CIRCUMCISION OF HEART

Catechism Two, Lesson 17

Reading: Colossians 2:9–15

1. What Is The Relation Of Water Baptism To The New Covenant?

As the circumcision of the flesh was to the Old Covenant, so the circumcision of the heart received in water baptism is to the New Covenant.

A. Circumcision is an initiation into the Covenant.

Both the Old and the New Covenant are ratified through the initiatory rite of circumcision. Abraham and Moses learned that God required each male child to be circumcised in the foreskin of the flesh as a sign of covenant. So necessary was obedience to this initiation that those who did not obey were cut off from God and from His people.

And God said unto Abraham, Thou shalt keep my covenant therefore, thou, and thy seed after thee in their generations. 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. And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you. 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. He that is born in thy house, and he that is bought with thy money, must needs be circumcised: and my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. 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 (Gen. 17:9–14).

Under the Old Covenant every male was circumcised—and thus separated unto the Lord—regardless of the state of his heart. The reality of this sanctification could only be effected by Christ. Therefore, Christian initiation (baptism) can—indeed, must—involve heart reality in addition to external rite.

B. Circumcision is the seal of faith.

Abraham had already been justified because he had believed God. Righteousness had been imputed to him on the basis of his faith. But God required a further step, a sign of the covenant. He was to bear in his own body a personal reminder of his relationship to God. Similarly, under the New Covenant, justification is on the basis of faith. But the gospel requires us to go beyond believing to baptism—“he that believeth and is baptized shall be saved” (Mark 16:16).

And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised; that righteousness might be imputed unto them also (Rom. 4:11).

C. Circumcision is a mark of belonging.

Natural and spiritual Israel share in having a special token of membership in the redeemed community. God sets aside as His own possession those He has selected and called. For natural Israel this was

circumcision of the flesh; for spiritual Israel it is the circumcision of the heart. In either case, the people of God were set apart to become a praise in the earth—this is the meaning of the word “Jew.”

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature. And as many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God (Gal. 6:15, 16).

(Note: In this context, Paul is contrasting physical circumcision with real spiritual change, cf. Rom. 2:28, 29.)

God had a reason for adding circumcision to the covenant. It was a visible sign to the believer and to the nations that he belonged to God and was bound to Him.

2. Is Circumcision Of Heart A Symbol Or A Real Experience?

Under both covenants, circumcision is real. In the first Covenant, it is a natural or fleshly circumcision, involving only the physical body. Under the New Covenant, circumcision changes the innermost part of our being.

(1) Under the Old Covenant real blood was shed and a cut made in the skin. A portion of a man’s body, a layer of skin, was cut from him. God required the removal of something with which he was born. This was to show the intervention of God upon his life. Since he had met God and entered into covenant relationship, he was not the same.

(2) Under the New Covenant something spiritual is removed from us, but it is something equally real. Our old “fleshly” nature, called “the old man” or “the body of sin” is cut away from us when we are buried with Christ in baptism. Something is really buried. The enmity between us and God comes to an end.

In Him also you were circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands, but in a [spiritual] circumcision [performed by] Christ by stripping off the body of the flesh [the whole corrupt, carnal nature with its passions and lusts]. [Thus you were circumcised when] you were buried with Him in [your] baptism, in which you were also raised with Him [to a new life] through [your] faith in the working of God [as displayed] when He raised Him up from the dead (Col. 2:11, 12, Ampl.).

3. When Does This Circumcision Of The Heart Take Place?

We need to analyze with care the above Scripture quotation. This particular translation is both clear and faithful to the original Greek.

(1) This circumcision takes place “in Him.” We must be in Christ in order to receive any of His benefits.

(2) It is a spiritual circumcision performed by Christ Himself through the agency of the Holy Spirit.

(3) It is not a gradual overcoming of the self-life but a dramatic and instantaneous stripping away of the whole corrupt carnal nature.

(4) This takes place when we are baptized into Christ. The Greek form here is a participle—a verb which would end in “-ing” if in English. But the root shows the action as at a specific moment in time. It is the moment of our water baptism.

(5) This circumcision requires our cooperation of obedient faith.

4. What Are The Results Of Receiving A Circumcised Heart?

When God intervenes in our lives to impose Himself upon us, we are indeed changed. Circumcision of heart is no exception. Our whole personality is transformed and we enter an entirely new spiritual dimension. What was formerly out of reach in regard to serving God now becomes ours. We are truly new creatures!

A. We are free to love God and live.

Love transforms obedience from drudgery to delight.

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 (Deut. 30:6).

B. We can worship in Spirit and truth.

We can become the kind of worshippers the Father is seeking.

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

C. Our inner rebellion, stubbornness, and enmity (or hostility) is destroyed.

It is possible to have that inner war stop; we don’t have to go on fighting God.

Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked (Deut. 10:16).

D. We begin to hear God and to respond with cooperation.

A circumcised ear is not possible without a circumcised heart. As long as we are resisting the Holy Spirit, we will fight the things we need the most in God.

Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye (Acts 7:51).

E. God can write in the fleshly tables of our hearts.

It is no longer necessary for God to thunder His commandments from outside. He does not need to chisel them into stone. He can so plant them in our hearts that they become our “second nature.”

For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord; I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people (Heb. 8:10).

Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in the fleshy tables of the heart (2 Cor. 3:3).

F. We become receptive to the Holy Spirit.

It is much easier to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit when we are no longer fighting God inside. We can be comfortable to have Him move in to stay.

A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them.… and ye shall be my people, and I will be your God (Ezek. 36:26–28).

(Note: Other results could be added to this list by studying a concordance and tracing all the related passages. We can see by these already listed that circumcision of heart is an absolute necessity if we are to walk perfectly before God (Gen. 17:1, 2).)

5. What Is God’s Main Purpose In Circumcising Our Hearts?

God has always wanted a people all His own. But God is not only Spirit, but Love. Love must have response if fellowship is to result. Man could not love God without a deep inner change, a radical operation upon his heart. By changing man’s heart toward Himself, God has now made the possession of His people a reality. It is now possible for them to respond in the language He knows best: spontaneous self-giving love.

And I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within you; and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them an heart of flesh: That they may walk in my statutes, and keep mine ordinances, and do them: and they shall be my people, and I will be their God (Ezek. 11:19, 20).

Covenant loyalty to God and His people is only possible from a re-created heart.

Home Study: Lesson 17

Name\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. The word “circumcision” very simply means “the cutting around.” In what two basic ways is it used in Scripture?

a. It is used of the \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_cutting of the flesh of the 8 day old child under the Old Covenant.

b. It is used of the \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_operation performed by faith upon the heart under the New Covenant.

2. In 1 Corinthians 3 and in several other Scriptures, the two covenants are contrasted. List as many of these as you can find, and cite the references you used.

a. The Old Covenant was \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, in that it emphasized outward observances.

b. The New Covenant is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, because God is dealing with the heart of man.

References \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

c. The Old Covenant was written on \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

d. The New Covenant was written in the \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

References \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

a. The Old Covenant was a ministration of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

b. The New Covenant ministers \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

References \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

a. The Old Covenant was in the \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_of the law.

b. The New Covenant is the working of the \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_in our hearts.

References \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

3. What was the major reason for requiring circumcision in connection with the Old Covenant?

It was an \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

4. When does circumcision take place under the New Covenant? Give Scripture.

5. How is a circumcised heart different from our old heart?