

Spiritual Circumcision

by Daniel Steele

Daniel Steele's sermon explores the concept of spiritual circumcision as essential for achieving perfect love and holiness in the believer's life.

Scripture: Genesis 17:1, Deuteronomy 6:4, Romans 2:29, Romans 8:7, Colossians 2:11

Topics: "Entire Sanctification", "Christian Perfection"

Description

Daniel Steele preaches about the remarkable transition points in the religious development of Abraham, highlighting his separation from his kindred and country at God's command, his justification by faith, and his entire sanctification as key moments in his spiritual journey. Steele emphasizes the importance of spiritual circumcision or entire sanctification as the gateway to Christian perfection and pure love, casting out all fear. He discusses the unity of Judaism and Christianity in their supreme love for God, pointing out that the Old and New Testaments reveal the same essential principle of loving God above all. Steele delves into the concept of heart circumcision, explaining that it is a necessary condition following the new birth for believers to experience perfect love and holiness.

Transcript

THERE were three remarkable transition points in the religious development of Abraham. The first was separation from his kindred and country at the Divine command.

The call of Abraham is typical of that call of the Holy Spirit, which sooner or later comes to every sinner, to turn away from all known sin as a preparation for saving faith in Christ.

The second point of transition in Abraham's life was his justification by faith. He believed in Jehovah; and He counted it to him for righteousness. St. Paul cites this as a conspicuous instance of justification by faith under the old covenant. Abraham had exercised faith in obeying the call to separation; but it was what theologians style prevenient rather than saving faith.

Twenty-four years after Abraham's first call, and several years after his justification, he passed the third and final transition in his religious career, which in modern parlance would be called his spiritual perfection. When he was ninety years old and nine (Gen xvii.1) Jehovah disclosed to him His almightiness under the name of El-Shaddai, Almighty God, as the ground of a new commandment, "Be thou perfect." With this injunction was the institution of circumcision as necessary to the perfection required, demonstrating typically that spiritual circumcision or entire sanctification is the gateway into Christian

perfection, or pure love, styled by John "perfect love" which "casteth out" all "tormenting fear." For in "the self-same day" in which Abraham was commanded to walk before God and be perfect, he submitted to the painful rite of circumcision, the removal, in Hebrew conception, of that bodily impurity with which he was born. Here we find a striking type of original or birth sin, denied by all the self-styled modern liberalists, put away by "the circumcision of Christ" through the agency of the sanctifying Spirit, not by a gradual outgoing of native depravity, but by the heroic treatment of instantaneous excision. Hence the doctrine of spiritual circumcision is a two-edged sword, cutting away Pelagianism with one edge and gradualism with the other. The first is the denial of inbred or birth sin, and the second is the denial of its instantaneous extinction when faith lays hold of Him who "is able to save unto the uttermost."

Some persons may insist that there was a fourth crisis in the life of the father of the faithful -- the supreme test of his faith in obeying the command to offer up Isaac. It was a crisis, but not a transition from one state of grace to another. God found Abraham perfect in loyalty and love, and demonstrated this fact to all the coming generations of Bible-readers. The three marked epochs in his life were his separation, his justification, and his entire sanctification, the beginning of his perfect walk before Jehovah and not before misjudging mortals.

The Old Testament and the New contain not two different religions, but one in different stages of development. Well did Augustine say: "In the Old Testament the New lies hidden; in the New Testament the Old lies open." The essential principal of Judaism and of Christianity is the same supreme love to God. The Great Teacher and Law-giver sums up the law, and the prophets, and all human duty in this great word LOVE. It is the natural and necessary inference from the unity of God, as opposed to polytheism; hence it follows the "Shema," the first words every Hebrew child is taught to speak, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord; and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might" (Deut. vi. 4,5).

We are here met by the question, "Can genuine love be evoked by command? Is it not the free, spontaneous outflow of the heart towards the object for which it has affinity? How then can a soul void of all affinity for God, love Him supremely?" This question is more important than the theological puzzle, the origin of sin in a holy universe, inasmuch as the cure of an evil is of far higher interest to the sufferer than its genesis. If we turn to Romans viii. 7, we shall be appalled at the vastness of the multitude to whom the great command of both the Law and the Gospel is an utter impossibility, "because the carnal mind is enmity against God." But before we rashly accuse God of injustice, in reaping obedience where He has not sown ability, let us further read our Bibles and get the whole of the Divine purpose in this case. It is possible that a scheme of wondrous mercy may be found instead of severity. It is remarkable that most of those who find fault with God, have the least knowledge of His revelation. Turn again to the Old Testament at Deut. xxx. 6, and the difficulty vanishes, and God's moral character is vindicated. He proposes, by a direct supernatural interposition of His almightiness, with man's free consent, to perform a piece of spiritual surgery, to cut away the carnality which prevents love and invites enmity, and to clear the way for the natural upspringing of love, filling to the brim every faculty of intelligence and sensibility. "And the Lord thy God will circumcise thy heart, to love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live," or have real and internal well-being. Carnality in the least degree is obstructive of love of the purest and most perfect kind.

The question now arises, -- "Who are entitled to this heart circumcision?" As natural birth within the old covenant was a necessary condition of circumcision in the flesh, so the new birth, under the new covenant, is the necessary condition of that spiritual circumcision, without which perfect love cannot exist.

This is beautifully proven by St. Paul, in 2 Cor. vii. 1, read in connection with the last verse of the preceding chapter. "Having therefore these promises" -- things promised, especially adoption as "sons and daughters," the work of entire sanctification is to be perfected in so thorough a manner as to exclude every "filthiness of the flesh," all tendencies to those sins which find expression through the body, "and of the spirit," every taint of the spirit prompting to sins independent of the material organism, as pride, unbelief, rebellion, hatred, etc. The doctrine taught by St. Paul is that spiritual circumcision follows spiritual sonship in order to the perfecting of holiness. Impenitent sinners are nowhere in the Holy Scriptures exhorted to holiness, to perfection, to fullness of the Spirit, but rather to repentance, and the new birth. Only they who "have been made partakers of the Holy Ghost" can be filled with the Spirit, only they who have become believers can mount up to the altitude of perfect faith, and only they that have life are capable of having the more abundant life. We now come to the questions, "Who is the author of heart-circumcision in New Testament times, and in exactly what does it consist?"

The answer to both of these questions is found in Col. ii. 11, R.V.: "In whom ye were also circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands, in the putting off of the BODY OF THE FLESH in the circumcision of Christ," i.e., that which He provides for believers through the efficacy of His atonement. Here we have a full account of spiritual circumcision, or entire sanctification. For judicial clearance from the guilt of "the sins of the flesh," through justification by faith, is not here described, as King James' version of a defective manuscript teaches, but rather the perfect riddance of the flesh itself, the sin principle in depraved humanity. "The 'body of the flesh,'" says Bishop Ellicot, "is practically synonymous with 'the body of sin,' in Rom. vi. 6, and is designedly used in this place to keep up the antithetical allusion to legal circumcision, which consisted in the cutting away and laying aside of a part (Ex. iv. 25), the circumcision by Christ in putting off the whole body of the flesh." Similar reasoning is found in John vii. 23, where Christ contrasts the greatness of His work on the Sabbath in bestowing perfect and entire healing on the cripple, making an entire man whole, with the insignificance of circumcision, which purified only part of a man, making him only ceremonially clean. But we have not done with Col. ii. 11. We call the attention of every Greek scholar to the strength of the original noun, "putting off." It is a word invented by Paul and found nowhere else in the Bible, nor in the whole range of Greek literature. To show the thoroughness of the cleansing by the complete stripping off, and laying aside of the propensity to evil, the apostle prefixes one preposition, (apo) denoting separateness, to another (ek) denoting outness, and thus constructs the strongest conceivable term for the entire removal of depravity. In Col. iii. 9, R.V., "Seeing that ye have put off the old man with his doings," he uses the same strong combination of words, in the form of a participle -- used nowhere else in the New Testament except in Col. ii. 15, "having stripped away from himself the (hostile) principalities and powers" -- to show how completely the "old man," as well as "his deeds," has been "put off," if the believer has realized the full extent of Gospel salvation.

We have now ascertained that Christ is the originator of heart-circumcision, and that it figuratively signifies entire purgation from the defilement of sin.

Let us now inquire for the agent who effects this wonderful deliverance in which the scheme of redemption reaches its climax. For this purpose we turn to Rom. ii. 29, and we find a photograph of a real Jew, "who is one inwardly: and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit," i.e., says Meyer, "in the HOLY SPIRIT in the definite sense, and as distinguished from the spiritual conditions and tendencies which He produces."

Thus we find the whole Trinity engaged in the circumcision of the human heart. The Father instituted the symbolic rite, and intended its spiritual efficacy; the Son originated its causal ground, His atoning blood; and the Holy Spirit is both the sphere in which holiness exists, and the agent who introduces it into the

soul. Well may full believers thus soliloquize with Faber,--

"Oh, wonderful, oh passing thought!

The love that God hath had for thee,

Spending on thee no less a sum

Than the undivided Trinity!"

We are often asked for scriptural proofs of the instantaneousness of entire sanctification. We add to those which are customarily quoted as indicating momentary action, because of the tense in the Greek, all the texts in the Bible in which the circumcision of the heart is spoken of. It is a remarkable fact that this is the only kind of circumcision which the Spirit of inspiration thought worthy of mention, except in Jer. ix. 25, from the entrance of Joshua into Canaan, to the circumcision of John the Baptist, a period of 1,450 years.

The conclusion to which this Bible reading conducts us is that entire sanctification, as an act, is the divinely appointed gateway into perfect love as a state. As the act is always followed by the state, and the state always implies the preceding act, entire sanctification, and loving God with all the heart, are practically equivalent phrases.

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