

# The Cross and Circumcision

by G.W. North

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*G.W. North's sermon underscores the necessity of the cross and warns against the dangers of blending faith with works, particularly through circumcision.*

**Scripture:** Galatians 5:2

**Topics:** "Legalism vs. Grace", "The Cross"

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## Description

G.W. North emphasizes the significance of the cross in relation to circumcision, arguing that the Judaizers' insistence on circumcision undermines the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice. He expresses Paul's vehement rejection of any practice that detracts from the glory of salvation being attributed solely to Christ, warning against the subtlety of adding works to faith. North highlights the danger of religious practices becoming substitutes for true faith, illustrating that true circumcision is a matter of the heart, not merely a physical act. He urges believers to reject any form of legalism that distracts from the grace of God and to embrace the transformative power of the cross in their lives. Ultimately, he calls for a return to the core message of the gospel, free from the trappings of religious tradition.

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## Transcript

The sixth mention of the cross is really a reinforcement of some of Paul's earlier statements about it. It reveals his utter abhorrence of Judaism and his loathing of the Judaizers from which and from whom Christ had set him free; 'they constrain you to be circumcised only lest they should suffer persecution for the cross of Christ', he said. Whoever these people were, their propagation and practice of circumcision was hypocritical cowardice. The apostle's words are very penetrative; he was very angry about these things and quite merciless; 'I would they were even cut off which trouble you', he said. This particular statement is the last of his three citations of the cross with reference to its power and work in the hands of the Spirit.

The first three references to the cross have to do with the redemptive work of Christ: the second three are all to do with the power and purpose of the cross against the flesh. The Galatians needed this emphasis, for it was in this area that they were most gravely at risk. The suggestion being fed to them by misguided Jewish believers was very subtle. Those people did not seek to prevent them from believing the gospel, they wanted them to include something more than that in it. They should preach, so they told them, that beside believing in Christ, everybody should be circumcised; this would make the gospel more palatable to Jewry. The subtlety of the doctrine lay in its appeal to loving-kindness and inoffensiveness. It sowed the

idea that by this love and understanding would be promoted in the church and their gospel would be more acceptable to men. But the unmentioned, perhaps unseen sin of it was that if that were so the glory of salvation would not, nor could be, given to Christ alone. The practice of circumcision would unavoidably mean that some of the credit must be given to father Abraham and prophet Moses.

The devil does not mind who is brought in to move people's hearts away from believing in Christ alone for salvation; satan always wants to substitute the good for the best and sadly enough hearts are often only too open and vulnerable to his suggestions. But such error, once allowed into the Church, before long opens the door wide for him to bring in other famous, though perhaps less illustrious, persons of the past also. The tendency toward pantheism is natural to the heart of religiously-minded men. Peter on the mount of transfiguration is sufficient illustration of this: he wanted to include Elijah and Moses with Christ into his pantheon and was willing to build a temple or pitch a tabernacle for each of them alongside Jesus. 'Not for one moment' says God, 'this is my beloved Son'.

It is so sad that believers are such gullible people; it seems we are so very easily bewitched and switched on to erroneous ideas. Even the cross itself can be so wrongly presented and the crucified Christ so easily misrepresented and abusively treated that the gospel is rendered ineffectual. This was Paul's great concern and the reason why he wrote the epistle. He realized that the cross, together with the reasons for the crucifixion, must be presented to the churches again and again. There are so many high-sounding words and high-flown ideas circulating among believers. 'Good motives' and 'moral reasons' and 'the best of intentions' are often put forward as substitutes for righteousness, but none of them are acceptable to God: 'this is my Son, hear Him', He says. The desire to be under law and to be obedient seems to speak of a submissive spirit wanting to be ruled by God, but this is not so; the Galatians are a typical example of this. In this instance he pressed home freshly upon them that, if they wished to be under law and be obedient, let them keep the law of Christ and obey the truth of the gospel and not seek after Moses' law.

With regard to Abraham, since they were so enamoured of him and circumcision, let them remember that he had two sons and that both of them were circumcised, but only one was the promised seed. Circumcision does not guarantee salvation. Ishmael was the son of Abraham as well as Isaac, but Ishmael was of the bondwoman; he was not born after the promise, his birth was of the flesh and so was his circumcision. The commandment to circumcise was of God and in obedience to Him Abraham circumcised himself and in his zeal to obey the Lord applied the commandment to all the males of his household, one of whom was Ishmael. That day Abraham circumcised very many, not one of whom was born after the Spirit; his own son Ishmael was born after the fleshly desires of his own and Sarah's hearts. Abraham, who saw so much, never foresaw the trouble they would cause. Their impatience was still causing trouble in Paul's day. How irreversible was their zealous, fleshly desire and how regrettable! It was not till years later that he circumcised 'him who was born after the Spirit'. Isaac was born according to the promise and power of God and the affections and desires God wrought in Abraham and Sarah to do His will.

Unfortunately circumcision, by its very nature, having been once done, cannot be undone. Jews still practise circumcision and so also do the Arabs, but it is valueless to them all; the blessing of Abraham is upon none of them. The significance of circumcision in relationship to God's commitments to Israel in the future is obscure. One thing is certain, the cross of Christ has made all sacramental practices and works, formerly made compulsory by the law of Moses and ordained of God as means of salvation for men, superfluous and irrelevant, circumcision included. Sacramentalism has no saving power in the Church of Christ, but the spirit in which they were practised has not died among the churches to this day; that is the

tragedy. There is a spirit in man which even now invests the sign with the power and spiritual effectiveness of which it is only the symbol; this is superstition at its worst.

All the symbols of the Church have been degraded by the belief, only too common among us, that they impart grace. Whether baptism or the communion or anointing with oil, all these and others beside them have been made substitutes for the thing for which they stand and have thereby been degraded to tokens of the curse instead of signs of the blessing. Perhaps the most potently dangerous of these is the communion: this ordinance enjoined upon us by Christ, wrongly understood and ignorantly practised, is a deadly habit. The symbols in which it stands, namely bread and wine, wrongly taken are actual media of sickness and death in the midst of the churches, the exact opposite of what God intended. Baptism may be singled out as another ordinance, intended by God for blessing among men. It has been made a substitute for the real truth for which it stands. From time immemorial men have made pictures, symbols, signs, statues their idols and have turned all the practices connected with them into mere ritual; God's reasons for instituting them have become as nothing and He is grieved. Man can be very religious and in his zeal he sometimes seeks to apply to himself truth which is exclusive to the Church. Whenever this happens the results are disastrous to that individual.

Any people who trespass beyond God's intentions and use the symbols He instituted for His regenerate Church alone preach and minister destruction to those they purport to help and bless thereby. All such practice is satanically inspired and carried out in the zeal of flesh excited by unregenerate spiritual convictions; none of this is of the Spirit of God. Man has always done these things, the habit has not been recently introduced; it all began in Eden, the seeds of all these things were planted then, though not by God. As Adam exceeded God's word, so did Abraham. Although Abraham did not disobey God in the same way as Adam, he certainly exceeded God's will in the promise He made to him and so the mystery of 'the flesh' in spiritual things was typed out. The pattern is clearly defined and easily traceable in scripture. From the time of Abraham's experimentation in concubinage Ishmael has represented the circumcision of the flesh, but Isaac has represented the circumcision made without hands wrought by God in man's spirit -- the real circumcision.

The inevitable tragedy of it all (it always works out like this) is that he who was born after the flesh persecuted him who was born after the Spirit. There were so many in Abraham's camp who were born after the flesh, they were not even his seed, yet he zealously applied to them the special sign. He did this with the best of intentions of course (had not God given him the order?). They were his workers and retainers, possibly also there were some camp-followers. He was a good man and he wanted blessing for them all, so although he was not the father of their flesh as he was of Ishmael's, when he received the commandment he circumcised them. Presumably they stayed on with Abraham and by reason of that fact dwelt in the promised land. In some measure they all partook of Abraham's blessings there, but not one of them had direct personal inheritance in it because they were not the spiritual seed. Even Ishmael, the one who through seniority would have had ground for claiming the special double portion of the blessing, was by God's orders cast out; Abraham was not allowed to give the promised land of God to him for an inheritance, the God of the land would not be his God. He watched over him and made provision for him, but He would not be his God. Circumcised though they were, this was the same for every one of them.

To explain these things to the Galatians Paul told an allegory in which Hagar, the mother of Abraham's child of the flesh, represents the law and earthly Jerusalem. Long before Paul's day what in David's kingdom and psalms was the city of God had become the Jews' house of bondage; they were satan's slaves. Because of what she and her children did to Christ, Jerusalem and the Jews' religion had been

excommunicated. Judaism and national religious systems remain rejected to this day. Jerusalem is the mother and head(-quarters) of sinister law-works in which the flesh delights, for thereby it can achieve pseudo heights of religion. Any covenant she had with God is now broken, and her fleshly children, together with all their bondages, must be cut right out of the churches. Until Jerusalem which is above mothers us all, Jerusalem which now is on earth is the mother of us all. In the allegory she is 'the flesh'; Sarah, her heavenly counterpart, is 'the Spirit', the 'mother' of all God's children. We must be born from above -- Jesus said it.

Paul takes up this idea of circumcision, applying it widely when he says 'I would they were even cut off which trouble you'. His deliberate intention was to destroy the superstitious belief, rampant among the Jews, that circumcision of itself was a great spiritual blessing -- it was not. Paul laboured this point much. By these people, whether in Jewry or throughout Christendom, whatever their religious attachment, fake doctrines and religious practices are being substituted for true experience of Christ. Through them all the glory that should go to Christ by the Spirit goes to satan via the flesh. Paul in his day was incensed against them and so should we be in our day, 'Cast them out, cut them off', he says, 'they are bewitching you, you've stopped running the race, you've fallen from grace, you are in bondage'. The churches must run like athletes and walk like champions and to do so they must discard all the trappings of religious flesh. We all must walk with Christ in the Paradise of salvation without any of this pseudo-religious clothing of cast-off practices. Fear of persecution must not prevent us from preaching the cross of Christ; to refrain from doing so is to glory in the flesh. The availability of the cross in the Spirit commits us all to using or applying it in every realm of our being; to fail to do so is to despise it. All spiritual, mental and bodily appetites can be adjusted to God by the cross, so that by the Spirit, on the cross we can offer ourselves without spot to God.

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