

Circumcision and Baptism

'7n whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins o f the flesh by the circumcision o f Christ'-Col. 2:11

An attempt is often made to justify infant sprinkling by a comparison with circumcision. To such as have no desire to discover the real truth of the matter but who merely want to support the orthodox tradition of baby sprinkling, this argument appeals strongly. An honest and careful investigation, however, soon shows the groundlessness of such a position.

The argument is that baptism under the Christian dispensation corresponds with circumcision under the Mosaic, and that inasmuch as circumcision was performed a few days after birth, so baptism should be. This has a superficial appearance of plausibility, but the simple answer is that it is not true and there is not a shred of evidence to support it.

In some respects they are similar. But in other respects, equally important, they are very dissimilar. It is the height of folly and presumption to nullify and ignore plain commandments relating to the one on the basis of an inferred identity with the other. Any reasonable mind will readily agree with this. Any reasonable mind will be convinced that our first duty in the matter is to learn what God has commanded us to do, and to obey it as faithfully as possible.

An ignorance of what the Scriptures teach and command regarding baptism, and a hazy identification of it with something that differs from it in many fundamental respects, is clearly no way to please God and no safe course to follow.

It will surely be agreed, as a self-evident truth, that we are never at liberty to alter or nullify God's commands to ourselves on the very questionable basis of a supposed inference from a very different ordinance related to a people of a different dispensation, described as the "weak and beggarly elements" (Gal. 4:9) and "the law of a carnal commandment" (Heb. 7:16).

This is the crucial point at issue and cannot be overstressed. It is very clear. There is nothing involved or obscure. God, according to His divine prerogative, varies His commands and ordinances according to times and circumstances. Our concern is to fully understand and faithfully obey those relating to us, without the mischievous tampering of presumptuous speculation. God has given us certain definite commands concerning baptism. We have no justification whatever for ignoring these and substituting something else. Surely if we are really trying to please God it should not be necessary to emphasize this point! But a look around us at the so-called Christian world shows us, sadly enough, that it is necessary.

Simple obedience will not do. It does not gratify the urge to self-importance. The simple truth is not good enough. Man must needs set himself up as an authority and constantly meddle with God's holy and divine appointments.

Sincere people, commencing an inquiry into divine matters, sometimes wonder how it can be possible for Christendom to be so far astray from the truth of the Scriptures. The answer lies in the attitude and frame of mind with which Christendom views its own

position. We find, strangely enough, that it has no qualms about being astray from the truth. It cannot conceive of itself being astray at all. It may change and alter and experiment and revise, but "all is for the best." There is no piercing this armor of self-approval, except with the two-edged sword of eternal and revealed truth.

But Christendom has little regard for the Word of God. It has far more confidence in its own powers of reasoning. To Christendom at large, Scripture is not the authoritative Voice of God. You may accept what part of it you wish as divine. You may interpret it according to your own whim. And even then you are free to receive or reject what it contains. Christendom admittedly prefers its own "common sense."

This viewpoint is strikingly illustrated by the late renowned "Dean" Stanley. He says, speaking of this very ordinance "The Eastern Church, indeed, with its usual tenacity of ancient forms, still immerses, but in the Western Church the Christian Religion has taken its free and natural course; and in the boldness which substituted a few drops of water for the ancient bath, which pronounced a charitable judgment on the innocent babe who dies without sacraments . . . we have at once the best proof of the total and necessary divergence of modern from ancient doctrine . . . It is a striking example of the triumph of common-sense and convenience over the bondage of form and custom."

Let us ponder that statement deeply. Here is the whole answer to Christendom's condition. Such are the "Fathers" of the Church-presumptuous man priding himself on setting aside the ordinances of God at the dictates of his own "commonsense and convenience"!

Let us direct our attention in relief to that "light shining in a dark place" that is "able to make us wise unto salvation."

The inauguration of circumcision is recorded in Gen. 17. It is a command from God to Abraham and binding upon all his male descendants upon the penalty of being "cut off from among his people" (v. 14). In v. 11 we are told that it is a "token of the covenant" between God and Abraham. The covenant was (vs. 4-8) that God would be the God of Abraham and his seed, that He would' make them a great nation and give them the land of promise for an everlasting possession.

In v. 12 we learn that it was to be performed on the eighth day after birth, and that it applied to all who entered the congregation, Israelite or stranger. It was not dependant or contingent upon the disposition or consent of the individual. The will or intentions of the individual had no effect on the case in any way. All must be circumcised. In Exo. 4 we find that an angel of the Lord sought to kill Moses because he had neglected to circumcise his son. From this we learn that the responsibility was not imputed to the subject of circumcision but to the parent.

There are one or two figurative references in the Old Testament. Moses says (Deut. 10:16): "Circumcise your heart and be no more stiffnecked," and similarly in Deut. 30:6. Here are hints that circumcision symbolized a certain disposition that was pleasing to God, consisting of a cutting off of the wilfulness of the flesh and an obedience to Him. The ordinance was a token that it was upon this basis and understanding that God had made His covenant with the nation. Circumcision was a part of the "patterns of things in the heavens" to which Paul refers (Heb. 9:23), and as such it had a typical significance, a

cutting off of the natural and sinful impulses of the flesh. God through Jeremiah says similarly (4:4)

"Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, lest My fury come forth because of the evil of your doings.

Turning to the New Testament we find this further illustrated. Most of Paul's references to it are to the point that it was part of the system of carnal ordinances that was done away with at the death of Christ. He reasons that the act itself, being a part of the old system, was no longer required, but that the disposition it symbolized was the important thing. To have the outward sign without the inward mental attitude was only selfcondemnation. The one but typified the necessity of the other:

"Circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit and not in the letter" (Rom. 2:29).

He says further in Rom. 2:25 (and we must remember that he is here laying his basis for the principle of justification by faith),

"Circumcision verily profiteth-if thou keep the Law."

Some tried to insist upon circumcision of all believers, but this showed a failure to understand the purpose of Christ's sacrifice and therefore was a fatal error. Paul says to them

"If ye be circumcised CHRIST SHALL PROFIT YOU NOTHING" (Gal. 5:2).

The way opened by Christ put away the necessity of individual circumcision. It put away the necessity of individual conformance with all the ordinances of the Law. They were all fulfilled in Christ. Christ fulfilled and finished the Law, because after him there was n& one for it to apply to. This is the big point. The Law illustrated God's righteous requirements. By its standard of perfection it demonstrated man's inability to fulfill the righteousness of God. By its system of sacrifices it pointed to the necessity of a perfect man who could fulfill God's righteousness, earn its reward of life, and through whom man could approach God and God could bless man.

When this was accomplished in Christ the Law had fulfilled its purpose. It was not given, let us clearly understand, to tantalize man by the setting down of conditions which he could not fulfill; it was given, says Paul (Rom. 8:13) to demonstrate the weakness of flesh and the sinfulness of sin, and to prove the necessity of the way that the mercy of God was providing for man's redemption.

Christ fulfilled the Law for all. All who accept God's merciful provision are regarded as justified by the obedience Christ had rendered. Christ was the last one to whom the Law applied. It ceased with his death just as the laws of a country cease when the last inhabitant of that country dies. All believers after him are considered part of him. The Law only applies to them through him, and he has already rendered to it all it can claim

"For Christ is the END OF THE LAW for righteousness to everyone that believeth" (Rom. 10:4).

See what he says in the previous verse, speaking of the Jews "They being ignorant of God's righteousness (the righteous ness of faith through Christ) and going about to

establish

their own righteousness (by the works of the Law), have not submitted themselves to the righteousness of God."

"Going about to establish their own righteousness." This brings us back to the point in Galatians (5:2)

"If ye be circumcised Christ shall PROFIT YOU NOTHING."

Why? Because to insist upon circumcision is to miss the whole meaning of Christ's work. It is "going about to establish one's own righteousness." Paul continues (v. 3)

"For I testify again to every man that is circumcised that he is a debtor to do the whole law. Christ is -become of no effect unto you. Ye are fallen from grace."

If we accept Christ, circumcision is unnecessary-if circumcision is insisted upon, then a man must depend upon himself alone and render a perfect obedience to the Law, which is impossible.

Not that Paul taught that the mere act of circumcision itself would deprive a man of the benefits of Christ's sacrifice, but the insistence upon its necessity would. Of itself the act meant nothing. Twice he says to the Galatians, "In Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth anything, not uncircumcision" (Gal. 5:6; 6:15). And again to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 7:18), "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing."

To the Romans he especially points out (Rom. 4:10) that Abraham's faith was reckoned to him for righteousness before he was circumcised, and that circumcision was but a seal of the righteousness of faith that he had already been given.

It is sometimes asked why Paul had Timothy circumcised as recorded in Acts 16:3, in view of his statement that, "If ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing" (Gal. 5:2). But we have seen that Paul attached no importance either to the performance or the omission of the act itself. His strong stand was in regard to reliance upon it.

Now Timothy was half Jewish. He should have been circumcised before, according to the Law. His uncircumcision in such a position was a reproach in the eyes of the Jews. Under such circumstances, and dealing with the Jews whose feelings and prejudices were strong, Paul thought it wiser to have him circumcised, to remove occasion for cavil, though he attached no importance to the operation. His reason, as given, is "because of the Jews that were in those quarters." Paul here acted in accord with the principle he describes elsewhere

"Unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews, to them that are under the Law as under the Law that I might gain them that are under the Law" (1 Cor. 9:19-22).

There is a very enlightening incident recorded at the time of Paul's last visit to Jerusalem. This was quite late in his ministry, we note, and just before his imprisonment at Rome. James and the elders in Jerusalem say to Paul (Acts 21:20)

"Thou seest, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are which believe; and they are all zealous of the Law."

This is hard to understand inasmuch as they had the very apostles themselves to teach them the truth in Christ, but it illustrates the difficulties of this period of transition and shows clearly that under the patient guidance of the Spirit, the early church was still in the process of developing that complete understanding referred to by Paul (Eph. 4:13) as

"The perfect man, the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ in the unity and knowledge of the faith." Continuing in Acts (v. 21)

"And they are informed of thee, that thou teachest all the Jews which are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children, neither to walk after the customs."

Then they arrange for Paul to publicly fulfill a vow, that (v. 24): "All may know that these things whereof they were informed concerning thee are nothing, and that thou thyself also walkest orderly, and keepest the Law."

So we see that Paul did not teach the Jews to forsake Moses, he did not teach them not to circumcise their children, and he himself kept the Law. In Acts 22:12 he speaks of Ananias at Damascus, who received him at his conversion, as

"A devout man according to the Law, having a good report of all the Jews."

Now how is all this to be reconciled with his uncompromising stand against the Law in the epistles to the Romans, Galatians and Hebrews?

The answer seems to be this. It was the mission of the apostles, not to antagonize the Jews, but to persuade them. Their message was that the Law was fulfilled in Christ and was no longer binding upon them, but ingrained as the Law was into their national fibre this was a very difficult and delicate undertaking. To have been precipitate would have destroyed all possibility of good and rather created chaos. We have many instances of how easily even an apparent infraction of the law would throw the Jews into a fanatical uproar. If each believer, as he began to comprehend the freedom of Christ, had immediately cut off all the forms of the Law, a condition of strife and confusion would have resulted in which further teaching would have been impossible. So prejudices were patiently borne with until they were dispelled by enlightenment.

Even the apostles themselves took time to learn these things. Peter's lesson in relation to Cornelius was a great and shocking revelation to him. And later again we see him wavering on this very point, and Paul finds it necessary to rebuke him. Peter through fear of the Jews, we are told (Gal. 2), withdrew from eating with the Gentile Christians. This was a point Paul could not concede, regardless of the consequences. He had no desire to anger the Jews, and he kept the Law himself, but when it became an issue affecting the fellowship and communion of the church, a clear stand must be taken whatever the cost. The seriousness with which Paul regarded the dissimulation of Peter is shown by his describing it as (Gal. 2:14)

"Walking not uprightly according to the truth of the Gospel."

And again, when principle was in question (Gal. 2:3-5), Paul resolutely refused to have Titus, a Gentile, circumcised to satisfy the prejudices of certain Judaizers. So it becomes clear that though in all things the apostles endeavored to avoid violating the

scruples of the Jews they were trying to persuade, still whenever any question of truth or principle was at issue, they refused to compromise the freedom of the Gospel, or allow its teaching to be obscured.

Circumcision as a national custom they did not oppose. They endorse its practice to avoid offence, but they firmly taught that to insist upon it as necessary to salvation or as of any religious value was to reject Christ.

Reviewing, we have seen that circumcision was a national ordinance, imposed upon all regardless of any personal considerations. It was the token of a national covenant-its national, as contrasted to individual, character is further shown by the fact that it only applied to a representative half (the males) of the people. It was given to Abraham after his justification and acceptance by God, and, in like manner in each case performed it did not bring the individual into the covenant, it was a token that they were already under that covenant-it was a seal of the fact that God had previously chosen them as a peculiar nation, regardless of their will in the matter.

It was a permanent mark of distinction, a constant reminder of their unique position before God. It was a command to parents in regard to their children. Its performance was not consequent upon the volition, knowledge, consent or belief of the individual. It was part of the system classified as "carnal ordinances"-that is, it had but a mechanical or ritualistic effect,

"Not making the subject of it perfect, as pertaining to the conscience" (Heb. 9:9).

It had nothing to do with the remission of individual sins, for it was performed before any sins were committed. It was a type of purity, separation, and putting off the sins of the flesh. There is not the slightest hint anywhere in Scripture that a child dying uncircumcised went to torment and a child dying circumcised to heaven, or that circumcision had any effect at all upon a child, except to permit it to remain in the congregation of Israel. In apostolic times to insist upon its necessity was to reject Christ and return to the rudiments and shadows of mechanical ritual. Whether or not a man had been circumcised had no bearing of any kind upon his necessity for baptism, clearly showing that one was not a substitute for the other.

All familiar with the truth concerning baptism will perceive many points of difference between these two ordinances, and will further perceive how foolish and dangerous it is to reason superficially from one to the other. It would be just as reasonable to baptize only males as to baptize infants on the strength of the argument from circumcision.

There is one clear and outstanding feature of scriptural baptism that above all others effectually destroys the argument that it may be performed at birth after the manner of circumcision. BAPTISM, to be scriptural and effective, MUST BE PRECEDED by BELIEF IN THE INDIVIDUAL. This was not required in circumcision. Here is the big difference between them. The Scriptures are very clear on the necessity of belief. Anyone truly desiring to be guided by the Word cannot arrive at any other conclusion "When they believed, they were baptised" (Acts 8:12).

"He that BELIEVETH and is baptised shall be saved" (Mark 16:16).

We are buried and risen "with Christ in baptism, through faith-"pistis," belief-same word (Col. 2:12).

"Baptism• doth now save us-the ANSWER OF A GOOD CONSCIENCE" (I Pet :21).

"REPENT, and be baptised" (Acts 2:38).

"Many BELIEVED, and were baptised" (Acts 18:8).

"Without BELIEF it is impossible to please God-he that cometh to God must BELIEVE" (Heb. 11:6).

The truth seeker will not be convinced by the shallow, superficial arguments of an apostate Church, who condemn themselves out of their own mouths. "Dean" Stanley, whom we quoted earlier, and who admittedly preferred "common sense and convenience" to Holy Scripture, himself declares:

"There is no one who would now wish to go back to the old practice. It had, no doubt, the sanction of the Apostles and their Master. (but) Speaking generally, the whole Christian World has decided against it. The change from immersion to sprinkling has set aside the larger part of the apostolic language regarding baptism and has altered the very meaning of the word."

And so a corrupt Church glories in its very shame. What hope is there of awakening them? --G.V.G.