

Circumcision What Does It Mean?

written by Tim Jennings, M.D. | May 5, 2022



After Abraham's conversion, God gave him and his descendants circumcision as a sign of that new relationship. Have you ever wondered why? What does circumcision mean? What does it symbolize? What is the reality to which it points?

Paul understood that bodily circumcision was only a symbol of something else and wrote:

A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code (Romans 2:28, 29 NIV84).

Circumcision is a sign of circumcising the heart, but what does that mean and why would bodily circumcision be useful in representing spiritual circumcision?

- Physical circumcision was painful; spiritual circumcision, conversion, dying to self, cutting away attachments to this world is also painful.
- Physical circumcision happens on a part of the body that is not easily seen by others; spiritual circumcision, conversion, happens in the secret parts of the heart, which is also not easily seen by others.

- Those with whom we have some intimacy can know if we have been circumcised bodily (not just spouses, but also our doctors and even military buddies with whom we sometimes undress in the same barracks or shower in the same locker room)—so, too, with circumcision of the heart; the people who get to know us well can tell if our hearts have been changed from a state of fear and selfishness to a love for God and others.
- Circumcision happens upon the part of the body that physically joins husband and wife together as one; circumcision by the Spirit happens upon the heart—cutting away sin, fear, selfishness, guilt, shame, and every obstacle that interferes with becoming one with God.

Without the cutting away from our hearts of fear, selfishness, guilt, shame, and the attachments to this world (things we love more than God), we cannot be wedded, united, bonded to our Savior.

Therefore, circumcision is a sign of dying to self, of cutting away ties, practices, attachments, and values of this world; of cutting out the fear, sin, and selfishness; and of having the heart renewed in truth, love, and trust in God.

Physical circumcision is done by a physical knife, whereas circumcision of the heart is done by the Spirit of love and truth wielding the Spirit-created or inspired tools of love and truth:

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart (Hebrews 4:12 NIV84).

The Holy Spirit works through the Scriptures to cut through the lies, fears, and misunderstandings caused by sin and to bring healing truth to bear upon our hearts and minds in order to cut out of our heart falsehoods, unhealthy practices, and worldly or lustful affections, and to instill godly methods leading us to establish healthy routines and boundaries with others.

The Holy Spirit also works through His trusting friends. When the prophet Nathan confronted King David after David's sin with Bathsheba, the truth brought to bear by Nathan was used by the Holy Spirit to bring David to conviction and repentance and was part of a healing process of cutting the sin, guilt, and shame out of David's heart.

While we can choose to have our infant sons circumcised physically, we cannot choose for any human heart other than our own to be circumcised by the Spirit. The newborn in Christ must choose for themselves to surrender to the Holy Spirit, study the Word of God, and actively cooperate with the Spirit to cut out of the heart anything that interferes with our intimacy with Jesus.

This is because the transformation of the heart that occurs in God's plan of salvation requires the active and voluntary participation of the sinner. God cannot use His infinite power to inflict a change of heart without the consent of the person because to do so would destroy that person's individuality and create either a programmed robot that cannot love, or a new intelligent being.

So, circumcision is, ultimately, a poignant object lesson illustrating the intimate cutting away from our hearts every obstacle to our unity and oneness with God. Understanding this, Jesus, praying for His followers right before His crucifixion, asked His Father to "sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17 NIV84). Jesus asked His Father to use the sword of the Spirit, the truth, to cut away

from His followers everything that interferes with their unity, so that having had their hearts sanctified by the truth, “all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you (John 17:21 NIV84). This is the goal, unity, at-one-ment with God that requires fear, sin, selfishness to be cut out of our hearts and God’s law of love to be written in (Hebrews 8:10).

What does circumcision mean? It means being set free from the world and being united in the bonds of love and trust with God.

I encourage you to allow God, in these last days, to circumcise your heart from every fear, sin, guilt, and shame, from anything in this world that you love more than Him so that you might be one with Him just as Jesus prayed for us to be.