

THIRD PART, QUESTION 37

Of Christ's Circumcision, and of the Other Legal Observances Accomplished in Regard to the Child Christ (In Four Articles)

We must now consider Christ's circumcision. And since the circumcision is a kind of profession of observing the Law, according to Gal. 5:3: "I testify... to every man circumcising himself that he is a debtor to do the whole Law," we shall have at the same time to inquire about the other legal observances accomplished in regard to the Child Christ. Therefore there are four points of inquiry:

- (1) His circumcision;
- (2) The imposition of His name;
- (3) His presentation;
- (4) His Mother's purification.

Whether Christ should have been circumcised?

IIIa q. 37 a. 1

Objection 1. It would seem that Christ should not have been circumcised. For on the advent of the reality, the figure ceases. But circumcision was prescribed to Abraham as a sign of the covenant concerning his posterity, as may be seen from Gn. 17. Now this covenant was fulfilled in Christ's birth. Therefore circumcision should have ceased at once.

Objection 2. Further, "every action of Christ is a lesson to us"*; wherefore it is written (Jn. 3:15): "I have given you an example, that as I have done to you, so you do also." But we ought not to be circumcised; according to Gal. 5:2: "If you be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing." Therefore it seems that neither should Christ have been circumcised.

Objection 3. Further, circumcision was prescribed as a remedy of original sin. But Christ did not contract original sin, as stated above (q. 14, a. 3; q. 15, a. 1). Therefore Christ should not have been circumcised.

On the contrary, It is written (Lk. 2:21): "After eight days were accomplished, that the child should be circumcised."

I answer that, For several reasons Christ ought to have been circumcised. First, in order to prove the reality of His human nature, in contradiction to the Manicheans, who said that He had an imaginary body: and in contradiction to Apollinarius, who said that Christ's body was consubstantial with His Godhead; and in contradiction to Valentine, who said that Christ brought His body from heaven. Secondly, in order to show His approval of circumcision, which God had instituted of old. Thirdly, in order to prove that He was descended from Abraham, who had received the commandment of circumcision as a sign of his faith in Him. Fourthly, in order to take away from the Jews an excuse for not receiving Him, if He were uncircumcised. Fifthly, "in order by His example to exhort

us to be obedient"[†]. Wherefore He was circumcised on the eighth day according to the prescription of the Law (Lev. 12:3). Sixthly, "that He who had come in the likeness of sinful flesh might not reject the remedy whereby sinful flesh was wont to be healed." Seventhly, that by taking on Himself the burden of the Law, He might set others free therefrom, according to Gal. 4:4,5: "God sent His Son... made under the Law, that He might redeem them who were under the Law."

Reply to Objection 1. Circumcision by the removal of the piece of skin in the member of generation, signified "the passing away of the old generation"[‡]: from the decrepitude of which we are freed by Christ's Passion. Consequently this figure was not completely fulfilled in Christ's birth, but in His Passion, until which time the circumcision retained its virtue and status. Therefore it behooved Christ to be circumcised as a son of Abraham before His Passion.

Reply to Objection 2. Christ submitted to circumcision while it was yet of obligation. And thus His action in this should be imitated by us, in fulfilling those things which are of obligation in our own time. Because "there is a time and opportunity for every business" (Eccl 8:6).

Moreover, according to Origen (Hom. xiv in Luc.), "as we died when He died, and rose again when Christ rose from the dead, so were we circumcised spiritually through Christ: wherefore we need no carnal circumcision." And this is what the Apostle says (Col. 2:11): "In whom," [i.e. Christ] "you are circumcised with circumcision not made by hand in despoiling of the body of the flesh, but in the circumcision of" our Lord Jesus "Christ."

Reply to Objection 3. As Christ voluntarily took upon Himself our death, which is the effect of sin, whereas He had no sin Himself, in order to deliver us from death, and to make us to die spiritually unto sin, so also

* Innoc. III, Serm. xxii de Temp. † Bede, Hom. x in Evang.

‡ Athanasius, De Sabb. et Circumcis.

He took upon Himself circumcision, which was a remedy against original sin, whereas He contracted no original sin, in order to deliver us from the yoke of the Law,

and to accomplish a spiritual circumcision in us—in order, that is to say, that, by taking upon Himself the shadow, He might accomplish the reality.

Whether His name was suitably given to Christ?

IIIa q. 37 a. 2

Objection 1. It would seem that an unsuitable name was given to Christ. For the Gospel reality should correspond to the prophetic foretelling. But the prophets foretold another name for Christ: for it is written (Is. 7:14): “Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and His name shall be called Emmanuel”; and (Is. 8:3): “Call His name, Hasten to take away the spoils; Make haste to take away the prey”; and (Is. 9:6): “His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor God the Mighty, the Father of the world to come, the Prince of Peace”; and (Zech. 6:12): “Behold a Man, the Orient is His name.” Thus it was unsuitable that His name should be called Jesus.

Objection 2. Further, it is written (Is. 62:2): “Thou shalt be called by a new name, which the mouth of the Lord hath named [Vulg.: ‘shall name’].” But the name Jesus is not a new name, but was given to several in the Old Testament: as may be seen in the genealogy of Christ (Lk. 3:29), “Therefore it seems that it was unfitting for His name to be called Jesus.”

Objection 3. Further, the name Jesus signifies “salvation”; as is clear from Mat. 1:21: “She shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call His name Jesus. For He shall save His people from their sins.” But salvation through Christ was accomplished not only in the circumcision, but also in uncircumcision, as is declared by the Apostle (Rom. 4:11,12). Therefore this name was not suitably given to Christ at His circumcision.

On the contrary is the authority of Scripture, in which it is written (Lk. 2:21): “After eight days were accomplished, that the child should be circumcised, His name was called Jesus.”

I answer that, A name should answer to the nature of a thing. This is clear in the names of genera and species, as stated Metaph. iv: “Since a name is but an expression of the definition” which designates a thing’s proper nature.

Now, the names of individual men are always taken from some property of the men to whom they are given. Either in regard to time; thus men are named after the Saints on whose feasts they are born: or in respect of some blood relation; thus a son is named after his father or some other relation; and thus the kinsfolk of John the Baptist wished to call him “by his father’s name Zachary,” not by the name John, because “there” was “none of” his “kindred that” was “called by this name,” as related Lk. 1:59-61. Or, again, from some occurrence; thus Joseph “called the name of” the “first-born Manasses, saying: God hath

made me to forget all my labors” (Gn. 41:51). Or, again, from some quality of the person who receives the name; thus it is written (Gn. 25:25) that “he that came forth first was red and hairy like a skin; and his name was called Esau,” which is interpreted “red.”

But names given to men by God always signify some gratuitous gift bestowed on them by Him; thus it was said to Abraham (Gn. 17:5): “Thou shalt be called Abraham; because I have made thee a father of many nations”: and it was said to Peter (Mat. 16:18): “Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build My Church.” Since, therefore, this prerogative of grace was bestowed on the Man Christ that through Him all men might be saved, therefore He was becomingly named Jesus, i.e. Saviour: the angel having foretold this name not only to His Mother, but also to Joseph, who was to be his foster-father.

Reply to Objection 1. All these names in some way mean the same as Jesus, which means “salvation.” For the name “Emmanuel, which being interpreted is ‘God with us,’” designates the cause of salvation, which is the union of the Divine and human natures in the Person of the Son of God, the result of which union was that “God is with us.”

When it was said, “Call his name, Hasten to take away,” etc., these words indicate from what He saved us, viz. from the devil, whose spoils He took away, according to Col. 2:15: “Despoiling the principalities and powers, He hath exposed them confidently.”

When it was said, “His name shall be called Wonderful,” etc., the way and term of our salvation are pointed out: inasmuch as “by the wonderful counsel and might of the Godhead we are brought to the inheritance of the life to come,” in which the children of God will enjoy “perfect peace” under “God their Prince.”

When it was said, “Behold a Man, the Orient is His name,” reference is made to the same, as in the first, viz. to the mystery of the Incarnation, by reason of which “to the righteous a light is risen up in darkness” (Ps. 111:4).

Reply to Objection 2. The name Jesus could be suitable for some other reason to those who lived before Christ—for instance, because they were saviours in a particular and temporal sense. But in the sense of spiritual and universal salvation, this name is proper to Christ, and thus it is called a “new” name.

Reply to Objection 3. As is related Gn. 17, Abraham received from God and at the same time both his name and the commandment of circumcision. For this

reason it was customary among the Jews to name children on the very day of circumcision, as though before being circumcised they had not as yet perfect existence: just as now also children receive their names in Baptism. Wherefore on Prov. 4:3, “I was my father’s son, tender, and as an only son in the sight of my mother;” the gloss says:

“Why does Solomon call himself an only son in the sight of his mother, when Scripture testifies that he had an elder brother of the same mother, unless it be that the latter died unnamed soon after birth?” Therefore it was that Christ received His name at the time of His circumcision.

Whether Christ was becomingly presented in the temple?

IIIa q. 37 a. 3

Objection 1. It would seem that Christ was unbecomingly presented in the Temple. For it is written (Ex. 13:2): “Sanctify unto Me every first-born that openeth the womb among the children of Israel.” But Christ came forth from the closed womb of the Virgin; and thus He did not open His Mother’s womb. Therefore Christ was not bound by this law to be presented in the Temple.

Objection 2. Further, that which is always in one’s presence cannot be presented to one. But Christ’s humanity was always in God’s presence in the highest degree, as being always united to Him in unity of person. Therefore there was no need for Him to be presented to the Lord.

Objection 3. Further, Christ is the principal victim, to whom all the victims of the old Law are referred, as the figure to the reality. But a victim should not be offered up for a victim. Therefore it was not fitting that another victim should be offered up for Christ.

Objection 4. Further, among the legal victims the principal was the lamb, which was a “continual sacrifice” [Vulg.: ‘holocaust’], as is stated Num. 28:6: for which reason Christ is also called “the Lamb—Behold the Lamb of God” (Jn. 1: 29). It was therefore more fitting that a lamb should be offered for Christ than “a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons.”

On the contrary is the authority of Scripture which relates this as having taken place (Lk. 2:22).

I answer that, As stated above (a. 1), Christ wished to be “made under the Law, that He might redeem them who were under the Law” (Gal. 4:4,5), and that the “justification of the Law might be” spiritually “fulfilled” in His members. Now, the Law contained a twofold precept touching the children born. one was a general precept which affected all—namely, that “when the days of the mother’s purification were expired,” a sacrifice was to be offered either “for a son or for a daughter;” as laid down Lev. 12:6. And this sacrifice was for the expiation of the sin in which the child was conceived and born; and also for a certain consecration of the child, because it was then presented in the Temple for the first time. Wherefore one offering was made as a holocaust and another for sin.

The other was a special precept in the law concerning the first-born of “both man and beast”: for the Lord claimed for Himself all the first-born in Israel, because, in

order to deliver the Israelites, He “slew every first-born in the land of Egypt, both men and cattle” (Ex. 12:12,13,29), the first-born of Israel being saved; which law is set down Ex. 13. Here also was Christ foreshadowed, who is “the First-born amongst many brethren” (Rom. 8:29).

Therefore, since Christ was born of a woman and was her first-born, and since He wished to be “made under the Law,” the Evangelist Luke shows that both these precepts were fulfilled in His regard. First, as to that which concerns the first-born, when he says (Lk. 2:22,23): “They carried Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord: as it is written in the law of the Lord, ‘Every male opening the womb shall be called holy to the Lord.’” Secondly, as to the general precept which concerned all, when he says (Lk. 2:24): “And to offer a sacrifice according as it is written in the law of the Lord, a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons.”

Reply to Objection 1. As Gregory of Nyssa says (De Occursu Dom.): “It seems that this precept of the Law was fulfilled in God incarnate alone in a special manner exclusively proper to Him. For He alone, whose conception was ineffable, and whose birth was incomprehensible, opened the virginal womb which had been closed to sexual union, in such a way that after birth the seal of chastity remained inviolate.” Consequently the words “opening the womb” imply that nothing hitherto had entered or gone forth therefrom. Again, for a special reason is it written “‘a male,’ because He contracted nothing of the woman’s sin”: and in a singular way “is He called ‘holy,’ because He felt no contagion of earthly corruption, whose birth was wondrously immaculate” (Ambrose, on Lk. 2:23).

Reply to Objection 2. As the Son of God “became man, and was circumcised in the flesh, not for His own sake, but that He might make us to be God’s through grace, and that we might be circumcised in the spirit; so, again, for our sake He was presented to the Lord, that we may learn to offer ourselves to God”*. And this was done after His circumcision, in order to show that “no one who is not circumcised from vice is worthy of Divine regard”†.

Reply to Objection 3. For this very reason He wished the legal victims to be offered for Him who was the true Victim, in order that the figure might be united to and

* Athanasius, on Lk. 2:23 † Bede, on Lk. 2:23

confirmed by the reality, against those who denied that in the Gospel Christ preached the God of the Law. “For we must not think,” says Origen (Hom. xiv in Luc.) “that the good God subjected His Son to the enemy’s law, which He Himself had not given.”

Reply to Objection 4. The law of Lev. 12:6,8 “commanded those who could, to offer, for a son or a daughter, a lamb and also a turtle dove or a pigeon: but those who were unable to offer a lamb were commanded to offer two turtle doves or two young pigeons”*. “And so the Lord, who, ‘being rich, became poor for our [Vulg.: ‘your’] sakes, that through His poverty we [you] might be rich,” as is written 2 Cor. 8:9, “wished the poor man’s victim to be offered for Him” just as in His birth He was “wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger”†. Nevertheless, these birds have a figurative sense. For the turtle

dove, being a loquacious bird, represents the preaching and confession of faith; and because it is a chaste animal, it signifies chastity; and being a solitary animal, it signifies contemplation. The pigeon is a gentle and simple animal, and therefore signifies gentleness and simplicity. It is also a gregarious animal; wherefore it signifies the active life. Consequently this sacrifice signified the perfection of Christ and His members. Again, “both these animals, by the plaintiveness of their song, represented the mourning of the saints in this life: but the turtle dove, being solitary, signifies the tears of prayer; whereas the pigeon, being gregarious, signifies the public prayers of the Church”‡. Lastly, two of each of these animals are offered, to show that holiness should be not only in the soul, but also in the body.

Whether it was fitting that the Mother of God should go to the temple to be purified?

IIIa q. 37 a. 4

Objection 1. It would seem that it was unfitting for the Mother of God to go to the Temple to be purified. For purification presupposes uncleanness. But there was no uncleanness in the Blessed Virgin, as stated above (Qq. 27,28). Therefore she should not have gone to the Temple to be purified.

Objection 2. Further, it is written (Lev. 12:2-4): “If a woman, having received seed, shall bear a man-child, she shall be unclean seven days”; and consequently she is forbidden “to enter into the sanctuary until the days of her purification be fulfilled.” But the Blessed Virgin brought forth a male child without receiving the seed of man. Therefore she had no need to come to the Temple to be purified.

Objection 3. Further, purification from uncleanness is accomplished by grace alone. But the sacraments of the Old Law did not confer grace; rather, indeed, did she have the very Author of grace with her. Therefore it was not fitting that the Blessed Virgin should come to the Temple to be purified.

On the contrary is the authority of Scripture, where it is stated (Lk. 2:22) that “the days of” Mary’s “purification were accomplished according to the law of Moses.”

I answer that, As the fulness of grace flowed from Christ on to His Mother, so it was becoming that the mother should be like her Son in humility: for “God giveth grace to the humble,” as is written James 4:6. And therefore, just as Christ, though not subject to the Law,

wished, nevertheless, to submit to circumcision and the other burdens of the Law, in order to give an example of humility and obedience; and in order to show His approval of the Law; and, again, in order to take away from the Jews an excuse for calumniating Him: for the same reasons He wished His Mother also to fulfil the prescriptions of the Law, to which, nevertheless, she was not subject.

Reply to Objection 1. Although the Blessed Virgin had no uncleanness, yet she wished to fulfil the observance of purification, not because she needed it, but on account of the precept of the Law. Thus the Evangelist says pointedly that the days of her purification “according to the Law” were accomplished; for she needed no purification in herself.

Reply to Objection 2. Moses seems to have chosen his words in order to exclude uncleanness from the Mother of God, who was with child “without receiving seed.” It is therefore clear that she was not bound to fulfil that precept, but fulfilled the observance of purification of her own accord, as stated above.

Reply to Objection 3. The sacraments of the Law did not cleanse from the uncleanness of sin which is accomplished by grace, but they foreshadowed this purification: for they cleansed by a kind of carnal purification, from the uncleanness of a certain irregularity, as stated in the Ia IIae, q. 102, a. 5; Ia IIae, q. 103, a. 2. But the Blessed Virgin contracted neither uncleanness, and consequently did not need to be purified.

* Bede, Hom. xv in Purif. † Bede on Lk. 1 ‡ Bede, Hom. xv in Purif.