

## QUESTION 37

### Christ's Circumcision and the Other Legalities Observed with respect to the Christ Child

Next we have to consider Christ's circumcision. And because the circumcision is a sort of public acknowledgment of the Law that has to be observed—this according to Galatians 5:3 (“I testify to every man circumcising himself, that he is a debtor to the whole Law that has to be carried out”)—we will at the same time look into the other legalities observed with respect to the Christ child. Hence, there are four questions: (1) concerning His circumcision; (2) concerning the imposition of His name; (3) concerning His being offered [in the temple]; and (4) concerning the purification of His mother.

#### Article 1

##### Was it fitting for Christ to be circumcised?

It seems that it was not fitting for Christ to be circumcised (*Christus non debuerit circumcidi*):

**Objection 1:** When the truth arrives, the prefigurement ceases. But as is clear from Genesis 17, circumcision was prescribed to Abraham as a sign of the covenant that was going to be born from His seed. But this covenant was brought to an end with the nativity of the Christ. Therefore, circumcision should have ceased immediately.

**Objection 2:** Every action by Christ is an instruction; hence, John 13:15 says, “I have given you an example, in order that as I have done to you, so you might likewise do.” But it is not the case that we ought to be circumcised—this according to Galatians 5:2 (“If you get circumcised, Christ will not profit you at all”). Therefore, it seems that neither should Christ have been circumcised.

**Objection 3:** Circumcision is ordered toward a remedy for original sin. But as is clear from what was said above (q. 14, a. 3 and q. 15, a. 1), Christ did not contract original sin. Therefore, it was not fitting for Christ to be circumcised.

**But contrary to this:** Luke 2:21 says, “After the eight days were fulfilled for the boy to be circumcised ...”

**I respond:** There are several reasons why it was fitting for Christ to be circumcised:

First of all, in order to show the genuineness of His human flesh—this against the Manicheans, who claimed that He had an imaginary body; and against Apollinarius, who claimed that Christ's body was consubstantial with His divine nature; and against Valentinus, who claimed that Christ had brought His body with Him from heaven.

Second, in order to show approval of circumcision, which God had instituted from of old.

Third, in order to prove that He was of the race of Abraham, who accepted the mandate of circumcision as a sign of his faith in Him.

Fourth, in order to remove an excuse that the Jews would have had not to accept Him if He had not been circumcised.

Fifth, in order to commend the virtue of obedience to us by His example. Hence, He was circumcised right on the eighth day, as had been commanded in the Law.

Sixth, in order that “He who had come in the likeness of sinful flesh” (Romans 8:3) might not reject the remedy by which sinful flesh was wont to be made clean.

Seventh, in order that, taking on the burden of the Law within Himself, He might liberate others from the burden of the Law—this according to Galatians 4:4-5 (“God sent His Son, made under the Law, in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law”).

**Reply to objection 1:** Circumcision, accomplished by removing a piece of skin on the organ of generation, “prefigured the passing away of the old birth (*significabat spoliationem vetustae*

*generationis*” (Athanasius, *De Sabbatis et Circumcisione*), and we are freed from this old birth by the passion of Christ. And so the truth of this figure was fully accomplished not in Christ’s nativity, but in His passion, prior to which circumcision retained its power and status. And so it was fitting for Christ, before His passion, to be circumcised as a son of Abraham.

**Reply to objection 2:** Christ received circumcision at a time at which He was under the precept. And so His action should be imitated by us in our observing those things that lie under a precept in our own time. For as Ecclesiastes 8:6 says, “For every task there is a time and an opportunity.”

Furthermore, as Origen explains, “As we died when Christ died and rose again when Christ rose, so were we circumcised by a spiritual circumcision through Christ. And this is why we do not need a carnal circumcision.” And this is what the Apostle is saying in Colossians 2:12: “In Him”—viz., Christ—“you are circumcised with a circumcision not done by hand in despoiling the body of the flesh, but with the circumcision of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

**Reply to objection 3:** Just as, by His own will, Christ, having no sin within Himself, took on our death, which is an effect of sin, in order to liberate us from death and to make us spiritually dead to sin, so, too, He took on circumcision, which is a remedy for original sin, without Himself having original sin, in order to free us from the yolk of the Law and in order to effect a spiritual circumcision for us—so that by taking on the prefigurement, He fulfilled the reality.

## Article 2

### Was a name appropriately imposed on Christ?

It seems that a name was not appropriately imposed on Christ (*inconvenienter fuerit Christo nomen impositum*):

**Objection 1:** Gospel truth has to correspond to prophetic prediction. But the prophets predicted a different name for Christ. For instance, Isaiah 7:14 says, “Behold, a virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and his name shall be called ‘Emmanuel’.” Again, Isaiah 8:3 says, “Call his name ‘Hasten to take away the spoils’, ‘Make haste to take away the prey’.” Again Isaiah 9:16 says, “His name shall be called: ‘Wonderful’, ‘Counselor’, ‘God the Mighty’, ‘Everlasting Father’, ‘Prince of Peace’.” And Zachariah 6:12 says, “Behold the man: ‘Orient’ is his name.” Therefore, it was inappropriate for His name to be called ‘Jesus’.

**Objection 2:** Isaiah 62:2 says, “You shall be called by a new name, which the mouth of the Lord has named.” However, the name ‘Jesus’ is not a new name, but instead, as is clear from Christ’s genealogy itself in Luke 3, this name had been imposed on many individuals in the Old Testament. Therefore, it seems that it was inappropriate for His name to be called ‘Jesus’.

**Objection 3:** As is clear from what is said in Matthew 1:21 (“She will bring forth a son, and you will call His name ‘Jesus’, for He shall save His people from their sins”), the name ‘Jesus’ signifies salvation. However, salvation through Christ is effected not only in circumcision, but, as is clear from the Apostle in Romans 4:11-12, “also in uncircumcision.” Therefore, it was inappropriate for the name ‘Jesus’ to be imposed on the Christ at His circumcision.

**But contrary to this** is the authority of Scripture, in which it is said in Luke 2:21: “After the eight days were fulfilled for the boy to be circumcised, His name was called Jesus.”

**I respond:** Names should correspond to the properties of things. This is clear with the names of species and genera, given that *Metaphysics* 4 says, “The concept that the name signifies is the definition, which designates the proper nature of the entity.”

Now the names of individual human beings are always imposed because of some property of the individual on whom the name is imposed—either (a) because of a *time*, in the way that names of certain saints are imposed on individuals who are born on the feast days of those saints; or (b) because of *kinship*, in the way that the name of an individual's father is imposed on him, or the name of some relative—just as, according to Luke 1:59-61, John the Baptist's relatives wished to call him “by his father's name ‘Zachary’,” and not by the name ‘John’, because “none of his relatives were called by that name”—or, again, (c) because of an *event*, in the way that Joseph called his first-born son ‘Manasses’, explaining, “God has made me forget all my troubles” (Genesis 41:51); or, again, (d) because of *some quality of the one on whom the name is being imposed*, in the way that Genesis 25:25 tells us, “The one who came forth first was red and hairy like an animal skin, and his name was called ‘Esau’,” which means *red*.

On the other hand, names that are divinely imposed on certain individuals always signify some *gratuitous gift given to them by God*, in the way that in Genesis 17:5 it is said to Abram, “You will be called ‘Abraham’, because I will make you the father of many nations,” and in the way that in Matthew 16:18 it is said to Peter, “You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church.”

Therefore, because the man Christ had been given the gratuitous gift that all men were to be saved through Him, His name was appropriately called ‘Jesus’, i.e., ‘Savior’, and the angel announced this name ahead of time not only to His mother, but also to Joseph, since Joseph was going to bring Him up.

**Reply to objection 1:** The name ‘Jesus’, which signifies salvation, is in some way signified in all the names in question:

For instance, what is designated when one says ‘Emmanuel’, which means ‘God with us’, is the *cause* of salvation, which is the union of the divine and human natures in the person of the Son of God, through whom it is brought about that God is with us.

Again, what is designated by saying “Call his name ‘Hasten to take away the spoils’, ‘Make haste to take away the prey’” is *the one from whom He saves us*, since He saves from the devil, whose spoils He took away—this according to Colossians 2:15 (“Despoiling the principalities and powers, He has confidently triumphed over them”).

Again, what is designated by saying “His name will be called Wonderful, etc.” is *the way to, and the terminus of, our salvation*, insofar as we are led by the wonderful counsel and power of the divine nature to the inheritance of the world to come, in which there will exist the perfect peace of the children of God under God Himself as the ruler.

On the other hand, what is referred to by saying “Behold the man, his name is Orient” is the same as in the first point above, viz., the mystery of the Incarnation, in accord with which “a light has risen up in the darkness for the righteous” (Psalm 111:4).

**Reply to objection 2:** The name ‘Jesus’ was able to belong to individuals who lived before Christ in accord with some other notion, e.g., because they brought some sort of particular and temporary salvation. But in accord with the notion of *universal spiritual salvation*, this name was proper to Christ. And that is why it is said to be a new name.

**Reply to objection 3:** As one reads in Genesis 17, Abraham simultaneously received the imposition of His name by God and the mandate of circumcision. And so among the Jews it was customary for names to be imposed on boys on the day of their circumcision, as if they did not have complete *esse* before circumcision—in the way that names are now imposed on children at their baptism. Hence, a Gloss on Proverbs 4:3 (“I was my father's son, tender, and like an only son in the eyes of my mother”) says, “Why does Solomon call himself an only son in the eyes of his mother, when Scripture testifies that he had an elder brother of the same mother, unless because that brother died without a name soon after birth?” And this is why, when Christ was circumcised, He simultaneously received the imposition of His name.

### Article 3

#### Was it appropriate for Christ to be offered in the temple?

It seems that it was not appropriate for Christ to be offered in the temple (*inconvenienter fuerit Christus in templo oblatus*):

**Objection 1:** Exodus 13:2 says, “Consecrate to me every first-born who opens the womb among the children of Israel.” But Christ came out from the closed womb of the virgin, and His mother’s womb was not opened. Therefore, it was inappropriate for Christ to be offered in the temple in fulfillment of this law.

**Objection 2:** What is always present to someone cannot be presented to him. But Christ’s human nature was always maximally present to God, since it was always conjoined to God in the unity of a person. Therefore, it was unnecessary for Him to be presented to the Lord (*non oportuit quod coram domino sisteretur*).

**Objection 3:** Christ is the principal victim, to whom all the victims of the Old Law are related as the prefigurements to the reality. But there should not be a second victim for a victim. Therefore, it was inappropriate for another victim to be offered in the place of Christ.

**Objection 4:** Among the legal victims the principal one was the lamb, which was a “perpetual sacrifice,” as Numbers 28:6 puts it. This is why Christ is likewise called a lamb in John 1:29 (“Behold, the lamb of God. Therefore, it was more appropriate for a lamb to be offered in the place of Christ than a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons.

**But contrary to this** is the authority of Scripture, which testifies to this having been done (Luke 2:22).

**I respond:** As has been explained (a. 1), Christ wanted “to be under the Law, in order to redeem those who were under the Law” (Galatians 4:4) , “and in order that the justification of the Law might be fulfilled” spiritually in His members” (Romans 8:4).

Now two precepts were handed down in the Law concerning newborn children:

One was a general precept with respect to everyone, viz., that after the days for the purification of the mother were completed, a sacrifice was to be offered for the son or daughter, as is laid out in Leviticus 12:6ff. This sacrifice was both (a) for the expiation of the sin in which the offspring had been conceived and born, and also (b) for a sort of consecration of the child, who was at that point being presented in the temple for the first time.

The second was a specific precept of the Law with respect to the first-born “of both men and beasts of burden.” Thus the Lord claimed for Himself every first-born in Israel, because, in order to free the people of Israel, “He had slain every first-born of Egypt, both men and beasts of burden” (Exodus 12:12-29), whereas the first-born among the children of Israel had been spared. This precept is set down in Exodus 13. In this, too, Christ, “who is the first-born among many brothers” (Romans 8:29), was prefigured.

Therefore, since Christ, born of a woman, was a first-born and wanted to be under the Law, the evangelist Luke showed that the following two things were observed concerning Him: (a) first, what pertained to the first-born, when he says, “They took Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord, as was written in the Law of the Lord, ‘Every male opening the womb shall be called holy to the Lord’”—and (b), second, what pertained in general to everyone, when he says, “... and in order to offer a sacrifice according to what was written in the Law of the Lord, a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons.”

**Reply to objection 1:** As Gregory of Nyssa says, “This precept of the Law seems to be fulfilled in

the incarnate God alone in a singular way and in a way different from others. For He alone, conceived in an ineffable way and born in an incomprehensible way, opened a virginal womb that had not been opened beforehand to sexual intercourse, while preserving the seal of chastity inviolate even after the birth.”

Consequently, the words ‘opening the womb’ designate that nothing has entered or exited it beforehand. Again, [Luke] specifically says ‘male’ “because He carried nothing of the sin of the woman’s nature” (Gregory, *ibid*). Again, He is called ‘holy’ in a singular way, because He felt no contagion of earthly corruption, given that His birth was wondrously unstained” (Ambrose, *Super Lucam*).

**Reply to objection 2:** Just as the Son of God “is made man and circumcised not for His own sake, but in order to make us gods through grace and in order that we might be circumcised spiritually, so it is for our sake that He is presented to the Lord, in order that we might learn to present ourselves to the Lord” (Athanasius, *Fragmenta in Lucam*). And this is done after His circumcision in order to show that “no one who has not been circumcised of his vices is worthy of being in God’s presence (*dignum esse divinis conspectibus*)” (Bede, *In Lucam*).

**Reply to objection 3:** He who is the true victim wants legal victims to be offered for Him in order that the prefigurement might be joined to the reality and in order that the prefigurement might meet with approval through the reality—against those who denied that it was the God of the Law who was preached by Christ in the Gospel. For as Origen says in *In Lucam*, “We must not think that the good God subjected His Son to the enemy’s law, which He Himself had not given.”

**Reply to objection 4:** Leviticus 12:6,8 “commands those who have sufficient means to offer, for their son or a daughter, a lamb along with a turtle dove or a pigeon, whereas it commands that those who do not have sufficient means to offer a lamb should instead offer two turtle doves or two young pigeons” (Bede, *Homilia* 15). “Therefore, our Lord, who, ‘being rich, became poor for our sake, that through His poverty we might be rich’ (2 Corinthians 8:9), wanted the pauper’s victim to be offered for Him, just as at His birth ‘He was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger’.” (Bede, *in Lucam*).

Nevertheless, these birds fittingly serve as figures. For because the turtle dove is talkative, it signifies the preaching and confessing of the Faith, whereas because it is a spotless animal, it signifies chastity, and because it is a solitary animal, it signifies contemplation. The pigeon, on the other hand, is a gentle and simple animal signifying gentleness and simplicity. But it is a gregarious animal and thus signifies the active life. And so victims of this sort signify the perfection of Christ and His members. Again, “both these animals, by the plaintiveness of their singing, present the mourning of the saints in this life. However, the turtle dove, which is solitary, signifies the tears that accompany prayer, whereas the pigeon, being gregarious, signifies the public prayers of the Church” (Bede, *ibid.*). Lastly, each of these animals is offered in duplicate, so that holiness might exist not only in the soul, but also in the body.

#### Article 4

##### Was it fitting for the Mother of God to go to the temple to be purified?

It seems that it was not fitting for the Mother of God to go to the temple to be purified (*inconvenienter mater Dei purganda ad templum accesserit*):

**Objection 1:** Purification seems to be only from uncleanness. But as is clear from what has been said above (q. 27, aa. 3-4 and q. 28, aa. 1-3), there was no uncleanness in the Blessed Virgin. Therefore, it was not fitting for her to go to the temple to be purified.

**Objection 2:** Leviticus 12 says, “A woman who, having received seed, gives birth to a male child will be unclean for seven days,” and so she is commanded “not to enter the sanctuary until the days of her purification are fulfilled.” But the Blessed Virgin gave birth to a male child without male seed. Therefore, it was not fitting for to go to the temple to be purified.

**Objection 3:** Purification from uncleanness is effected only through grace. But the sacraments of the Old Law did not confer grace; instead, she had the author of grace with her. Therefore, it was not fitting for the Blessed Virgin to go to the temple to be purified.

**But contrary to this** is the authority of Scripture, by which Luke 2:22 says, “After the days of Mary’s purification were fulfilled according to the Law of Moses ...”

**I respond:** Just as the fullness of grace flows from Christ into His mother, so it was fitting for His mother to be conformed to the humility of Her Son; for as James 4:6 says, “God gives grace to the humble.” And so just as Christ, even though He was not subject to the Law, nonetheless willed to undergo circumcision and the other burdens of the Law to provide an example of humility and obedience, both in order to show His approval of the Law and to deprive the Jews of an occasion for calumny, for these same reasons He wanted His mother likewise to fulfill the observances of the Law even though she was not subject to them.

**Reply to objection 1:** Even though the Blessed Virgin had no uncleanness, she nonetheless wanted to fulfill the observance of purification—not because of any necessity, but for the sake of the precept of the Law. And so the evangelist explicitly states, “After the days of her purification were fulfilled *according to the Law*.” For she did not need purification in her own right (*secundum se*).

**Reply to objection 2:** Moses seems to have spoken explicitly in order to make an exception from uncleanness for the Mother of God, who did not give birth after having received semen. And so it is clear that she is not obligated to fulfill the precept in question; instead, as has been explained, she voluntarily fulfilled the observance of purification.

**Reply to objection 3:** The sacraments of the Old Law did not provide the purification of the uncleanness of sin that is effected through grace, but they did prefigure that sort of purification. For as was explained in the Second Part (*ST* 1-2, q. 102, a. 5 and q. 103, a. 2), they purified one, by means of a certain carnal purification, from the uncleanness of an irregularity. Still, the Blessed Virgin had not contracted either sort of uncleanness, and so she did not need to be purified.