

QUESTION 70

Circumcision

Next we have to consider those things that are preparations for baptism: first of all, the preparation that preceded baptism, viz., circumcision (question 70) and, second, the preparations that occur together with baptism, viz., catechesis and exorcism (question 71).

On the first topic there are four questions: (1) Was circumcision a preparation for and prefigurement of baptism? (2) Was circumcision instituted in a fitting manner? (3) Was the rite of circumcision appropriate? (4) Did circumcision confer justifying grace as an effect?

Article 1

Was circumcision a preparation for and prefigurement of baptism?

It seems that circumcision was not a preparation for or a prefigurement of baptism (*circumcisio non fuerit praeparatoria et figurativa Baptismi*):

Objection 1: Every prefigurement bears some similarity to what it is a figure of. But circumcision bears no similarity to baptism. Therefore, it seems that it was not a preparation for or prefigurement of baptism.

Objection 2: In 1 Corinthians 10:2 the Apostle, speaking of the ancient fathers, says, "... they were all baptized in the cloud and in the sea." But he does not say that they were baptized in circumcision. Therefore, the protection afforded by the column of the cloud, along with the crossing of the Red Sea, were a preparation for and prefigurement of baptism more than circumcision was.

Objection 3: It was explained above (q. 38, aa. 1 and 3) that the baptism of John was a preparation for the baptism of Christ. Therefore, if circumcision was a preparation for and prefigurement of the baptism of Christ, it seems that the baptism of John was superfluous. But this is wrong. Therefore, it is not the case that circumcision was a preparation for and prefigurement of baptism.

But contrary to this: In Colossians 2:11-12 the Apostle says, "You have been circumcised with a circumcision not wrought by hand, in the despoiling of the body of the flesh, but with a circumcision that is of Christ, buried with Him in baptism."

I respond: Baptism is called the sacrament of faith, viz., insofar as (a) in baptism a certain profession of faith is made and (b) through baptism a man is added to the congregation of believers (*aggregatur homo congregationi fidelium*). Now our faith is the same as that of the ancient fathers—this according to the Apostle in 2 Corinthians 4:13 ("... having the same spirit of faith, we believe"). But circumcision was a sort of declaration of faith (*quaedam protestatio fidei*), and through circumcision the ancients were brought together into a community of believers (*congregabantur collegio fidelium*). Hence, it is clear that circumcision was a preparation for baptism and prefigured it to the extent that, as 1 Corinthians 10:11 points out, "all those things happened to the ancient fathers as a prefigurement" of the future, in the same way that their faith had to do with the future.

Reply to objection 1: Circumcision did bear a similarity to baptism with respect to the spiritual effect of baptism. For just as through circumcision a small piece of bodily skin is removed, so through baptism a man is despoiled of a carnal way of life.

Reply to objection 2: The protection afforded by the column of the cloud and by the crossing of the Red Sea were prefigurements of our baptism, by which we are reborn from water, signified by the Red Sea, and from the Holy Spirit, signified by the column of the cloud, but no profession of faith was being made through those things, as it was through circumcision. And that is why the two things just mentioned were only prefigurements and not sacraments. By contrast, circumcision was a sacrament and a preparation for baptism, even though it prefigured baptism less expressly with respect to externals than

the two things in question did. And that is why the Apostle mentioned those things rather than circumcision.

Reply to objection 3: The baptism of John was a preparation for the baptism of Christ with respect to the exercise of the act, but, as has been explained, circumcision was a preparation for baptism with respect to the profession of faith, which is required in baptism.

Article 2

Was circumcision instituted in a fitting manner?

It seems that circumcision was not instituted in a fitting manner (*circumcisio fuerit inconvenienter instituta*):

Objection 1: As has been explained, in circumcision a certain profession of faith was being made. But no one has ever been able to be saved from the sin of the first man except through faith in Christ's passion—this according to Romans 3:25 ("... whom God has set forth as a propitiation through faith in His blood"). Therefore, circumcision should have been instituted immediately after the sin of the first man and not at the time of Abraham.

Objection 2: In circumcision a man professed that he would observe the Old Law, just as in baptism an individual professes that he will observe the New Law; hence, in Galatians 5:3 the Apostle says, "I testify to every man who has himself circumcised that he is bound to observe the whole Law." But the observance of the Law was handed down not at the time of Abraham, but at the time of Moses. Therefore, it was unfitting for circumcision to have been instituted at the time of Abraham.

Objection 3: Circumcision was a preparation for and prefiguration of baptism. But baptism is made available to all peoples—this according to Matthew 28:19 ("Go and teach all nations, baptizing them ..."). Therefore, circumcision should have been instituted to be observed by all peoples and not just by the one people of the Jews.

Objection 4: Carnal circumcision should correspond to spiritual circumcision as the prefiguration to what is prefigured. But spiritual circumcision, which is effected through Christ, belongs indifferently to both sexes, since, as Colossians 3:11 explains, "In Christ Jesus there is no male or female." Therefore, circumcision, which belongs only to males, was inappropriately instituted.

But contrary to this: We read in Genesis 17:10 that circumcision was instituted by God, "whose works are perfect" (Deuteronomy 32:4).

I respond: As has been explained (a. 1) circumcision is a preparation for baptism insofar as it was a sort of profession of faith in Christ, which we likewise profess in baptism. Now among the ancient fathers Abraham was the first to receive the promise concerning the Christ who was going to be born, when it was said to him in Genesis 22:18, "All the nations of the earth will be blessed in your seed." And he was likewise the first to separate himself from the society of non-believers, in accord with the command of the Lord, who said to him in Genesis 13:1, "Go forth away from your country and away from your kindred." And that is why it was fitting for circumcision to be instituted in Abraham.

Reply to objection 1: Immediately after the sin of the first parent, because of the knowledge had by Adam himself, who had been fully instructed concerning divine things, faith and natural reason still flourished in man to the extent that it was not necessary for any signs of faith and salvation to be directed toward men; instead, each one was professing his faith on his own by suitable signs. However, around the time of Abraham faith was waning and most had fallen in idolatry. In addition, natural reason was clouded by an increase in excessive sensual desire (*per augmentum carnalis concupiscentiae*) even with respect to sins contrary to nature. And so it was fitting for circumcision to be instituted at that time—and

not before—in order to promote faith and decrease carnal concupiscence.

Reply to objection 2: A legal observance should be given only to a people that has been brought together, since, as was explained in the Second Part (*ST* 1-2, q. 90, a. 2), a law is ordered toward the common good. But the people of the believers had to be brought together by a sign that could be sensed—which is necessary in order for men to be united to one another in any religion, as Augustine explains in *Contra Faustum*. And so circumcision had to be instituted before the Law was given. Hence, in Genesis 18:19 the Lord Himself says of Abraham, “I know that he will command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord.”

Reply to objection 3: Baptism contains within itself the perfection of salvation to which God calls all human beings—this according to 1 Timothy 2:4 (“... who wishes all men to be saved”). And so baptism is proposed to all the people. By contrast, circumcision did not contain the perfection of salvation, but signified it as something to be accomplished by the Christ, who was to be born of the Jewish people. And that is why circumcision was given only to that people.

Reply to objection 4: The institution of circumcision is, as it were, a sign of the faith of Abraham, who believed that he would be the future father of the Christ promised to him, and so it was fitting for circumcision to belong to males alone. Again, as was explained in the Second Part (*ST* 1-2, q. 81, a. 5), original sin, against which circumcision was specifically ordered, is drawn from the father and not the mother. By contrast, baptism contains Christ’s power, which is the universal cause of the salvation of all and of the remission of all sins.

Article 3

Was the rite of circumcision appropriate?

It seems that the rite of circumcision was not appropriate (*ritus circumcisionis non fuerit conveniens*):

Objection 1: As has been explained (aa. 1-2), circumcision is a sort of profession of faith. But faith is seated in the apprehensive power, the operation of which is especially apparent in the head. Therefore, the sign of circumcision should have been given in the head rather than in the member of generation.

Objection 2: For use in the sacraments we take up those things whose use is more common, e.g., water for washing and bread for eating. But for cutting we more commonly use an iron knife than a stone knife. Therefore, circumcision should not have been done with a stone knife.

Objection 3: Just as baptism was instituted as a remedy for original sin, so too with circumcision, as Bede explains. But at present baptism is not deferred until the eighth day, lest the young children be threatened with the danger of damnation because of original sin if they die unbaptized. Again, sometimes baptism is delayed until beyond the eighth day. Therefore, likewise the eighth day should not have been made determinate for circumcision; instead it should sometimes have been moved up, just as it should have sometimes been delayed.

But contrary to this: The aforementioned rite of circumcision is cited by a Gloss on Romans 4:11 (“And He received the sign of circumcision”).

I respond: As has been explained (a. 2), circumcision is a sort of sign of faith instituted by God, “whose wisdom has no measure” (Psalm 146:5). But it is a work of wisdom to decide upon appropriate signs. And so it should be conceded that the rite of circumcision was appropriate.

Reply to objection 1: It was appropriate for circumcision to be done in the member of generation. First of all, because it was a sign of the faith by which Abraham believed that it would be of his own seed

that the Christ was going to be born. Second, because circumcision was done as a remedy for original sin, which is passed on through the act of generation. Third, because circumcision is ordered toward weakening carnal concupiscence, which flourishes mainly in these members because of the intensity of sexual pleasure (*propter abundantiam delectationis venereorum*).

Reply to objection 2: A stone knife was not necessary for circumcision. Hence, we do not find such an instrument being designated by divine precept. Nor did the Jews commonly make use of such an instrument for circumcising, nor do they use it now.

Nevertheless, we read that certain well-known circumcisions were done with a stone knife. For instance, in Exodus 4:25 we read, “Sephora took a very sharp stone and circumcised the foreskin of her son.” And Joshua 5:2 says, “Make yourself knives of stone and circumcise a second time the children of Israel.” This prefigured the spiritual circumcision that was going to be done by the Christ, of whom it is said 1 Corinthians 10:4, “Now the rock was Christ.”

Reply to objection 3: The eighth day was fixed for circumcision, both (a) because of a mystery, since in the eighth age, which is the age of those who rise again and so is, as it were, the eighth day, the spiritual circumcision will be brought to completion by Christ, when He will take away not only sin, but also every punishment; and also (b) because of the tenderness of an infant before the eighth day. Hence, even in the case of other animals Leviticus 22:27 prescribes, “When a bull or a sheep or a goat has been brought forth, they shall spend seven days under the udder of their mother, whereas from the eighth day on they will be able to be offered to the Lord.”

Again, the eighth day was necessary by precept, with the result that those who delayed beyond the eighth day were committing a sin, even if the eighth day was a sabbath—this according to John 7:23 (“If a man receives circumcision on a sabbath in order that the Law of Moses might not be broken ...”). However, it was not necessary for the sacrament, since if any individuals missed the eighth day, they were able to be circumcised afterwards.

Again, some claim that because of an imminent danger of death, the eighth day could be anticipated. But this cannot be proved either from the authority of Scripture or from the custom of the Jews. Hence, it is better to claim, as Hugh of St. Victor does, that the eighth day was not anticipated for any sort of emergency. Thus, a Gloss on Proverbs 4:3 (“I was an only son in the eyes of my mother”) explains that Bathsheba’s other baby boy was not counted because, having died before the eighth day, he was not given a name and, consequently, was not circumcised, either.

Article 4

Did circumcision confer justifying grace?

It seems that circumcision did not confer justifying grace (*circumcisio non conferebat gratiam iustificantem*):

Objection 1: In Galatians 2:21 the Apostle says, “If justice comes from the Law, then Christ died for nothing (*gratis*),” i.e., without cause. But circumcision was a certain obligation of the Law that had to be fulfilled—this according to Galatians 5:3 (“I testify to every man who has himself circumcised that he is bound to observe the whole Law”). Therefore, if justice comes from circumcision, then Christ died for nothing, i.e., without cause. But this is wrong. Therefore, it is not the case that the grace that justifies one from sin came from circumcision.

Objection 2: Before the institution of circumcision, faith alone was sufficient for justification; for in *Moralia* 4 Gregory says, “What baptism is capable of doing among us, faith alone did for young children among the ancients.” But the power of faith is not diminished because of the commandment

concerning circumcision. Therefore, it was faith alone that justified the young children, and not circumcision.

Objection 3: In Joshua 5:5-6 we read, “The people who were born in the desert throughout the forty years had not been circumcised.” Therefore, if original sin was taken away through circumcision, then it seems that everyone who died in the desert, both children and adults alike, were damned. And the same objection applies to children who died before the eighth day of circumcision, which, as explained above (a. 3, ad 3), was not supposed to be anticipated.

Objection 4: Nothing except sin impedes entry into the kingdom of heaven. But those who were circumcised before Christ’s passion were blocked from entering the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, it is not the case that men were justified from sin through circumcision.

Objection 5: Original sin is not remitted without actual sin, since, as Augustine says, “It is impious to hope for a ‘half-forgiveness’ from God.” But we never read that actual sin was remitted through circumcision. Therefore, original sin was not remitted through it, either.

But contrary to this: In *Ad Valerium Contra Iulianum* Augustine says, “From the time that circumcision was instituted among God’s people as ‘a seal of the justice or righteousness belonging to faith’, it was capable of sanctifying her children by cleansing them from original sin and from past sin (*veterisque peccati*)—just as baptism likewise, from the time of its institution, began to be capable of renewing a man.”

I respond: It is commonly claimed by everyone that in circumcision original sin was remitted.

However, some have claimed that sin was remitted alone and that grace was not conferred. This is what the Master claims in *Sentences* 4, dist. 1, as does a Gloss on Romans 4:11. But this cannot be the case, since sin is remitted only through grace—this according to Romans 3:24 (“They are justified freely by His grace, etc.”).

And so others have claimed that through circumcision grace was conferred with respect to the remission of sin, but not with respect to its *positive* effects—lest they be forced to admit that (a) the grace conferred in circumcision is sufficient [for an individual] to fulfill the mandates of the Law and, as a consequence, that (b) Christ’s coming was unnecessary (*superfluus fuit adventus Christi*). But this position likewise cannot stand. First of all, because, through circumcision, what is given to the children is the ability in their own time to attain glory, which is the ultimate positive effect of grace. Second, because, in the order of *formal* causality, the positive effects are naturally prior to the privative effects, even though the converse is true in the order of *material* causality. For a form excludes the relevant privation only by informing the subject.

And so others have claimed that in circumcision grace was likewise conferred with respect to *some* positive effect, viz., to make one worthy of eternal life, but not with respect to *all* the effects, since it was not sufficient to repress the excessive sensual desire belonging to the stimulant [to sin] (*non sufficiebat reprimere concupiscentiam fomitis*) or, again, sufficient to fulfill the mandates of the Law. At one time this claim seemed correct to me as well, but it is apparent to one who considers the matter diligently that the claim is not true. For a minimum of grace is able to resist any sort of excessive sensual desire and to avoid all mortal sin that is committed in violation of the mandates of the Law, since a minimal charity loves God more than greed (*cupiditas*) loves “thousands of gold and silver pieces” (Psalm 118:72).

And so one should reply that in circumcision grace is conferred with respect to *all* the effects of grace, but in a way that differs from baptism. For in baptism grace is conferred by baptism’s own power, which it has insofar as it is an instrument of Christ’s passion as having already been completed. By contrast, circumcision conferred grace insofar as it was a sign of faith in the Christ’s future passion, so that, namely, a man who received circumcision professed—either for himself in the case of an adult or through someone else in the case of a young child—that he would accept such faith. Hence, in Romans 4:11 the Apostle says, “Abraham received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the justice of

faith”—since, namely, the justice came from the faith that was signified and not from the circumcision that signified it. And it is because baptism operates instrumentally in the power of Christ, whereas circumcision does not, that baptism imprints a character which incorporates the man into Christ and confers a more copious grace than circumcision does. For the effect of a reality that is already present is greater than the effect of hope.

Reply to objection 1: This argument would go through if justice or righteousness came from circumcision in some way other than through faith in the passion of the Christ.

Reply to objection 2: Just as, before the institution of circumcision, faith in the future Christ justified both children and adults, so, too, with the time following the institution of circumcision. But, before circumcision, a sign professing this faith was not required, since men of faith had not yet begun to unite themselves for the worship of the one God, separately from non-believers. Still, it is probable that faithful parents would pour out prayers to God for the children born to them, especially if they were in danger, or applied blessings to them—things that were a sign of their faith—in the same way that the adults were offering prayers and sacrifices for themselves.

Reply to objection 3: The people in the desert had an excuse for overlooking the mandate of circumcision, both because they did not know when the camp was going to be moved, and also because, as Damascene points out, it was unnecessary for them to have a sign of their distinctiveness while they were living apart from other peoples. However, as Augustine notes, those who omitted circumcision out of contempt incurred the sin of disobedience.

However, it seems that none of the uncircumcised died in the desert, since Psalm 104:37 says, “There was not one among their tribes that was infirm.” Instead, the only ones who died seem to have been those who had been circumcised in Egypt. However, if any of the uncircumcised did die in the desert, the same reasoning applies to them that applies to those who died before the institution of circumcision. And this should also be understood to apply to children who died before the eighth day during the time of the Law.

Reply to objection 4: In circumcision original sin was taken away on the part of the *person*, but on the part of the *whole nature* there remained an impediment to entering the kingdom of heaven—an impediment that was removed through Christ’s passion. But if circumcision had a place after Christ’s passion, it would give entrance into the kingdom.

Reply to objection 5: When adults were circumcised, they received remission not only of original sin, but also of actual sins, yet not in such a way that they were freed from every debt of punishment—as did happen with baptism, in which a more copious grace was conferred.