

Session 4

Circumcision Made Without Hands

You were buried with him in baptism: the covenant sign has changed hands.

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers that entry into God's covenant has always come through a God-given sign, that St. Paul explicitly names Baptism as the *circumcision of Christ, made without hands* (Colossians 2:11–12), and that the prophets had already promised a circumcision God himself would perform on the heart.

Catholic Touchstone. The Catechism reads the Lord's own circumcision as a sign of his incorporation into Abraham's descendants and says it prefigures that *circumcision of Christ* which is Baptism (CCC 527). Covenant entry by a sign is not a Catholic invention; it is the Bible's constant grammar, and Paul tells us the sign's new name.

What You Need to Know

Tonight the study turns a corner. Sessions 1 through 3 watched water: creation, flood, sea. Tonight there is almost no water in the Old Testament text at all, and that is deliberate. Before the group can understand what Baptism does, they need to see the older, deeper category Baptism belongs to: the covenant sign. God does not deal with his people as a loose crowd of individuals who feel sincere; he cuts covenants, and, in the pattern this session traces from Abraham forward, he marks entry into covenant with a sign he chooses.

Genesis 17 is the founding scene. God binds himself to Abraham with promises (descendants, land, and *I will be their God*), and commands a sign in the flesh: every male circumcised, and circumcised *at eight days old* (Genesis 17:12). Let the group feel how strange and how wonderful that is. An eight-day-old has done nothing, chosen nothing, understood nothing; he receives the covenant as pure gift, because covenant membership in Israel was never earned by comprehension. It was conferred, and then grown into. Say no more than that tonight; just make sure everyone sees it in the text. It will matter enormously in Session 13.

The prophets then deepen the sign inward. Deuteronomy 30:6 promises a day when *the LORD your God will circumcise your heart*: not Israel circumcising itself, but God operating on the interior person. Jeremiah repeats the summons to circumcise the heart, and Ezekiel will promise the new heart itself (the group will live inside Ezekiel 36 in three weeks; resist previewing it). The trajectory the Old Testament itself draws: an outward covenant sign, awaiting the day God himself performs it on the heart.

Then Colossians 2:11–12, tonight's summit. Paul, writing (on the common reading of the letter's situation) to baptized Gentiles under pressure to take on the old sign, answers: you already have the reality it pointed to. *In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by*

putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ; and you were buried with him in baptism. Track the argument with the group slowly: you were circumcised (past tense, done), not by human hands, and the moment Paul points to is Baptism. Baptism is the new covenant's circumcision: the God-performed entry sign, cutting away not a scrap of flesh but the whole *body of flesh*, the old fallen self.

Prepare for tonight's steelman, which is genuinely strong: *made without hands* sounds like Paul is contrasting physical rites with a purely spiritual event, and verse 12 credits *faith in the working of God*. On that reading, Colossians 2 dissolves ritual rather than transferring it. The answer turns on what *without hands* means in Scripture's own usage, and on who the acting subject of a sacrament is. Master the answer box before the night; this is one of the exchanges your sharpest participants will remember.

One more seed, planted with a single sentence and no follow-up: Genesis 17 gave the covenant sign to eight-day-old infants, and in Session 2 the group met eight persons saved through water, and early Christians heard resurrection, the eighth day, in both. Just point at the pattern and smile. The doctrine waits for Session 13.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

He that is eight days old among you shall be circumcised; every male throughout your generations...

Genesis 17:12 (RSV2CE)

And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.

Deuteronomy 30:6 (RSV2CE)

Paul announces that the promised, God-performed circumcision has arrived, and names it:

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ; and you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.

Colossians 2:11–12 (RSV2CE)

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Justin Martyr • *Dialogue with Trypho*

St. Justin, whom the group met at the flood, teaches in substance that Christians have received the true, spiritual circumcision promised by the prophets, and that we receive it through Baptism: the sign given to Abraham has found the reality it always pointed toward, and it is now open to every nation.

Leader note: Justin is arguing, respectfully and at length, with Trypho, a Jew, about covenant membership. If your group includes anyone sensitive to how Christians speak of Judaism, model Justin's better angels: the claim is fulfillment, never contempt, and the Church repudiates every reading of these texts that despises the Jewish people.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. John Chrysostom • *Homilies on Colossians*

St. John Chrysostom, preaching through Colossians in the fourth century, teaches in substance that Paul deliberately calls Baptism the Christian's circumcision: performed not by human hands but by the Spirit, and removing not a small piece of the body but the whole *body of flesh*, the old sinful self, stripped off and buried in the water.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Thomas Aquinas • *Summa Theologiae III, q. 70*

St. Thomas, treating circumcision directly, teaches in substance that circumcision was the figure and preparation of Baptism: a true covenant sign professing faith in the Christ who was to come, while Baptism is the sacrament of the Christ who has come. What the old sign promised from a distance, the new sacrament confers in fullness.

Leader note: If a precise participant asks whether circumcision *did* anything: St. Thomas holds that it truly benefited those under it through faith in the Christ to come, while Baptism confers grace with a fullness the old sign could not. The old covenant was real grace on the way to more grace, not an empty ritual era.

Catechism Connection

CCC 527 is tonight's anchor: Jesus' own circumcision on the eighth day is the sign of his incorporation into Abraham's descendants and prefigures that *circumcision of Christ* which is Baptism. CCC 1150 sets the wider frame: the signs of the Old Covenant, and it names circumcision among them, prefigure the sacraments of the New.

Hold in reserve, without citing it aloud tonight: the entire logic of tonight (covenant entry conferred by God's sign, given even to infants, grown into afterward) is the scriptural spine of the Church's practice of infant Baptism. The Catechism draws that conclusion where the group will draw it, in Session 13.

Tonight we only lay the rail.

Paragraphs for this session: 527, 1150

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH • LEADER ONLY

Why water? (master thread): tonight complicates the sealed question from a new angle: the covenant sign did not used to involve water at all. Whatever the answer to *why water* is, it now has to explain why the sign changed element. Do not say this aloud; let anyone who notices carry it.

Eighth day (developed tonight, resolved Session 13): eight-day-old infants (Genesis 17:12), eight persons through the flood, circumcision of Jesus at eight days (the discovery text). Touch, do not press.

Given to infants (planted tonight, resolved Session 13): the group must see Genesis 17:12 with their own eyes tonight; Session 13's argument stands on tonight's observation. Plant only.

Circumcise the heart (planted tonight, resolved Session 7): Deuteronomy 30:6 is the first half of a promise; Ezekiel 36 is the other half, and Session 7 is the unsealing night. Do not quote Ezekiel tonight.

Buried and raised (planted tonight, resolved Session 11): Colossians 2:12's burial language gets one admiring sentence tonight and a whole session later.

Session Goals

1. The group can define a covenant sign from Genesis 17: God binds himself with promises and marks entry with a sign he chooses.
2. The group has seen, in the text, that the old covenant sign was given to eight-day-old infants as pure gift.
3. The group has read Colossians 2:11–12 aloud and can say what Paul calls Baptism: the circumcision of Christ, made without hands.
4. The steelman (*without hands* means non-ritual) has been given at full strength and answered from Scripture's own usage.
5. The heart-circumcision promise (Deuteronomy 30:6) is on the table, unresolved, pointing toward Session 7.

Timed Plan (85 minutes)

5 min • Welcome and opening prayer

10 min • Win questions

15 min • Build: Genesis 17:1–14; covenant and sign; the eighth day; Q1-Q2

10 min • Build: Deuteronomy 30:6; the promised surgery of the heart; Q3

15 min • Build: Colossians 2:11–12 slowly; Q4-Q5

10 min • Live discovery: Romans 2:28–29 and Luke 2:21

10 min • Steelman: does *without hands* dissolve the rite?

10 min • Send, Live It, memory verse, closing prayer

If you must land at 75 minutes, cut: Q3 can be folded into the leader's framing of Deuteronomy 30:6 in one sentence, and the Dig Deeper box. Never cut Genesis 17:12 (the infant detail) or the steelman.

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

God of Abraham, you made a covenant with our father in faith and marked his family as your own. Thank you for marking us. Open your word tonight, and circumcise our hearts: cut away whatever keeps us from loving you with everything we are. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win • open the room

QW1. What is something you belong to that you were brought into before you could choose it (a family, a country, a name, a parish)? How do you feel now about having been given it rather than having chosen it?

QW2. Think of a ring, a uniform, a brand, a flag: why do we humans mark belonging on the body at all? What does a visible sign do that a private feeling cannot?

Build • into the text

Have someone read Genesis 17:1–8 (the promises) and someone else read 17:9–14 (the sign). Ask the group to listen for who initiates every single element.

Q1. List the promises God makes in verses 1–8, and then answer: what does Abraham contribute to this covenant besides receiving it?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

God promises to multiply Abraham exceedingly, to make him the father of a multitude of nations, to give the land, and, the heart of it all, *to be God to you and to your descendants after you*. Abraham's contribution is to walk before God and receive the sign. The covenant is God's initiative, God's promises, God's chosen sign. This is the pattern to hold all night: covenants are entered on God's terms, through God's sign, as God's gift.

Q2. Look hard at verse 12. At what age does a male enter this covenant, and what has he done to qualify?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Eight days old, and he has done nothing: no faith he can articulate, no repentance, no understanding, no choice. He is carried into the covenant by his family and marked as God's, and then spends his life growing into what he already is. Whatever else we conclude in this study, the Bible's first covenant sign was, by God's explicit command, given to infants. (File that away; we will need it in Session 13. Tonight, just make sure you saw it in the text.)

Q3. Now Deuteronomy 30:6. Who performs this future circumcision, what is it performed on, and what is it for?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

God performs it (*the LORD your God will circumcise*), on the heart, and its purpose is love: so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and soul, and live. The Old Testament itself announces that the outward sign was always awaiting an inward, God-performed fulfillment. The question the prophets leave hanging: when, and how, will God do this surgery? Hold the question; it is not answered tonight.

Now the summit. Read Colossians 2:11–12 aloud twice, slowly. Remind the group of Paul's situation: Gentile Christians in Colossae are being pressured to take on the old covenant sign. Watch what Paul tells them they already have.

Q4. Paul says *you were circumcised*: past tense, already done. With what kind of circumcision, and, tracking verse 12, at what moment does Paul say it happened?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

A circumcision *made without hands*, the *circumcision of Christ*, and the moment Paul points to is Baptism: *you were circumcised... and you were buried with him in baptism*. Paul's answer to *do I need the covenant sign?* is not *signs are over*; it is *you have received the covenant sign, the greater one, the one God himself performs*. Baptism is to the new covenant what circumcision was to the old: the divinely appointed entry.

Q5. The old sign removed a small piece of flesh. According to verse 11, what does the circumcision of Christ remove?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The body of flesh: not a token of the old self but the old self entire, stripped off like a garment and buried with Christ in the water. The new sign does not do less than the old because it sheds no blood; it does immeasurably more. It is Deuteronomy 30:6 happening: God's own hands, on the heart.

LIVE DISCOVERY

The hunt, in two quick finds. First: somewhere in Romans, Paul says who the *real Jew* is and what *real* circumcision is. Find it in **Romans 2:28–29**. Second: the Gospels record the day the Lord himself received the old sign, at exactly the age Genesis commanded. Find it in **Luke 2:21**. Read both aloud.

Draw the lines: real circumcision is of the heart (Romans agreeing with Deuteronomy), and Jesus received the old covenant's sign at eight days, the sign of his incorporation into Abraham's descendants (CCC 527), so that in him the sign could be brought to its fulfillment.

STEELMAN • PRESS THE OBJECTION AT FULL STRENGTH

Tonight's objection, at full strength: *made without hands* is precisely how the Bible says *not a ritual*. Paul's whole point to the Colossians is to free them from external rites: no to circumcision, and, by the same logic, do not replace one physical ceremony with another. The circumcision of Christ is spiritual: God's inner work on the heart, received, verse 12 says plainly, *through faith in the working of God*. On this reading's strongest form, Baptism remains a commanded covenant sign, even a seal of grace received by faith; what it is not is the instrument that effects the burial and rising. Making the water do the work is exactly the mistake, external religion, that Paul is writing to correct.

Q6. Before we answer: what does this objection get right about the danger of external religion? Where does the Old Testament itself thunder against empty ritual?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The danger is real, and the prophets said it first: rites without repentance disgusted God (think of Isaiah 1). Catholic teaching agrees: a sacrament received without repentance and faith does not bear its saving fruit, and can even be received sacrilegiously. If the objection were merely *ritual without faith is dead*, we would only say amen.

But look at how *made without hands* works in the usages nearest this one. There the phrase does not mean *nothing happens*; it marks God's workmanship over human manufacture: The temple *made without hands* is a real temple, but God builds it; the resurrection body is called a building from God, a house *not made with hands*, and it is emphatically a body. So a circumcision made without hands is not a circumcision that does not happen; it is one performed by no human surgeon. And that is exactly the Catholic doctrine of Baptism: at the font, the minister's hands pour or immerse, but God's hands work. The acting subject of every sacrament is Christ. *Without hands* is not an argument against Baptism doing something; it is the reason Baptism can do what it does.

And notice: Paul does not set faith against Baptism; he locates them in the same event. *Buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God*. In it, through faith: the sacrament and faith are not rivals here any more than they were on the ark, where faith built and water carried. If Paul had wanted to say the rite is dispensable, this letter, written precisely to people being pressured about a rite, was his moment to say it. Instead he told them their rite had already happened, without hands, in the water.

DIG DEEPER • OPTIONAL

For a strong group: Genesis 17:5 and 17:15. Entering this covenant changed Abram's and Sarai's very names. Ask: what happens to a person's name at Baptism, and why does the Church ask *what name do you give your child?* as the very first question of the rite? Covenant has a way of renaming people, and the Church still begins at the font with a name.

Send • out of the room

QS1. You were carried into the covenant, most of you, before you could choose it, and confirmed it later. Where are you right now in growing into what you already are?

QS2. Deuteronomy promises a circumcised heart *so that you will love*. What is one attachment, resentment, or fear you would ask God to cut away this week so that love has more room?

Live It This Week

- Pray one line each morning this week: *Lord, circumcise my heart; cut away what keeps me from loving you.*
- If you were baptized as an infant, thank (in person, by call, or in prayer if they have died) the people who carried you to the font.
- Read Colossians 2:6–15 once, alone, and underline every verb whose subject is God, not you.

Memory Verse

and you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.

Colossians 2:12 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

Father, you marked us as your own in a circumcision made without hands, and you buried our old selves with Christ in the water. Finish the surgery you have begun: circumcise our hearts, free our love, and raise everything in us that still lies in the grave. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in order.

Genesis 17:1–14 • Covenant promises and the sign; verse 12: eight days old

Deuteronomy 30:6 • God will circumcise the heart, so that you will love

Colossians 2:11–12 • Circumcision made without hands; buried with him in baptism; memory verse

Romans 2:28–29 • Live discovery: real circumcision is of the heart

Luke 2:21 • Live discovery: the Lord receives the old sign at eight days

Genesis 17:5, 15 • Dig Deeper: covenant entry as naming