and why no one was fighting. They told him that there was a giant out there about twice their size and everyone was afraid of him. And David said, “...who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?” (1 Samuel 17:26).

It is as if David were saying, “This man shouldn’t frighten you. He can’t stand before the Lord. A lion came against the flock once, and I killed him. Well Goliath is coming against the flock too and he’s no different than that lion, for they are both uncircumcised and therefore outside of God’s covenant relationships. I’m not going to stand by and let him run the flock off so I’ll go out and fight him.”

And David went out and defeated Goliath and he did so on the basis of the knowledge of the circumcision and the covenant that God had. He knew that Goliath was not circumcised and therefore could not stand before the Lord. David did not care how big Goliath was or how bad the circumstances looked or how many were afraid, for there was no way Goliath could stand because he was not circumcised and therefore he was already a defeated foe. He was cut off from the presence of the Lord because the Scripture had said, “And the uncircumcised man child whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant” (Genesis 17:14). Because of the covenant, David just believed God’s Word and put it to the test, and sure enough Goliath was cut off, and to dramatize it David went over and “cut off” Goliath’s head with his own sword (1

Samuel 17:51). Those who are not circumcised are automatically cursed of God, and all that had to be done was to stand on the Word of God.

To enter into God's covenant it was necessary to be circumcised. In fact the covenant itself was circumcision but not the outward circumcision in the flesh. You see, in Genesis 17, two things are described: 1) the covenant; 2) the sign of the covenant.

We already read verse 10 where the covenant is described, but look at verse 11 where the sign of the covenant is given: *"And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token (sign) of the covenant betwixt me and you."*

The circumcising of the foreskin was to be only a sign of the covenant and not the covenant itself, but as was the case so many times, the Jews began to make the sign preeminent instead of that for which the sign stood. So we see that the actual, physical cutting away of the flesh of foreskin was only a sign and the covenant spoke of a circumcision that God planned to reveal at the cross.

I want to talk some more about the difference between the covenant and the sign of the covenant later but right now it is important to establish what true circumcision is all about as far as the Christian is concerned; but to fully understand this, we must look again to the Old Testament and Israel's experience, and we must see that the circumcision is really two-fold in the plan of God.

FIRST CIRCUMCISION – THE CROSS

Let us look now to Israel. From the great exodus out of Egypt to the time Israel entered into the land of Canaan, they experienced two circumcisions. The Scriptures tell us that the things that happened unto Israel happened for our learning (1 Corinthians 10:11). The fact that the two circumcisions took place is significant for the Christian. Before we examine the spiritual significance as it relates to the church, let us take a look at the historical facts surrounding Israel's circumcision.

We find that as Moses returned to deliver Israel from Egypt, his son was circumcised (Exodus 4:24-26). In Exodus 12:43-49 the Lord established a law that no one would eat the Passover except they were circumcised and in Joshua 5:2-9 that all who came out of Egypt had been circumcised but those born in the wilderness had not been circumcised.

So the first circumcision took place with the eating of the first Passover (for none could eat except they were circumcised) and with the death of the lamb which marked their departure from Egypt. I want you to read again my last sentence, for it relates directly to the truth of the circumcision accomplished by the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. When circumcision was given to Abraham, it was given as a sign. Circumcision is the cutting away of the flesh, and the circumcision given to Abraham was a sign of God's sentence of death in the flesh. That sentence of death would be carried out by Jesus.

The taking away of the nature and works of the flesh happened at the cross: *"And they that were Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts"* (Galatians 5:24). Jesus would be the one to administer the true circumcision: *"Now I say that Jesus Christ was a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made unto the fathers"* (Romans 15:8).

So Jesus performed the circumcision, but what was the flesh that was cut off? *"Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air,*

the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others" (Ephesians 2:2, 3). The flesh that was cut off was our old nature and life and that which remained after the circumcision and remains is the nature and life of Christ. *"In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the death"* (Colossians 2:11, 12). Any circumcision is the taking away of the flesh, but the sign of the circumcision or outward circumcision in the flesh could not take away the flesh that displeases God. *So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God"* (Romans 8:8). The circumcision that would take away this flesh would and could never be the work of man's own hands. Only by the operation performed by the great Physician could this kind of flesh be cut away. So in a fore view of that which was to come, God gave Abraham an outward token of the true circumcision that He would perform at the cross.

Israel was in bondage down in Egypt, and through circumcision and the death of the Passover lamb, they came out. The Christ also was in bondage to the old life; and through circumcision and this death of the Lamb of God, we come out of bondage. Israel's experience in coming out of Egypt has been likened unto what happens to a Christian at salvation. As Israel rejoiced as they came out after having stood still and seen the salvation of the Lord, so the Christians sing praises unto the Savior unto this day.

LIVING AFTER THE SIGN

I mentioned earlier that I wanted to address the difference between the sign of circumcision and circumcision as spoken of in Genesis 17. From what we have already studied about the first circumcision, we can see what the covenant of circumcision is all about; but even as the Jews put the emphasis on the sign, so it is today. Christians know that we are not "to live after the flesh; for if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die..." (Romans 8:12, 13). Knowing this, most Christians set out to circumcise or put away the flesh. They try doing this through attending church, keeping commandment and "praying through" only to find that the flesh has just been temporarily subjected but has not been put away. The sins of the flesh continue to come forth; circumcision calls for the cutting away of the flesh and not the subjection of it.

How ridiculous to think that anything we can do outwardly will take away the flesh. On the other hand, there are those who desire to see an outward sign as proof of your circumcision. They want you to have their sign of circumcision in your flesh so that they can glory in their numbers. Paul spoke of this in Galatians 6:12: "As many as desire to make a fair show in the flesh, they constrain you to be circumcised; only lest they should suffer persecution for the cross of Christ."

They are not satisfied with the truth that the cross is all the circumcision you need. Because you cannot show them the cross like they can show you their *sign* of circumcision, then they persecute you for the cross of Christ. Their glory is in something they can see "that they may glory in your flesh" (verse 13). But our glory is in the true circumcision of the cross: "But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature" (verse 14, 15).

Notice two important phrases in these three verses: 1) they constrain you; 2) new creature. Both of those phrases are used in II Corinthians 5. But instead of Paul being constrained by man to have

an outward sign, he rather is constrained by the circumcision of the cross: "For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead" (II Corinthians 5:14). Here he speaks of the fact that the cross cut away all men, for all were born of the fleshly nature. But Jesus did more than destroy the flesh of our nature, for He imparted to us His very nature and here we find our second phrase: "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (verse 17).

We are constrained by the knowledge of the cross but those who seek a sign try to constrain you to display their mark of circumcision. Their *sign* could be the type of clothes they wear or the length of their hair or something that will distinguish them from others. If you are not *circumcised* with the sign the way they are, then they claim that you are not of God. Of this kind of people Jesus said, "An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign." The only sign Jesus would give was the sign of the cross: "and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matthew 12:38-40).

We find in Galatians 5:2 that if we start following the sign instead of the cross, then Christ shall profit us nothing. When circumcision is made outward in the flesh, then glorying takes place in the flesh. People do not need the flesh to be tinkered with but need the deeper work of the cross.

If the early church had thought an outward sign in the flesh was still needed since the work of the cross was completed, then in Acts 15 they would have told the Jews and Gentiles alike to continue to be circumcised. The only flesh Paul desired to be "cut off" was those that troubled the church: "And I, brethren, if I yet preach circumcision (outward), why do I yet suffer persecution? Then is the offence of the cross ceased. I would they were even cut off (circumcised) who trouble you" (Galatians 5:11, 12).

We try to circumcise ourselves, but even in this God made it impossible for us to carry it out as seen in the sign of the covenant: "And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every man child in your generations, he that is born in the house, or bought with money of any stranger, which is not of thy seed" (Genesis 17:12). It is totally impossible for an eight day old child to circumcise himself. I believe that this is why circumcision was done so soon after birth: so that the child could not do it for himself but would have to depend on his father to circumcise. The Christian cannot circumcise himself either but must depend on the Father, even on the operation of God, to bring about circumcision. Even Jess could not perform the circumcision on His own, for it is impossible to crucify yourself. It was performed by the Father (Isaiah 53).

THE SECOND CIRCUMCISION—THE HEART

The first circumcision took place before crossing the Red Sea out of the house of bondage. The second circumcision took place immediately after crossing the Jordan River in the promised land. "At that time (after entering the land) the Lord said unto Joshua, Make thee sharp knives, and circumcise again the children of Israel the second time" (Joshua 5:2).

It took circumcision and the death of the lamb to bring them out of bondage, and here again it took circumcision and also (in verse 10) the Passover lamb to bring them into the land promised: "And the children of Israel encamped in Gilgal, and kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the month at even in the plains of Jericho."

The spiritual truth and working of God demand that there be two circumcisions, but of course it is impossible to perform literal, physical circumcision on a man twice, so the historical fact of two circumcisions is explained in verses 4-7: "And this is the cause why Joshua did circumcise: All the people that came out of Egypt, that were males, even all the men of war, died in the wilderness by the way, after they came out of Egypt. Now all the people that came out were circumcised: but all the people that were born in the wilderness by the way as they came forth out of the children of Israel walked forty years in the wilderness, till all the people that were men of war, which came out of Egypt, were consumed, because they obeyed not the voice of the Lord: unto whom the Lord sware that he would not show them the land, which the Lord sware unto their fathers that he would give us, a land that floweth with milk and honey. And their children, whom he raised up in their stead, them Joshua circumcised: for they were uncircumcised, because they had not circumcised them by the way."

The first circumcision was likened unto the experience of the Christian at salvation where he is delivered from the hold of sin. The second circumcision is the act of bringing those who are children of God and already delivered into the inheritance. Moses gave us a description of this second circumcision: "And the Lord thy God will bring thee into the land which thy fathers possessed, and thou shalt possess it; and he will do thee good, and multiply thee above thy fathers. And the Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live" (Deuteronomy 30:5, 6).

So Moses informed Israel that upon entering the land a circumcision would take place—a circumcision of the heart. Now how does all this apply to the Christian? Many would have you to believe that the second circumcision relates to physical death when you will go on to be with the Lord eternally. This is simply not so! The heart of man will not be changed at death. Man is spirit, soul and body; and at salvation man was born of the Spirit of Christ. The soul or the heart of man was not changed at salvation. When Israel came out of Egypt all they knew was that a lamb had been slain and they were free. The only way this affected them was through a change of ownership. They were no longer Egypt's slaves but God's people. At salvation many Christians know that Jesus died and that they are free from sins and hell. A change of ownership has taken place, and they are no longer under the kingdom and rule of Satan but are now God's people. But just as Israel so also the Christian soon realizes that he still has a lot of problems inwardly. Israel murmured against leadership, tempted God, sought after things they should not have and continually angered the Lord. Though the spirit had been changed, yet the soul or the heart of the believer had not also taken part in the first circumcision. The circumcision of the heart is actually the believer coming to the knowledge (by the revelation of Jesus Christ) of what took place at the first circumcision.

We, before entering into the inheritance, always talk about what happened to Jesus and how He died for me and how He set me free at the first circumcision (the cross). But when the circumcision of the heart comes we begin to understand that we died at the cross. "I am crucified with Christ," Paul began to declare. What Jesus put an end to when He died on the cross was no Himself but us and our self life. The land of Canaan is a shadow of our life in Christ, and as Paul entered into the inheritance and received the second circumcision, he began to cry, "Christ liveth in me" (Galatians 2:20).

Christ does not come in you at the second circumcision, but your heart is circumcised to the truth of the Christ that has been there since the first circumcision. You are just now coming to the knowledge of it! For the first time the murmurings of the old life are silenced, and the life that is more than a conqueror, which is Christ, begins to possess the land. We have so many wilderness wanderers

who understand that Jesus died, but they do not know that “ye are dead” (Colossians 3:3) and that Christ is the only life that will please the Father.

Without the second circumcision, you will continue to live in the wilderness with the same motivations and lusts as you had in Egypt. The overall purpose of God was not just to bring Israel out obey the first circumcision but in by the second. Read 1 Corinthians 10:1-121 if you do not believe what I am telling you. It is very possible to be brought out of bondage only to fail to enter into the living of the life of Christ through the second circumcision. God is not just after saved sinners but sons of God in the image of Christ.

Paul was bold enough to name the name of the one that lived in him: “Not I, but Christ” (Galatians 2:20). You cannot truly claim Christ as the only life in your vessel until you have received the circumcision of the heart. Even the law will teach us this. A child in Israel may have been born into the family but remained nameless until the day of circumcision: “Now Elisabeth’s full time came that she should be delivered; and she brought forth a son... And it came to pass, that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child; and they called him Zacharias, after the name of his father. And his mother answered and said, not so; but he shall be called John” (Luke 1:57, 59, 60). “And when eight days were accomplished for the circumcising of the child, his name was called JESUS, which was so named of the angel before he was conceived in the womb” (Luke 2:21).

Notice that His name was Jesus before HE was even conceived, but they could not truly call Him that until the day of circumcision. Though many are born again, many are not able to say with Paul, “Not I, but Christ liveth in me.” Paul did not begin declaring that it was Christ living in him until after he was circumcised. “I am crucified (circumcised) with Christ: nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me...” (Galatians 2:20).

When we receive the circumcision of the heart, then we understand the circumcision that took place at new birth at the cross. Our understanding changes from what God did for me and me serving God to Christ living in me for the good pleasure of the Father. We proclaim the name that was ours at new birth but could not claim until the circumcision took place.

The name is given at circumcision at eight days old. Remember that an eight day old child cannot circumcise himself. The responsibility of the child was not to circumcise himself but to (when he become mature) come to the knowledge and purpose of that circumcision that he had experienced at his birth. Once again we must apply this to Christians. This was the circumcision that Moses spoke of to Israel: “Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiff-necked” (Deuteronomy 10:16); “And the Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live” (Deuteronomy 30:6). So the first circumcision is that of the cross and the second is that of the heart.

After seeing the importance of the two circumcisions, can you see why it is so foolish to preach a third—the circumcision in the flesh? This is why Paul is so against the Jews teaching that the Gentiles must be physically circumcised. “For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God” (Romans 2:28-29). Notice how Paul contrasted the Jews’ circumcision with that of the cross and shows theirs as foolish. “As many as desire to make a fair show in the flesh, they constrain you to be circumcised; only lest they should suffer persecution for the cross of Christ. For neither they themselves

who are circumcised keep the law; but desire to have you circumcised, that they may glory in your flesh. But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature" (Galatians 6:12-15). At the first circumcision, you understood that you are a new creature; at the second, you realize that the new man is Christ and this is the only thing that avails eternally and not some outward sign in the flesh. There is no mark in the flesh that can give you life, but marks of the circumcision of the cross remind you of the only life that lived through the cross: "From henceforth let no man trouble me: for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus" (verse 17).

We can now understand the significance of the two circumcisions, but how does the Christian enter into the land? How does he move out of being a wilderness wanderer? How can he experience the second circumcision? The circumcision of the heart is accomplished in the Word of God. Though we are born again as a result of the circumcision of the cross, our minds are yet carnally motivated and fleshly (Colossians 2:18; Romans 8:7, 8). The veil of flesh must be taken away that we might see Jesus (II Corinthians 3:15).

The Spirit of God is about the task of dealing with the hearts and minds of the believers. The tool of circumcision that he uses to cut away the fleshly mind is "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12). The sword of the Spirit is able to cut deeply to divide flesh from soul and soul from spirit, for it discerns "the thoughts and intents of the heart." This cutting process is continual and can never start much less continue unless the believer brings his mind in subjection to the Word of God. To go to the Scriptures to find a few words of comfort or to find some new precious promise does not constitute submission to circumcision. It is as if one goes to the tool of circumcision and picks it up and handles it for a while and puts it down and goes his own way. The tool of the circumcision is no good unless it is used for the purpose intended—to cut off the flesh. Many are there who handle the Word of God deceitfully (II Corinthians 4:2). They appear spiritual in that they handle and are seen with the Word of God, but they refuse to let it do its perfect work. The beginning of the circumcision is not immediate upon looking in the Scriptures. We must subject our mind to the Scripture for a long while, filling our mind with it and preparing an environment in our mind so that the Holy Spirit might perform the operation. Only the heart that spends much time in the scriptures crying out to see the Lord will be circumcised. After a period of time (which time is controlled by the Father), the Holy Spirit will begin the process of circumcision. This is not another experience I am speaking of, for the process of circumcision begins but should never end unless we withdraw our mind from the place of cutting. This circumcision of the heart is nothing more than a continual process of growing in the knowledge of what happened at the cross.

The whole covenant of God of old time was based on the circumcision of the foreskin. The new covenant is also based on circumcision—that of the heart. Had Israel experienced the first circumcision only, they would have continued to wander in the wilderness in total confusion. The Christian can identify with Christ in the first circumcision at the cross, but unless the circumcision of the heart takes place, he will continually wander in circles as Israel and continually murmur and be confused and be lukewarm in his commitment to the Lord. But thank God there are those who are willing to have the tool of circumcision applied that they may know yet more and more the depth of the cross of our Lord.