

# WHAT MAKES A CHRISTIAN: Circumcision [Ordinances] or Faith?



A sermon by Alexander Maclaren (1826-1910). He was pastor of Union Chapel in Manchester, England for 45 years; there he became known as ‘the prince of expository preachers.’ (Sermon was condensed to fit this format. Read full sermon at [gloriouslight.org](http://gloriouslight.org))

**‘In Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but faith which worketh by love’ – Gal. 5:6**

It is a very singular instance of imaginative misreading of plain facts that the primitive Church should be held up as a pattern Church. The early communities had apostolic teaching; but beyond that, they seem to have been in no respect above, and in many respects below, the level of subsequent ages. If we may judge of their morality by the exhortations and dehortations received from the Apostle, Corinth and Thessalonica were but beginners in holiness. If we may judge of their intelligence by the errors into

which they were in danger of falling, these first congregations had indeed need that one should teach them which were the first principles of the oracles of God. It could not be otherwise. They were but just rescued from heathenism, and we need not wonder if their spirits long bore the scars of their former bondage. If we wish to know what the apostolic churches were like, we have but to look at the communities gathered by modern missionaries. The same infantile simplicity, the same partial apprehensions of the truth, the same danger of being led astray by the low morality of their heathen kindred, the same openness to strange heresy, the same danger of blending the old with the new, in opinion and in practice, beset both.

The history of the first theological difference in the early churches is a striking confutation of the dream that they were perfect, and a striking illustration of the dangers to which they were exposed from the attempt, so natural to us all, to put new wine into old bottles. The Jewish and the Gentile elements did not coalesce. The point round which the strife was waged was not whether Gentiles might come into the Church. That was conceded by the fiercest Judaizers. But it was whether they could come in as Gentiles, without first being incorporated into the Jewish nation by circumcision, and whether they could remain in as Gentiles, without conforming to Jewish ceremonial and law.

Those who said 'No' *were* members of the Christian communities, and, being so, they still insisted that Judaism was to be eternal. They demanded that the patched and stiff leathern bottle, which had no elasticity or pliability, should still contain the quick fermenting new wine of the kingdom. And certainly, if ever man had excuse for clinging to what was old and formal, these Judaizing Christians held it. They held by a law written with God's own finger, by ordinances awful by reason of divine appointment, ven-

erable by reason of the generations to which they had been of absolute authority, commended by the very example of Christ Himself. Every motive which can bind heart and conscience to the reverence and the practice of the traditions of the Fathers, bound them to the Law and the ordinances which had been Israel's treasure from Abraham to Jesus.

Those who said 'Yes' were mostly Gentiles, headed and inspired by a Hebrew of the Hebrews. They believed that Judaism was preparatory, and that its work was done. For those among themselves who were Jews, they were willing that its laws should still be obligatory; but they fought against the attempt to compel all Gentile converts to enter Christ's kingdom through the gate of circumcision.

The fight was stubborn and bitter.... All through Paul's life he was dogged and tormented by this controversy. There was a deep gulf between the churches he planted and this reactionary section of the Christian community.... This Epistle [to the Galatians] is the memorial of that foot-to-foot feud. It is of perennial use, as the tendencies against which it is directed are constant in human nature. Men are ever apt to confound form and substance, to crave material embodiments of spiritual realities, to elevate outward means into the place of the inward and real, to which all the outward is subsidiary. In every period of strife between the two great opponents, this letter has been a stronghold of those who fight for the spiritual conception of religion. With it Luther waged his warfare, and in this day, too, its words are precious.

My text contains Paul's condensed statement of his whole position in the controversy. It tells us what he fought for, and why he fought, against the attempt to suspend union to Christ on an outward rite.

## **I. The first grand principle contained in these words is that faith working by love makes a Christian.**

The antithesis of our text appears in somewhat varied forms in two other places in the Apostle's writings. To the Corinthians he says, 'Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God.' His last word to the Galatians—the gathering up into one strong sentence of his whole letter—is, 'In Christ Jesus, neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature.'

Now, all these assertions embody substantially the same opposition between the conception of Christianity as depending upon a ceremonial rite, and as being a spiritual change. And the variations in the second member of the contrast throw light on each other. In one, the essential thing is regarded from the divine side as being not a rite performed on the body, but a new nature, the result of a supernatural regeneration. In another, the essential thing is set forth as being not an outward act, but an inward principle, which produces appropriate effects on the whole being. In yet another the essential thing is conceived as being not a mere ceremonial, but practical obedience, the consequence of the active principle of faith, and the sign of the new life. There is an evident sequence in the three sayings. They begin with the deepest, the divine act of a new creation—and end with the outermost, the last result and object of both the others—deeds of conformity to God's law.

This one process in its triple aspects, says Paul, constitutes a man a Christian. What correspondence is there between it, in any of its parts, and a carnal ordinance? They belong to wholly different categories, and it is the most

preposterous confusion to try to mix them up together. Are we to tack on to the solemn powers and qualities, which unite the soul to Christ, this beggarly addition that the Judaizes desire, and to say, the essentials of Christianity are a new creature, faith, obedience—and circumcision? That is, indeed, sewing old cloth on a new garment, and huddling together in grotesque chaos things which are utterly diverse. It is as absurd bathos as to say the essentials of a judge are integrity, learning, patience—and an ermine robe!

There would be less danger of being entangled in false notions of the sort which devastated Galatia and have afflicted the Church ever since, if people would put a little more distinctly before their own minds what they mean by 'religion'; what sort of man they intend when they talk about 'a Christian.' A clear notion of the thing to be produced would thin away a wonderful deal of mist as to the way of producing it. So then, beginning at the surface, in order to work inward, my first remark is that religion is the harmony of the soul with God, and the conformity of the life to His law.

The loftiest purpose of God, in all His dealings, is to make us like Himself; and the end of all religion is the complete accomplishment of that purpose. There is no religion without these elements—consciousness of kindred with God, recognition of Him as the sum of all excellence and beauty, and of His will as unconditionally binding upon us, aspiration and effort after a full accord of heart and soul with Him and with His law, and humble confidence that that sovereign beauty will be ours. 'Be ye imitators of God as dear children' is the pure and comprehensive dictate which expresses the aim of all devout men. 'To keep His commandments' goes deeper than the mere external deeds.... Religion is no dry morality; no slavish, punctili-

ous conforming of actions to a hard law.... But to be godly is to be godlike. The full accord of all the soul with His character, ... the full glad conformity of the will to His sovereign will, who is the life of our lives – this, and nothing shallower, nothing narrower, is religion in its perfection; and the measure in which we have attained to this harmony with God, is the measure in which we are Christians....

But our text tells us, further, that if we look backwards from character and deed to motive, this harmony with God results from love becoming the ruling power of our lives....

And this is the might and nobleness of the Christian love to God; that it is no idle emotion or lazy rapture, no vague sentiment, but the root of all practical goodness, of all strenuous effort, of all virtue, and of all praise. That strong tide is meant to drive the busy wheels of life and to bear precious freightage on its bosom; not to flow away in profitless foam. Love is the fruitful mother of bright children .... Her sons are Strength and Justice, and Self-control and Firmness, and Courage and Patience, and many more besides; and her daughters are Pity with her sad eyes, and Gentleness with her silvery voice, and Mercy whose sweet face makes sunshine in the shade of death, and Humility all unconscious of her loveliness; and linked hand in hand with these, all the radiant band of sisters that men call Virtues and Graces. These will dwell in our hearts, if Love their mighty mother be there. If we are without her, we shall be without them.

There is discord between man and God which can only be removed by the sweet commerce of love, established between earth and heaven. God's love has come to us. When ours springs responsive to Him, then the schism is ended, and the wandering child forgets his rebellion, as he lays his aching head on the father's bosom, and feels the

beating of the father's heart.... The essential of religion is concord with God, and the power which makes that concord is love to God.

But the text leads to a still further consideration, namely, the dominion of love to God in our hearts arises from faith.

We thus reach the last link, or rather the staple, of the chain from which all hangs. Religion is harmony with God; that harmony is produced by love; and that love is produced by faith. Therefore the fundamental of all Christianity in the soul is faith. Would this sound any fresher and more obvious if we varied the language, and said that to be religious we must be like God, that to be like Him we must love Him, and that to love Him we must be sure that He loves us? Surely that is too plain to need enlarging on.

And is it not true that faith must precede our love to God, and affords the only possible basis on which that can be built? How can we love Him so long as we are in doubt of His heart, or misconceive His character, as if it were only power and wisdom, or awful severity? Men cannot love an unseen person at all, without some very special token of his personal affection for them. The history of all religions shows that where the gods have been thought of as unloving, the worshippers have been heartless too. It is only when we know and believe the love that God hath to us, that we come to cherish any corresponding emotion to Him. Our love is secondary, His is primary; ours is reflection, His the original beam .... Heaven must bend to earth before earth can rise to heaven. The skies must open and drop down love, ere love can spring in the fruitful fields. And it is only when we look with true trust to that great unveiling of the heart of God which is in Jesus Christ, only when we can say, 'Herein is love—that He gave His Son to

be the propitiation for our sins,' that our hearts are melted, and all their snows are dissolved into sweet waters, which, freed from their icy chains, can flow with music ... through our otherwise silent and barren lives. Faith in Christ is the only possible basis for active love to God.

And this thought presents the point of contact between the teaching of Paul and John. The one dwells on faith, the other on love, but he who insists most on the former declares that it produces its effects on character by the latter; and he who insists most on the latter is forward to proclaim that it owes its very existence to the former.

It presents also the point of contact between Paul and James. The one speaks of the essential of Christianity as faith, the other as works. They are only striking the stream at different points, one at the fountain-head, one far down its course among the haunts of men. They both preach that faith must be 'faith that worketh,' not a barren assent to a dogma, but a living trust that brings forth fruits in the life .... So all three of these great teachers of the Church are represented in this text, to which each of them might seem to have contributed a word embodying his characteristic type of doctrine.... where faith, love, and work are all united in the comprehensive saying, 'In Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but faith which worketh by love.'

The sum of the whole matter is this—He who is one in will and heart with God is a Christian. He who loves God is one in will and heart with Him. He who trusts Christ loves God. That is Christianity in its ultimate purpose and result. That is Christianity in its means and working forces. That is Christianity in its starting-point and foundation.



## **II. But we have to consider also the negative side of the Apostle's words. They affirm that in comparison with the essential—faith, all externals are infinitely unimportant.**

Paul's habit was always to settle questions by the widest principles he could bring to bear upon them .... In our text the question in hand is settled on a ground which covers a great deal more than the existing dispute. Circumcision is regarded as one of a whole class—namely, the class of outward rites and observances; and the contrast drawn between it and faith extends to all the class to which it belongs. It is not said to be powerless because it is an Old Testament rite, but because it is a rite. Its impotence lies in the very nature which it has in common with all external institutions, whether they be of the Old Testament or of the New, whether they be enjoined of God or invented by men. To them all the same characteristic cleaves. Compared with faith they are of no avail. Not that they are absolutely useless. They have their place, but '*in Christ Jesus*' they are nothing. Union to Him depends on quite another order of facts, which may or may not exist along with circumcision, or with baptism, or with the Lord's Supper. However important these may be, they have no place among the things which bind a soul to its Saviour....

Religion is the devotion of the soul to God. Then *everything* besides is not religion, but at most a means to it. That is true about all Christian ordinances. Baptism is spoken about by Paul in terms which plainly show that he regarded it as 'nothing' in the same sense, and under the same limitations, as he thought that circumcision was nothing [I Cor. 1:14-18].... Remember the grand freedom with which the same Apostle dealt with questions about meats offered to idols, and the observance of days

and seasons. The same principle guided him there too, and he relegated the whole question back to its proper place with, 'Meat commendeth us not to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, neither if we eat not are we the worse.' ...

The separation is broad and deep. On one side are all externals, rites, ceremonies, politics, Church arrangements, forms of worship, modes of life, practices of morality, doctrines, and creeds—all which are externals to the soul: on the other is faith working through love, the inmost attitude and deepest emotion of the soul.... We are joined to God by faith. Whatever strengthens that faith is precious as a help, but is worthless as a substitute.

### **III. There is a constant tendency to exalt these unimportant externals into the place of faith.**

The whole purpose of the Gospel may be described to be our deliverance from the dominion of sense, and the transference of the centre of our life to the unseen world.... To make the senses a ladder for the soul to climb to heaven by, will be perilously likely to end in the soul going down the ladder instead of up. Forms are sure to encroach, to overlay the truth that lies at their root, to become dimly intelligible, or quite unmeaning, and to constitute at last the end instead of the means.... Christ instituted two outward rites. There could not have been fewer if there was to be an outward community at all, and they could not have been simpler; but look at the portentous outgrowth of superstition, and the unnumbered evils, religious, moral, social, and even political, which have come from the invincible tendency of human nature to corrupt forms, even when the forms are the sweet and simple ones of Christ's own appointment. What a lesson the history of the Lord's

Supper, and its gradual change from the domestic memorial of the dying love of our Lord to the 'tremendous sacrifice,' reads us as to the dangerous ally which spiritual religion ... enlists when it seeks the help of external rites!

But remember that this danger of converting religion into outward actions has its root in us all, and is not annihilated by our rejection of an elaborate ceremonial. There is much significance in the double negation of my text, 'Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision.' If the Judaisers were tempted to insist on the former, as indispensable, their antagonists were as much tempted to insist on the latter. The one were saying, 'A man cannot be a Christian unless he be circumcised.' The other would be in danger of replying, 'He cannot be a Christian if he is.'...

My text has a double edge. Let us use it against all this Judaizing which is going on round about us, and against all the tendency to it in our own hearts.... Circumcision is nothing, as most of us are forward to proclaim. But, also, remember, when we are tempted to trust in our freedom, and to fancy that in itself it is good, *uncircumcision is nothing*. You are no more a Christian for your rejection of forms than another man is for his holding them. Your negation no more unites you to Christ than does his affirmation. One thing alone does that,—faith which worketh by love ....

#### **IV. When an indifferent thing is made into an essential, it ceases to be indifferent, and must be fought against.**

Paul proclaimed that circumcision and uncircumcision were alike unavailing. A man might be a good Christian either way.... But when it came to be maintained as a principle that Gentiles *must* be circumcised, the time for con-

ciliation was past. The other side had made further concession impossible. The Apostle had no objection to circumcision. What he objected to was its being forced upon all as a necessary preliminary to entering the Church. And as soon as the opposite party took that ground, then there was nothing for it but to fight against them to the last. They had turned an indifferent thing into an essential, and he could no longer treat it as indifferent.

So whenever parties or Churches insist on external rites as essential, or elevate any of the subordinate means of grace into the place of the one bond which fastens our souls to Jesus, and is the channel of grace as well as the bond of union, then it is time to arm for the defense of the spirituality of Christ's kingdom, and to resist the attempt to bind on free shoulders the iron yoke. Let men and parties do as they like, so long as they do not turn their forms into essentials.... Let us thankfully believe that men may love Jesus, and be fed from His fullness, whether they be on one side of this undying controversy or on the other. And whensoever or wheresoever these subordinates are made into things essential, and the ordinances of Christ's Church are elevated into the place which belongs to loving trust in Christ's love, then let *our* voices at least be heard on the side of that mighty truth that 'in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but faith which worketh by love.

from Expositions of Holy Scripture  
Alexander MacLaren, D.D., Litt. D.

Reprinted 2022 by Glorious Light  
S2209  
(Image added)