

Circumcision
 Initiatory Rite of the
Old Testament Church
extracted from:
Infant Baptism
A SCRIPTURAL SERVICE
by
Rev. Professor Robert Wilson
 Prof. of Sacred Literature for the General Assembly
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As the sign and seal of the covenant, circumcision constituted in the strictest sense, the initiatory ordinance of the ancient church. The truth of this proposition admits of easy and complete demonstration. Among the Israelites, the *stranger who joined himself to the Lord*, the proselyte (Grk.: *προσηλυτος*) of the Septuagint, Ex. xii. 48; Lev. xvii. 8, and of the New Testament, Acts ii. 10; vi. 5, was undoubtedly admitted to church membership by the rite of circumcision. That other observances of later origin were imposed on the neophyte, is manifest from the history of Jewish proselytism; but we are assured on the authority of Scripture, that no external rite, except circumcision, was essential to his joining with Israel in the solemnity of the Lord's passover. Here is the law on the subject. Ex. xii. 48, "When a stranger shall sojourn with thee, and will keep the passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it; and he shall be as one that is born in the land: for no uncircumcised person shall eat thereof."

That this law introduces circumcision as an *initiatory* ordinance our opponents cannot deny; but they strive to evade the force of the argument by alleging that the passover possessed no *religious* character, being *merely* a great national festival commemorative of the signal deliverance from bondage in Egypt. How this allegation is to be reconciled with the views of the passover observance so impressively presented in Scripture we are at a loss even to imagine. In Deut. xvi. 2, we find this injunction,— "Thou shalt, therefore, *sacrifice the passover unto the LORD thy God*, of the flock, and the herd, in the place which the LORD shall choose to place his name there." Are we to understand that a mere civil observance, a national rejoicing, is styled a sacrifice to the Lord, or that the same designation is applied to the slaugh-

tering of meat for a public repast ? Again, when we learn from 2 Chron. xxx. 18—20, that in keeping the passover under good king Hezekiah, the people *prepared their hearts to seek God, the LORD God of their fathers*, the exercise appears to us to fall in with the idea of a religious solemnity, while we cannot reconcile it with a mere civil institution.

We know the staple (baptistic) objection, that every Israelite, without regard to religious character, on simply submitting to circumcision, was entitled by law to partake of the passover. But the answer is obvious. Though God's people realized in the seal of the covenant a *legal* title to approach him in the passover, and other religious ordinances, yet " the preparation of the heart " was indispensable to the right and profitable enjoyment of the privileges secured by that title. To join in the passover solemnity, or in any other ordinance of religion, on the strength of lineal descent, or federal circumcision, regardless of the state of the heart before God, was to trample on things most sacred, and negative the design of institutions divinely appointed. Of the correctness of these statements, the first chapter of Isaiah furnishes ample and tremendous confirmation.

The state of the case now seems to be transparent. There is no access to the passover, and the other sacred observances growing out of the Abrahamic dispensation, except by the door of circumcision; and every man to whom that rite *as the seal of the covenant* has been administered is *ceremonially* qualified to keep the passover, and observe generally the ordinances appropriate to church membership. But this state of things presents no bar to the *necessity* of other and higher qualifications, whether implied in the religious observances themselves, or imposed by separate and superadded requirements on the part of the great Lawgiver.

In these views our opponents cannot be expected to acquiesce. "Circumcision," says Campbell¹ of America, " was not the door into any church. It was no initiatory rite to any moral institution." That the strength of these assertions is in the inverse ratio of the proof offered by their author, will be manifest to every intelligent and impartial reader of the " Lexington Debate." Here is the evidence condensed by himself, and appended to his propositions, "The Ishmaelites, and Edomites, and many other nations by Keturah, were circumcised. Into what church did they enter ? The Jews were members of the politico-ecclesiastico church by natural birth. Circumcision was no initiatory rite or door to them."—Suppose this veteran polemic could produce a thousand instances of nations practising circumcision, without

¹ Campbell of America. Born near Ballymena Co. Antrim in 1788, died in Bethany, West Virginia in 1866. A former minister of the "Seceders" denomination in its Northern Irish branch, Campbell was well dosed with that denomination's Amyraldianism and on emigration to the USA became a Baptist. He led and developed the sect of "Campbellite" baptists which by the late 19th cent. numbered some 600,000 members. They pressed "immersionist" views to logical sacramentarian conclusions, virtually investing the sacrament with regenerative powers as per the Roman church. (*Ed.*)

regarding it as initiatory to church membership, he would not thereby invest his argument with one shred of convincing power. Israel *may* have been *so* introduced, though the whole world beside had practised the rite apart from all idea of ecclesiastical initiation. Mr. Campbell does not appear to understand the position of the Ishmaelites and Edomites. These tribes, as we have shown, were divinely separated from the *federal* seed of Abraham; hence the rite of circumcision as practised by them, must have been, in a great measure, stripped of *its federal* significance. Why did circumcision introduce the sons of Ishmael and Edom to no church? Simply because they were not of the people with whom a God of grace and sovereignty had *established his covenant*. The difference between circumcision *within*, and circumcision *without* the provisions of the covenant, is patent and incontestable. A heathen priest, who may have observed the rite as part of his own system, was not thereby admissible to the covenant privileges of God's ancient people; but had he submitted to it as a proselyte to the faith of Abraham, it would have opened the door of church fellowship.

The author further affirms that the Jews were members of their national church "by natural birth," or, as Dr. Carson² says, were born into it, and that therefore circumcision could be no initiatory door to them. We meet this assertion with an unqualified negative. Speaking of circumcision, Dr. Palfrey states part of the truth, when he says,— "Without it no one could be, either by *birth* or adoption, a Jewish citizen." As this is a point of vital moment, we must endeavour to settle definitively which side is sustained by the evidence of Scripture. An Israelite was entitled, by natural birth, to the seal of the covenant, and he thus entered the ancient church by a door, which exhibited an impressive emblem of the necessity of spiritual cleansing. Suppose, however, this rite to have been neglected, what then was his position, according to the terms of the covenant? Destitute of the seal appended to that solemn engagement, could he mingle unchallenged in the religious services of the people who were "not reckoned among the nations?" If these blessings numbered among the fruits of natural birth, if the Jew *was born into* "the politico-ecclesiastico church," how are we to account for the fact that without circumcision, he dare not offer unto the Lord the sacrifice of the passover, or take any part in that great solemnity? But why discuss the privileges civil or sacred of an uncircumcised Hebrew of one whom the voice of the Abrahamic covenant consigned to utter excision? "He is by birth, a member of the church," says Campbell. "What saith the Scripture?" The only privilege which the God of the covenant has federally extended to the *uncircumcised*, is that "he shall be cut off from his people." Mere birth, therefore, only placed the Israelite within the range of an awful judicial sentence; while circumcision, as a merciful door of escape, introduced him ritually to all the blessings which flowed in the channel of a divine and gracious institution.

² Dr. Alexander Carson LLD. 1776- 1844. Learned and famous advocate of the Baptist cause, famed for his work on Baptist dogma: "*Baptism in its Mode and Subjects*." (5th edit. Philadelphia 1857).

Circumcision- OT Initiatory Rite

The fact of initiation by the covenant seal being thus established, we may add a word respecting its character. Circumcision we hold to have been introductory to a certain religious state, and we cannot therefore sympathize with the views of those who degrade it to the level of a merely carnal observance, destitute of moral efficacy, as well as personal saving application. Dr. Carson has done injustice to the spiritual character of this rite, by mis-apprehending the conditions on which it was administered, and losing sight of its own intrinsic significance. On the law (Ex. ii 48.) he thus annotates;—

" Here there is no faith required in the person who desires to eat the passover, nor in his adult males, whether children or slaves, who are to be circumcised as the condition of his eating the passover. The circumcision of his whole family takes place as a matter of course. There is then *no law that requires even a profession of faith in the God of Israel, in order to entitle a stranger to eat the passover.* There is no condition of either faith or character; and had he a thousand unbelieving children and slaves, he has a divine warrant to circumcise them." ³

On this comment, we observe—

1. That the law referred to by Dr. Carson speaks of "*keeping the passover to JEHOVAH,*"—a form of expression which manifestly denotes a religious observance,—while he betrays a uniform, if not intentional, preference for the phrase, "*eating the passover.*" The latter expression no doubt often occurs in Scripture; but it is interesting to notice that when the Spirit of God lays down the law for the admission of strangers, Ex. xii. 48, Num. ix. 14, He is careful to connect the ordinance with the great name of Jehovah. "*Keep the passover unto the Lord.*" Its religious character, we are aware, is not suspended on the terms in which it may be described; still the language of comment should not even *seem* to evade the spirituality of the text.

2 . We deny that neither faith, nor profession of faith was required in order to entitle a stranger to keep the passover. The law indeed prescribes the ceremonial qualification alike for Israel and the stranger; but the *ordinance itself* required a spiritual qualification. This distinction can produce Scripture warrant. In the days of Hezekiah, the people were *circumcised*—they possessed a ceremonial title to the passover; but besides, they were required to *prepare their hearts to seek God* in that solemn ordinance. Was this heart preparation will worship? **NO**, the nature of the observance demanded it, and it met divine approval. In like manner, those who joined the returned captives (Ezra vi. 21) in keeping the passover, were "such as had separated themselves from the filthiness of the heathen of the land to seek the Lord God of Israel." In this case also the parties felt, and felt truly, that the moral

³ Dr. Wilson refers here to "page 228" which we take to be a page ref. to Carson's magnum opus: "*Baptism in its Mode and Subjects*". But to which edition of this work Dr. Wilson refers is not indicated. (Ed.)

demands of a passover kept unto the Lord, could not be met without religious preparation. Now as the Israelite and the stranger were under the same law, and as the Israelite learned from that law the necessity of preparing his heart for God in the service of the passover, and as that preparation was signally owned of the Lord, it follows undeniably, that a bare ritual observance could not qualify, and was not designed to qualify, the stranger for drawing near to God in the same commemorative institution. In fact, the law implies the spiritual qualification, while it imposes a tolerably sharp test of the sincerity of the candidate. Besides, the circumcised stranger in common with his fellow-worshippers of Israel, was a *debtor to do the whole law*, and that, in case of disobedience, he exposed himself to its righteous penalties, is established by the uniform testimony of Scripture.

3. The relation between the stranger and the males of his family is unfairly or defectively exhibited by Dr. Carson. It lies on the face of the regulation, that unless all the male children were circumcised, the parent was not admissible to the passover. But this does not imply that he had "a divine warrant" to circumcise them unconditionally, or a divine warrant to circumcise them at all. The stranger received no command from God on the subject, nor did the law bind him to any particular course. It simply pledged the Israelites not to admit him to the passover, until all his males were circumcised; but as it neither recognised nor created any necessity for his admission, it could not have invested him with authority to force the rite on a reluctant or rebellious adult. The law was in effect for the authorities of the church, and it left the stranger to proceed with the circumcision of the males of his family, according to his own discretion. On a principle somewhat analogous, we contend against the necessity of compulsion in administering the rite to Abraham's household. Nay we affirm compulsion to have been physically impossible. The head of the family could not have administered the rite by force to several hundred of adults. Besides, had any of them refused, or considered Abraham's proposal cruel or preposterous, they could have gone into exile, as Hagar did, when her mistress dealt hardly with her. We do not maintain that all the members possessed true faith, such a regard for the authority of *El-Shaddai* as prompted voluntary submission, being all that the nature of the case imperatively demanded. So much is to my mind plainly implied in Gen. xvii. 27, comp. xviii. 19, the latter containing a noble prophetic testimony to the righteous deportment of the parties whom Abraham circumcised. "I know him," said Jehovah, "that he will command his children and his household after him, *and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment*; that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him."

That circumcision, then, introduced its subjects into a divinely organized religious community rests on the plain unsophisticated sense of Scripture; and that the infant offspring of parents who were members of that community, were legitimate subjects of this initiatory rite, is sustained by the same divine testimony.