

## THIRD PART, QUESTION 70

### Of Circumcision (In Four Articles)

We have now to consider things that are preparatory to Baptism: and (1) that which preceded Baptism, viz. Circumcision, (2) those which accompany Baptism, viz. Catechism and Exorcism.

Concerning the first there are four points of inquiry:

- (1) Whether circumcision was a preparation for, and a figure of, Baptism?
- (2) Its institution;
- (3) Its rite;
- (4) Its effect.

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#### Whether circumcision was a preparation for, and a figure of Baptism?

IIIa q. 70 a. 1

**Objection 1.** It seems that circumcision was not a preparation for, and a figure of Baptism. For every figure has some likeness to that which it foreshadows. But circumcision has no likeness to Baptism. Therefore it seems that it was not a preparation for, and a figure of Baptism.

**Objection 2.** Further, the Apostle, speaking of the Fathers of old, says (1 Cor. 10:2), that “all were baptized in the cloud, and in the sea”: but not that they were baptized in circumcision. Therefore the protecting pillar of a cloud, and the crossing of the Red Sea, rather than circumcision, were a preparation for, and a figure of Baptism.

**Objection 3.** Further, it was stated above (q. 38, Aa. 1,3) that the baptism of John was a preparation for Christ’s. Consequently, if circumcision was a preparation for, and a figure of Christ’s Baptism, it seems that John’s baptism was superfluous: which is unseemly. Therefore circumcision was not a preparation for, and a figure of Baptism.

**On the contrary,** The Apostle says (Col. 2:11,12): “You are circumcised with circumcision, not made by hand in despoiling the body of the flesh, but in the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in Baptism.”

**I answer that,** Baptism is called the Sacrament of Faith; in so far, to wit, as in Baptism man makes a profession of faith, and by Baptism is aggregated to the congregation of the faithful. Now our faith is the same as that of the Fathers of old, according to the Apostle (2 Cor. 4:13):

“Having the same spirit of faith... we... believe.” But circumcision was a protestation of faith; wherefore by circumcision also men of old were aggregated to the body of the faithful. Consequently, it is manifest that circumcision was a preparation for Baptism and a figure thereof, forasmuch as “all things happened” to the Fathers of old “in figure” (1 Cor. 10:11); just as their faith regarded things to come.

**Reply to Objection 1.** Circumcision was like Baptism as to the spiritual effect of the latter. For just as circumcision removed a carnal pellicule, so Baptism despoils man of carnal behavior.

**Reply to Objection 2.** The protecting pillar of cloud and the crossing of the Red Sea were indeed figures of our Baptism, whereby we are born again of water, signified by the Red Sea; and of the Holy Ghost, signified by the pillar of cloud: yet man did not make, by means of these, a profession of faith, as by circumcision; so that these two things were figures but not sacraments. But circumcision was a sacrament, and a preparation for Baptism; although less clearly figurative of Baptism, as to externals, than the aforesaid. And for this reason the Apostle mentions them rather than circumcision.

**Reply to Objection 3.** John’s baptism was a preparation for Christ’s as to the act done: but circumcision, as to the profession of faith, which is required in Baptism, as stated above.

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#### Whether circumcision was instituted in a fitting manner?

IIIa q. 70 a. 2

**Objection 1.** It seems that circumcision was instituted in an unfitting manner. For as stated above (a. 1) a profession of faith was made in circumcision. But none could ever be delivered from the first man’s sin, except by faith in Christ’s Passion, according to Rom. 3:25: “Whom God hath proposed to be a propitiation, through faith in His blood.” Therefore circumcision should have been insti-

tuted forthwith after the first man’s sin, and not at the time of Abraham.

**Objection 2.** Further, in circumcision man made profession of keeping the Old Law, just as in Baptism he makes profession of keeping the New Law; wherefore the Apostle says (Gal. 5:3): “I testify... to every man circumcising himself, that he is a debtor to do the whole Law.”

But the observance of the Law was not promulgated at the time of Abraham, but rather at the time of Moses. Therefore it was unfitting for circumcision to be instituted at the time of Abraham

**Objection 3.** Further, circumcision was a figure of, and a preparation for, Baptism. But Baptism is offered to all nations, according to Mat. 28:19: "Going... teach ye all nations, baptizing them." Therefore circumcision should have been instituted as binding, not the Jews only, but also all nations.

**Objection 4.** Further, carnal circumcision should correspond to spiritual circumcision, as the shadow to the reality. But spiritual circumcision which is of Christ, regards indifferently both sexes, since "in Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female," as is written Col. 3\*. Therefore the institution of circumcision which concerns only males, was unfitting.

**On the contrary,** We read (Gn. 17) that circumcision was instituted by God, Whose "works are perfect" (Dt. 32:4).

**I answer that,** As stated above (a. 1) circumcision was a preparation for Baptism, inasmuch as it was a profession of faith in Christ, which we also profess in Baptism. Now among the Fathers of old, Abraham was the first to receive the promise of the future birth of Christ, when it was said to him: "In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (Gn. 22:18). Moreover, he was the first to cut himself off from the society of unbelievers, in accordance with the commandment of the Lord, Who said to him (Gn. 13:1): "Go forth out of thy country and from thy kindred." Therefore circumcision was fittingly instituted in the person of Abraham.

**Reply to Objection 1.** Immediately after the sin of our first parent, on account of the knowledge possessed by Adam, who was fully instructed about Divine things, both faith and natural reason flourished in man to such an extent, that there was no need for any signs of faith and salvation to be prescribed to him, but each one was wont to make protestation of his faith, by outward signs of his

profession, according as he thought best. But about the time of Abraham faith was on the wane, many being given over to idolatry. Moreover, by the growth of carnal concupiscence natural reason was clouded even in regard to sins against nature. And therefore it was fitting that then, and not before, circumcision should be instituted, as a profession of faith and a remedy against carnal concupiscence.

**Reply to Objection 2.** The observance of the Law was not to be promulgated until the people were already gathered together: because the law is ordained to the public good, as we have stated in the Ia Iae, q. 90, a. 2. Now it behooved the body of the faithful to be gathered together by a sensible sign, which is necessary in order that men be united together in any religion, as Augustine says (Contra Faust. xix). Consequently, it was necessary for circumcision to be instituted before the giving of the Law. Those Fathers, however, who lived before the Law, taught their families concerning Divine things by way of paternal admonition. Hence the Lord said of Abraham (Gn. 18:19): "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 in itself the perfection of salvation, to which God calls all men, according to 1 Tim. 2:4: "Who will have all men to be saved." Wherefore Baptism is offered to all nations. On the other hand circumcision did not contain the perfection of salvation, but signified it as to be achieved by Christ, Who was to be born of the Jewish nation. For this reason circumcision was given to that nation alone.

**Reply to Objection 4.** The institution of circumcision is as a sign of Abraham's faith, who believed that himself would be the father of Christ Who was promised to him: and for this reason it was suitable that it should be for males only. Again, original sin, against which circumcision was specially ordained, is contracted from the father, not from the mother, as was stated in the Ia Iae, q. 81, a. 5. But Baptism contains the power of Christ, Who is the universal cause of salvation for all, and is "The Remission of all sins" (Post-Communion, Tuesday in Whitweek).

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### Whether the rite of circumcision was fitting?

IIIa q. 70 a. 3

**Objection 1.** It seems that the rite of circumcision was unfitting. For circumcision, as stated above (Aa. 1,2), was a profession of faith. But faith is in the apprehensive power, whose operations appear mostly in the head. Therefore the sign of circumcision should have been conferred on the head rather than on the virile member.

**Objection 2.** Further, in the sacraments we make use of such things as are in more frequent use; for instance, water, which is used for washing, and bread, which we use for nourishment. But, in cutting, we use an iron knife

more commonly than a stone knife. Therefore circumcision should not have been performed with a stone knife.

**Objection 3.** Further, just as Baptism was instituted as a remedy against original sin, so also was circumcision, as Bede says (Hom. in Circum.). But now Baptism is not put off until the eighth day, lest children should be in danger of loss on account of original sin, if they should die before being baptized. On the other hand, sometimes Baptism is put off until after the eighth day. Therefore the eighth day should not have been fixed for circumcision, but this day

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\* Gal. 3:28

should have been anticipated, just as sometimes it was deferred.

**On the contrary,** The aforesaid rite of circumcision is fixed by a gloss on Rom. 4:11: "And he received the sign of circumcision."

**I answer that,** As stated above (a. 2), circumcision was established, as a sign of faith, by God "of" Whose "wisdom there is no number" (Ps. 146:5). Now to determine suitable signs is a work of wisdom. Consequently, it must be allowed that the rite of circumcision was fitting.

**Reply to Objection 1.** It was fitting for circumcision to be performed on the virile member. First, because it was a sign of that faith whereby Abraham believed that Christ would be born of his seed. Secondly, because it was to be a remedy against original sin, which is contracted through the act of generation. Thirdly, because it was ordained as a remedy for carnal concupiscence, which thrives principally in those members, by reason of the abundance of venereal pleasure.

**Reply to Objection 2.** A stone knife was not essential to circumcision. Wherefore we do not find that an instrument of this description is required by any divine precept; nor did the Jews, as a rule, make use of such a knife for circumcision; indeed, neither do they now. Nevertheless, certain well-known circumcisions are related as having been performed with a stone knife, thus (Ex. 4:25) we read that "Sephora took a very sharp stone and circumcised the foreskin of her son," and (Joshua 5:2): "Make thee knives of stone, and circumcise the second time the children of Israel." Which signified that spiritual circumcision would be done by Christ, of Whom it is written (1 Cor. 10:4): "Now the rock was Christ."

**Reply to Objection 3.** The eighth day was fixed for circumcision: first, because of the mystery; since, Christ, by taking away from the elect, not only guilt but also all penalties, will perfect the spiritual circumcision, in the eighth age (which is the age of those that rise again), as it were, on the eighth day. Secondly, on account of the tenderness of the infant before the eighth day. Wherefore even in regard to other animals it is prescribed (Lev. 22:27): "When a bullock, or a sheep, or a goat, is brought forth, they shall be seven days under the udder of their dam: but the eighth day and thenceforth, they may be offered to the Lord."

Moreover, the eighth day was necessary for the fulfilment of the precept; so that, to wit, those who delayed beyond the eighth day, sinned, even though it were the sabbath, according to Jn. 7:23: "(If) a man receives circumcision on the sabbath-day, that the Law of Moses may not be broken." But it was not necessary for the validity of the sacrament: because if anyone delayed beyond the eighth day, they could be circumcised afterwards.

Some also say that in imminent danger of death, it was allowable to anticipate the eighth day. But this cannot be proved either from the authority of Scripture or from the custom of the Jews. Wherefore it is better to say with Hugh of St. Victor (De Sacram. i) that the eighth day was never anticipated for any motive, however urgent. Hence on Prov. 4:3: "I was... an only son in the sight of my mother;" a gloss says, that Bersabee's other baby boy did not count because through dying before the eighth day it received no name; and consequently neither was it circumcised.

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### Whether circumcision bestowed sanctifying grace?

IIIa q. 70 a. 4

**Objection 1.** It seems that circumcision did not bestow sanctifying grace. For the Apostle says (Gal. 2:21): "If justice be by the Law, then Christ died in vain," i.e. without cause. But circumcision was an obligation imposed by the Law, according to Gal. 5:3: "I testify... to every man circumcising himself, that he is a debtor to do the whole law." Therefore, if justice be by circumcision, "Christ died in vain," i.e. without cause. But this cannot be allowed. Therefore circumcision did not confer grace whereby the sinner is made righteous.

**Objection 2.** Further, before the institution of circumcision faith alone sufficed for justification; hence Gregory says (Moral. iv): "Faith alone did of old in behalf of infants that for which the water of Baptism avails with us." But faith has lost nothing of its strength through the commandment of circumcision. Therefore faith alone justified little ones, and not circumcision.

**Objection 3.** Further, we read (Joshua 5:5,6) that

"the people that were born in the desert, during the forty years... were uncircumcised." If, therefore, original sin was taken away by circumcision, it seems that all who died in the desert, both little children and adults, were lost. And the same argument avails in regard to those who died before the eighth day, which was that of circumcision, which day could not be anticipated, as stated above (a. 3, ad 3).

**Objection 4.** Further, nothing but sin closes the entrance to the heavenly kingdom. But before the Passion the entrance to the heavenly kingdom was closed to the circumcised. Therefore men were not justified from sin by circumcision.

**Objection 5.** Further, original sin is not remitted without actual sin being remitted also: because "it is wicked to hope for half forgiveness from God," as Augustine says (De Vera et Falsa Poenit. ix). But we read nowhere of circumcision as remitting actual sin. Therefore neither did it

remit original sin.

**On the contrary**, Augustine says, writing to Valerius in answer to Julian (*De Nup. et Concup.* ii): “From the time that circumcision was instituted among God’s people, as ‘a seal of the justice of the faith,’ it availed little children unto sanctification by cleansing them from the original and bygone sin; just as Baptism also from the time of its institution began to avail unto the renewal of man.”

**I answer that**, All are agreed in saying that original sin was remitted in circumcision. But some said that no grace was conferred, and that the only effect was to remit sin. The Master holds this opinion (*Sent.* iv, D, 1), and in a gloss on *Rom.* 4:11. But this is impossible, since guilt is not remitted except by grace, according to *Rom.* 3:2: “Being justified freely by His grace,” etc.

Wherefore others said that grace was bestowed by circumcision, as to that effect which is the remission of guilt, but not as to its positive effects; lest they should be compelled to say that the grace bestowed in circumcision sufficed for the fulfilling of the precepts of the Law, and that, consequently, the coming of Christ was unnecessary. But neither can this opinion stand. First, because by circumcision children received the power of obtaining glory at the allotted time, which is the last positive effect of grace. Secondly, because, in the order of the formal cause, positive effects naturally precede those that denote privation, although it is the reverse in the order of the material cause: since a form does not remove a privation save by informing the subject.

Consequently, others said that grace was conferred in circumcision, also as a particular positive effect consisting in being made worthy of eternal life; but not as to all its effects, for it did not suffice for the repression of the concupiscence of the fomes, nor again for the fulfilment of the precepts of the Law. And this was my opinion at one time (*Sent.* iv, D, 1; q. 2, a. 4). But if one consider the matter carefully, it is clear that this is not true. Because the least grace can resist any degree of concupiscence, and avoid every mortal sin, that is committed in transgressing the precepts of the Law; for the smallest degree of charity loves God more than cupidity loves “thousands of gold and silver” (*Ps.* 118:72).

We must say, therefore, that grace was bestowed in circumcision as to all the effects of grace, but not as in Baptism. Because in Baptism grace is bestowed by the very power of Baptism itself, which power Baptism has as the instrument of Christ’s Passion already consummated. Whereas circumcision bestowed grace, inasmuch as it was a sign of faith in Christ’s future Passion: so that the man who was circumcised, professed to embrace that faith; whether, being an adult, he made profession for himself, or, being a child, someone else made profession for him. Hence, too, the Apostle says (*Rom.* 4:11), that Abraham

“received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the justice of the faith”: because, to wit, justice was of faith signified: not of circumcision signifying. And since Baptism operates instrumentally by the power of Christ’s Passion, whereas circumcision does not, therefore Baptism imprints a character that incorporates man in Christ, and bestows grace more copiously than does circumcision; since greater is the effect of a thing already present, than of the hope thereof.

**Reply to Objection 1.** This argument would prove if justice were of circumcision otherwise than through faith in Christ’s Passion.

**Reply to Objection 2.** Just as before the institution of circumcision, faith in Christ to come justified both children and adults, so, too, after its institution. But before, there was no need of a sign expressive of this faith; because as yet believers had not begun to be united together apart from unbelievers for the worship of one God. It is probable, however, that parents who were believers offered up some prayers to God for their children, especially if these were in any danger. Or bestowed some blessing on them, as a “seal of faith”; just as the adults offered prayers and sacrifices for themselves.

**Reply to Objection 3.** There was an excuse for the people in the desert failing to fulfil the precept of circumcision, both because they knew not when the camp was removed, and because, as Damascene says (*De Fide Orth.* iv) they needed no distinctive sign while they dwelt apart from other nations. Nevertheless, as Augustine says (*QQ.* in *Josue* vi), those were guilty of disobedience who failed to obey through contempt.

It seems, however, that none of the uncircumcised died in the desert, for it is written (*Ps.* 104:37): “There was not among their tribes one that was feeble”: and that those alone died in the desert, who had been circumcised in Egypt. If, however, some of the uncircumcised did die there, the same applies to them as to those who died before the institution of circumcision. And this applies also to those children who, at the time of the Law, died before the eighth day.

**Reply to Objection 4.** Original sin was taken away in circumcision, in regard to the person; but on the part of the entire nature, there remained the obstacle to the entrance of the kingdom of heaven, which obstacle was removed by Christ’s Passion. Consequently, before Christ’s Passion not even Baptism gave entrance to the kingdom. But were circumcision to avail after Christ’s Passion, it would give entrance to the kingdom.

**Reply to Objection 5.** When adults were circumcised, they received remission not only of original, but also of actual sin: yet not so as to be delivered from all debt of punishment, as in Baptism, in which grace is conferred more copiously.