



# Cut Out the Rebellion

[2:11, 12]

Chris Bullard

*“And in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead” (2:11, 12).*

At age ninety-nine the patriarch Abraham awoke every morning anticipating news of the improbable. For twenty-four years he had lived daily in the hope of the promise given to him by God that his wife, Sarah, would become pregnant with a son. Already he had a son named Ishmael, born to him by his maidservant Hagar. One day God appeared to Abraham to renew the covenant between the two of them and at that time gave the patriarch a sign of that covenant:

Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations, a servant who is born in the house or who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of your descendants. A servant who is born in your house or who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised; thus shall My covenant be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. But an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the

flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant (Genesis 17:9-14).

## **CIRCUMCISION, A CHOSEN SIGN**

What is circumcision? The word literally means a “cutting off.” In actual practice it is the cutting off of some of the skin on a man’s reproductive organ. For a reason of His own choosing, God made this surgical act the sign of the covenant He made with Abraham and later with His people Israel.

Abraham was not the first person to be circumcised. The Arabians, Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, and Egyptians already practiced it. But God made this well-known act of circumcision the sign of His covenant. A man would be daily reminded that he had entered into a covenant with the Lord God.

Tragically, the Jewish people forgot across the years the significance of this symbol, just as we Christians often forget what the Lord’s Supper means. For many Jews, circumcision was simply a symbol to them that God had chosen them to be His people. Therefore, God would do things only for them which He did not promise to do for other nations. The physical act became all that was important; it got a person into the covenant. Whether or not he lived by the terms of the covenant did not matter, only that he had been circumcised. The Jews were so proud of their circumcised bodies, they never gave a thought to their uncircumcised hearts, lips, and attitudes.

The real significance of circumcision was not just that a man had entered into a covenant with God but that he also pledged himself to keep that covenant. The external act was to represent an internal reality. Jeremiah told the people of his day: "Thus says the Lord to the men of Judah and to Jerusalem, 'Break up your fallow ground, and do not sow among thorns'" (Jeremiah 4:3). The prophet was not giving a farming tip! Jeremiah was using an agricultural metaphor, and he meant, "Repent, and get the sin out of your lives."

The prophet quoted God as saying, "Circumcise yourselves to the Lord and remove the foreskins of your heart" (Jeremiah 4:4a). The prophet was pleading with the people to not be content with the external act of circumcision. "Complete the process," he was saying, "by circumcising your heart."

Later Jeremiah told the people:

"Behold, the days are coming," declares the Lord, "that I will punish all who are circumcised and yet uncircumcised—Egypt, and Judah, and Edam, and the sons of Ammon, and Moab, and all those inhabiting the desert who clip the hair on their temples; for all the nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised of heart" (Jeremiah 9:25, 26).

What did Jeremiah mean by being circumcised in heart? He meant that they were to cut out of their lives everything that was contrary to the terms of the covenant that they had entered into with God.

The New Testament reiterates this truth. Paul said that the ritual alone was not enough: "For indeed circumcision is of value, if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision" (Romans 2:25).

A boxer used to cross himself before he went into the ring to face an opponent. One fellow asked his friend, "Does it help to do that?" He replied, "It does if he can punch. If he can't, it won't do him any good at all." That was the way it was with circumcision. Paul said, "If you keep the law, then circumcision helps. If you don't keep the law, circumcision is a waste of time." The external act without the internal reality was useless. Not only did a piece of a man's skin have to be cut off, a cutting off in his heart of all that was against the heart of God had to be done.

Romans 2:28, 29 says, "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God."

## CIRCUMCISION, A SPIRITUAL ACT (2:11, 12)

You may think that all of this is academic, since you are not a Jew but a Gentile. On the contrary, this has a profound significance for your life as a Christian. As we turn to Colossians 2:11, 12, remember that the people to whom Paul wrote were also Gentiles.

Paul stated one great overriding fact: "You were also circumcised" (2:11a). That is past tense. It is completed action. At some point previously, every person who is in a covenant relationship with God has undergone a real "circumcision."

Notice five truths about the circumcision of every Christian. First, *it is a universal circumcision*. Under the Old Testament, circumcision was a sign given only to men. But in Christ the circumcision of which Paul spoke is for men and women. No qualifiers are here. Paul did not write "you men"; he literally wrote "you all." He included every Christian whether male or female. This immediately alerts us that what he said next was not about the traditional act of circumcision.

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Second, *it is a spiritual, not physical, circumcision*. Paul said, "With a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh" (2:11b).

Something is cut off. What is it? Something is literally removed. It is not a piece of skin, but rather

“the body of the flesh.” Some translations call it “the sinful nature.” It is that part of us that prompts us to do evil, to rebel against the will of God.

Before we become Christians the flesh controls our body and expresses itself in specific acts of defiance. Paul lists some of these in chapter 3: “Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry” (3:5). Unlike physical circumcision which simply removed a small portion of human skin, our spiritual circumcision removes an entire lifestyle. Gossip, hatred, jealousy, and selfishness have been cut out. Materialism has been excised. Pride has been removed. Spiritual circumcision is the cutting off from our heart every trace of sinful desire and rebellion.

To express the decisive nature of this act, Paul used a strong double compound word that means not just to “put off” but to “strip off and throw away.” You men know what it is like to come in from mowing the yard and strip off that sweaty T-shirt and fling it into the dirty clothes hamper. You just want to get rid of it; you do not want to wear it any longer. That is the imagery here. In spiritual circumcision we have our old selfish, sinful nature stripped out of our hearts.

The same word occurs again in verse 15: “When He had *disarmed* the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him.” (Emphasis mine.) At Calvary Jesus stripped Satan of his power over us. He cut off his authority to control our bodies. Jesus “neutralized” the forces of evil. When we were spiritually circumcised, our sinful nature was “neutralized.” Its power to control our bodies was cut off.

Third, *this spiritual circumcision was done by Jesus Christ*. Paul continued by saying that Christians were circumcised “by the circumcision of Christ” (2:11c).

Any priest could circumcise a man’s foreskin, but cutting the sinful nature out of the heart was a work only God could do. Spiritual surgery requires a spiritual physician. Our God came to earth, took on our humanity, did battle with the spiritual forces of evil, and finally cut off the power of evil to control our lives.

Fourth, *this spiritual circumcision is a completed experience*. As Paul said, “You were also circumcised,” he envisioned a past historical

event when this cutting off of the sinful nature took place. This is not something which is done every day. It is a once-for-all completed action. Just as in physical circumcision where a man’s skin was cut off once, never more to have to be done again, even so in spiritual circumcision, your old nature is cut out of your heart one time.

“If that is true,” someone will ask, “then why do I still sin? If my old sinful nature has been stripped out of my heart and thrown away by Jesus, why is it that I still rebel against God from time to time?” That is a good question. The answer is that even though your old nature that longs to rebel against God has been cut out, you still have your old body. It has been trained by years of experience to rebel against what God wants. Habits die hard. Your body expects to sin. Until you get your resurrection body in which holiness fully dwells, you will have to struggle to break the grip of sin in your life. The old sin nature will continually vie to regain the throne of your life, to retake possession of your heart.

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One final truth remains to be seen. *When did this spiritual circumcision take place?* The answer is: *You are spiritually circumcised at the historical moment of your baptism*: “Having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead” (2:12).

Baptism is not an optional extra. It is not something you do later *after* you become a Christian. Baptism, Paul said, is the time when you are circumcised by Jesus. Just as a Jew could look back to the day of his physical circumcision as

the day he entered God's covenant with Israel, now you can look back to the day of your baptism as the time when you entered into the new covenant inaugurated by Jesus. The day you were baptized Jesus cut off your sinful nature and gave you His new nature.

But baptism is more than a symbol of a "cutting off." Paul said it is also a burial and a resurrection. Let us think about these two parts of baptism for a moment.

The first half of baptism is a person being lowered into a watery grave. What happens in this liquid tomb? The person stops breathing. He closes his eyes. He looks like a corpse. That is because spiritually he is! And the old man, the sinful nature, is being buried.

Notice that Paul did not say, "Baptism is a symbol of burial." He said, "It is your burial." In that moment the person is making real in his own experience what Jesus did for him in His own death and burial at Calvary two thousand years ago. He is getting rid of the old man.

The other half of baptism is the resurrection. As Jesus came out of His tomb to new life by the power of God, even so the person being baptized comes out of his liquid tomb to a new life before God. He is a new creation. The sinful nature no longer has a right to control the body. The new Christian has entered into a covenant with God to cut off all the uncleanness that corrupted the old way of living.

Before anyone concluded that baptism itself is able to effect this change in his heart and life, Paul quickly added that this spiritual circumcision is done by Christ through one's faith in the power of God who worked a miracle in Jesus' life too. This is not baptismal regeneration. There is no power in the water! There is regeneration by Jesus Christ at the point in time of one's baptism.

If you have already experienced water baptism for the forgiveness of your sins, then you may look back to that day as the time when your sinful, rebellious nature was cut off and was buried and you were raised to a new life in the sight of God. That is what you are to hang on to. Whatever doubts assail you, whatever pressures come, whatever temptations come, you can say, "Look, Satan, I have been circumcised. I have been baptized. Therefore, I am dead to sin and alive to God. I say this to you, Satan, to remind you that you no longer have any power over me. That which once caused

me to rebel against my God has been cut out of my heart. Now my heart belongs wholly to God."

## CONCLUSION

Does your life show evidence of having been circumcised by Jesus? Do you have "circumcised" lips—lips that are dedicated to only the kind of speech Jesus would approve, lips that are free from filthy language? Do you have a "circumcised" heart that is free of jealousy, hatred, anger, lust, and pride? Do you have a "circumcised" ear that refuses to listen to gossip and divisive speech about others? How can you justify moral and spiritual immorality in your life if you have been circumcised by Jesus? If you have been truly baptized, your sinful nature was cut out of your heart by Jesus. Why are you still letting it control you?

You have been given fullness in Christ, and through Him you have mastery over every evil power and authority that wants to control you. You no longer have to sin. You do not have to engage in immorality. You can live in holiness.

Have you been baptized for the forgiveness of your sins? Then reject Satan's overtures, and remember that you have entered into a covenant with Jesus to be His child and to live according to His Spirit, not according to your sinful nature.

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## *A Portion of Himself*

"Emerson wrote a wonderful essay on 'Gifts' in which he said, 'Rings and other jewels are not gifts. They are apologies for gifts. The only gift is a portion of thyself.'

"'He gave his only begotten son'—a portion of Himself.

"Robert Browning has a poem entitled, 'One Word More.' It is the story of a man trying to express his love for a woman. He tried poetry, prose, paintings, sculpture, but always he fails and longs for one word more.

"Down through the centuries God had sought to reveal Himself in history, literature, prophecy, poetry, and through the lives of men. Then, in the fulness of time, He gave Himself. The love of God was made flesh and then we beheld His glory."

Charles L. Allen,  
*Roads to Radiant Living*