

Chapter 3

Circumcision: A New Way to Keep an Old Law

Almost all Christians agree that circumcision is an obsolete law, for the New Testament is very clear about it. But it will be helpful for us to examine in greater detail *why* it is obsolete.

Although you may not have any questions about circumcision itself, the lessons we learn from circumcision will help us evaluate laws that you *do* have questions about. So even though it might at first seem to be irrelevant, it is actually very relevant to our study. Let's begin by seeing how circumcision started.

A command for Abraham and his family

In the first biblical mention of circumcision, God made a covenant or an agreement with Abraham and his descendants. God said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless." God explained his part of the covenant — he would be the God of Abraham's descendants and give them the land of Canaan (Genesis 17:1-8).

God then explained Abraham's part of the covenant (verses 10-14). "This is...the covenant you are to keep." Every male was to be circumcised — the foreskin at the tip of the male sex organ was to be removed — and this was to be the "sign" of the covenant with God, and it was "an everlasting covenant."

Every male in Abraham's household was to be circumcised immediately, and from then on every baby boy was to be circumcised on the eighth day of his life. Whether they were Hebrews or whether they were slaves, the men had to be circumcised. If they were not, they would be cut off; they had broken the covenant.

Abraham did what God told him to do (verses 23-27; 21:4). The practice of circumcision became the defining characteristic of Abraham's family. However, the Israelites did not circumcise their boy babies in the wilderness. Joshua had to reinstitute this custom (Joshua 5:2-8). The omission had to be corrected before the plan of God proceeded. God would not allow the Israelites to live in the promised land unless they were faithful to the covenant God had made with Abraham.

Circumcision among the Israelites

Since circumcision was already a requirement for the Israelites, it is natural that it was included within the old covenant laws (Leviticus 12:2-3). People had to be circumcised to participate in the Passover (Exodus 12:44, 48). Even Gentiles had to be circumcised if they wanted to worship God by means of the Passover.

However, circumcision was not merely a physical and external practice. It symbolized something internal. God described idolatry and disobedience as a result of an uncircumcised heart (Leviticus 26:41); he described repentance as a circumcision of the heart (Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6).

But this spiritual meaning did not eliminate the need for the physical practice — the Israelites were to obey both the letter of the law *and* its symbolic meaning.

The Israelites apparently continued the practice of circumcision. Even in the lawless period of the judges, the Israelites were distinguished from others by the fact that they were circumcised (Judges

14:3; 1 Samuel 14:6; 2 Samuel 1:20; 1 Chronicles 10:4). The practice of circumcision was important in Israelite self-identity, in knowing that they were the people of God.

The prophets used the term "uncircumcised" as a synonym for Gentiles (Isaiah 52:1). Ezekiel criticized those who let uncircumcised people into the temple (Ezekiel 44:7). He predicted that only people who were circumcised in both the flesh and the heart could worship properly (verse 9). Physical circumcision was required.

The prophets elaborated on the *spirit* of circumcision, too. Jeremiah encouraged the people, who presumably were already physically circumcised, to circumcise their hearts (Jeremiah 4:4). It was a figure of speech meaning repentance. Indeed, God said he would punish both Israelites and Gentiles who are circumcised in the flesh only and not in the heart (Jeremiah 9:25-26). Physical circumcision was not enough; spiritual circumcision was also necessary.

Isaiah emphasized the importance of circumcision in

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one of his prophecies of God's glorious rule. He predicted a time when only circumcised people would be allowed to enter the new city of Zion (Isaiah 52:1-2). In Isaiah's culture and time, that meant people who were physically circumcised. Isaiah may have also meant those who were circumcised in heart as well. This was part of his prophecy of redemption (verse 3) — when good tidings of salvation are preached and God rules (verse 7) when the Lord returns to Zion (verse 8) and reveals salvation throughout the world (verse 10).

Circumcision in the early church

Now we come to the New Testament. John the Baptist and Jesus were circumcised (Luke 1:59; 2:21). Jesus' only comment about circumcision was favorable: It was part of the Law of Moses, and it was so important that it could be done on the Sabbath (John 7:22-23).

Stephen mentioned the covenant of circumcision that God had given Abraham (Acts 7:8), but he criticized the Jewish leaders for having uncircumcised hearts and ears (verse 51). They were physically circumcised, but not obedient to what God had told them through Jesus. Physical circumcision should have been followed by a circumcision of the heart — repentance.

The biggest controversy about circumcision came when the gospel began going to Gentiles. Circumcised believers (Jews) were astonished when the Holy Spirit was given to Cornelius, an uncircumcised Gentile (Acts 10:45). Jewish Christians criticized Peter for going to the house of uncircumcised people and even eating with them (Acts 11:2-3). For centuries, all of God's people had been circumcised, and these Jewish Christians assumed that this would always be true.

The problem surfaced again when more and more Gentiles began to believe in the Lord Jesus (verses 20-21). Later, some Jewish believers came to them and taught that the Gentiles had to be circumcised or else they could not be saved (Acts 15:1). They also said that the Gentiles should obey the entire Law of Moses (verse 5). In Antioch, this would not have included sacrifices, but it would have included other Jewish customs found in the books of Moses. By "circumcision," these Jews meant complete proselyte status, that the Gentiles had to become converted to Judaism — and that would mean that they had to keep all the other laws (Galatians 5:3). They said that Gentiles had to become Jewish in order to be saved.

However, the Jerusalem conference concluded that circumcision was *not* required for Gentile believers. They did not have to obey "the Law of Moses."

A possible argument for circumcision

Today, we understand that circumcision is not required for Gentiles, and we take it for granted. But perhaps we will better understand the significance of this decision if we try to argue the case *for* circumcision. Luke does not report the actual arguments used by the Judaizers, but they *could* have made a strong case. For example:

"Circumcision goes back to God's eternal covenant with Abraham, in which God promised to be the God of his descendants. These Gentiles are claiming Abraham as their spiritual father. He is the father of the faithful, and Genesis 17:12 tells us that *all* who are his descendants, whether physically or otherwise, come under the covenant of circumcision. If they really have the faith that Abraham did, they will be willing to do what Abraham did. If they really have a covenant with the same God, they will gladly accept the sign of that covenant. The covenant was revealed as everlasting, not a temporary arrangement. It was commanded by God himself.

"God has called these people, and that is good. But just as our ancestor Israelites could not inherit the promises until they were circumcised, so also these Gentiles cannot inherit the spiritual promises (salvation) unless they are circumcised. Until they are circumcised, they are strangers to the covenant of promise. We should not allow them to participate in our worship until they are circumcised; even though they have believed in Jesus our Passover, they should not partake of the meal or receive the benefit of his sacrifice unless they are circumcised.

There is solid scriptural precedent and support for this. The example of the ancient Israelites was written for our admonition.

"Circumcision is not only a physical command from God; it also has important spiritual symbolism.

It pictures repentance, but this symbolism doesn't eliminate the need to obey God physically, too. In fact, if these people really were obedient to God, they would not want to spiritualize away God's command to be circumcised. Isaiah clearly said that when the good news of salvation is preached, only circumcised people will be able to enter the daughter of Zion, which is the church today.

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These Gentiles are being grafted into Israel, and they therefore need to keep Israelite laws.

“What advantage is there in being circumcised? Much in every way! It is our nation that has the promises and covenants, and our Lord said that salvation is of the Jews. The only thing Jesus said about circumcision was positive. Circumcision helps us remember that we are God’s people and we are not supposed to act like other people do. Circumcision has value if a person observes the law, and we certainly don’t want to encourage these new converts to be lawbreakers. Our Messiah specifically said that he didn’t come to do away with the law, and none of it would pass away. He fulfilled the symbolism of sacrifices, but that doesn’t do away with our need to obey the plain and clear commands of God.

“God justifies people by faith, but the faith isn’t genuine if these people aren’t willing to obey clear commands of God in the God-breathed Scriptures that are able to make us wise for salvation. No one should rely on circumcision as a guarantee of salvation, of course, but neither should we reject it. Abraham believed first, and then he obeyed. That’s what these Gentiles need to do to be saved. Keeping God’s commands is what counts.”

Would we be able to answer such an argument without the writings of Paul? Probably not. The argument sounds strong (and parts of it are still used today in support of other Old Testament laws!), but the writings of Paul make it clear that the argument is faulty. If we want to obey God, then we will want to know *why* the argument isn’t valid.

Acts 15 concludes by saying that Gentiles do not have to be circumcised (verses 19-20; we will look at Acts 15 in more detail in chapter 5). Peter, Barnabas and Paul reinterpreted the law of circumcision by keeping the spiritual meaning but rejecting the physical custom. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, they explained that Abraham received the promises by faith *before* circumcision (Romans 4:9-10). Therefore the circumcision of the most-respected patriarch (even though commanded as an everlasting covenant for his physical heirs and extended household) cannot be a requirement for salvation. Abraham had saving faith without being circumcised, and Gentiles were being given the Holy Spirit without being circumcised.

Peter, Barnabas and Paul saw a *discontinuity* between the old way and the new. Even a ritual given hundreds of

years before Sinai could be set aside, as a requirement for salvation, by the new situation that Jesus brought.

Paul and circumcision

Many Jewish Christians could have been troubled by the conclusion that circumcision was not required. An ancient and culturally important religious law was set aside without even a hint that Jesus was against it. Why was this necessary? Let us look at what Paul later wrote and understand his reasons for the change between old and new.

“Circumcision has value if you observe the law,” Paul writes (Romans 2:25). But a person who observes the law is *counted as* circumcised (that is, in Abraham’s covenant) whether or not he is actually circumcised (verse 26). A Gentile who obeys is better than a Jew who disobeys (verse 27); physical circumcision does not affect our salvation. If a person is Jewish only in physical circumcision, but not in the heart, such a person is not one of God’s people, since real circumcision is not “merely” physical (verse 28).

Paul’s comments so far might be agreeable to a Jewish believer who said that both physical *and* spiritual circumcision were necessary. But Paul’s next comment would be too sweeping: A person is one of God’s people if he is inwardly circumcised, since the real circumcision is a spiritual matter, of the heart, “not by the written code” (verse 29). Although the prophets said that a person must be circumcised both inside and out, Paul said that only the inside counts. If the inside is OK, the outside does not matter.

But what value is there in being circumcised? Or, in synonymous terms, what advantage is there in being a Jew? Much, replies Paul (Romans 3:1-2). He mentions that circumcised people have in their community the words of God (verse 3). That is a great value, but it is useless if they do not obey — and that brings Paul to the core of the problem.

There is none righteous, no not one, he says (verse 10). No one keeps the law perfectly; we all fall short. So how can we be saved? Only by faith. “There is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith” (verse 30). Justification by faith is the main reason that the physical rite of circumcision is no longer necessary. We are right with God through faith, not by a ritual done in our flesh.

Paul examines the example of Abraham again, and notes that Abraham was counted as righteous even while he was uncircumcised (Romans 4:9-10). Even though he later received a physical sign or seal of his righteousness, his righteous status before God did not depend on circumcision (verse 11). He is the father of all who

faithfully live the way he did *before* he was circumcised (verse 12). He lived by faith, trusting in God.

Paul spells it out for the Galatians

Paul explained circumcision in greatest detail in his letter to the Galatians. The Galatian Christians were being misled by a Judaizing heresy that said Gentile believers should follow up their faith by obeying Old Testament commands. But Paul explained that it is wrong to view physical circumcision as *necessary* because that would imply that faith in Christ was not enough. “If you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all” (Galatians 5:2).

Paul did not *forbid* circumcision; after all, he had circumcised Timothy, whose mother was Jewish (Acts 16:3). But he explains that Titus, a Gentile, was not circumcised (Galatians 2:3). It was not a requirement for salvation, nor a requirement for leadership within the church. Circumcision is permissible as a voluntary practice, but it should not be taught as a requirement. It does not improve anyone’s standing before God. It should not be done as an obligation, or as a commitment to old covenant laws, which was the concern in Acts 15 and Galatians 5:2-3.

Circumcision was only the beginning of the Judaizers’ demands. What they were really insisting on was the whole Law of Moses (Galatians 5:3). They were insisting on the Mosaic covenant. Faith in Christ is great, they probably said, but we have to add to our faith some works as specified by the authoritative writings of Moses. Not so, said Paul. “In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” (verse 6).

Paul had to say that he was *not* preaching circumcision (verse 11). Why was this necessary? Probably because the Judaizers said that Paul was in favor of circumcision. Like other Jewish preachers seeking proselytes, Paul taught morals and virtues. Once people had accepted the morals, the Judaizers claimed, Paul would add circumcision as the capstone requirement. Not so, said Paul. He was not going to add requirements to what he had already taught the Galatian believers. He felt so strongly about the Judaistic agitators that he exclaimed, “I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!” (verse 12). Moreover, if the Galatians submitted to this work of the law as if it were required, then they could *not* be saved (verse 2)! They would no longer be trusting in Christ.

The Judaizers, he said, had selfish motives. They wanted to look good by bringing in converts, and they didn’t want to be criticized by other Jews regarding the

shameful death of Jesus (Galatians 6:12). They talked about obedience, but they themselves were sinning and in need of the cross they were ashamed of (verse 13).

Circumcision is obsolete, Paul said, since it has been replaced by the cross of Christ and all that the cross symbolizes (verse 14). Through faith in our Savior’s death on our behalf, we are acceptable to God on the basis of faith, and we do not need a physical sign of the covenant that we have in Jesus’ blood. Our relationship with God is based on Jesus, not on the flesh.

“Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation” (verse 15). If we are born anew in Christ, if we have a faith that works itself out in love, then we are acceptable to God. We do not have to observe this ancient ritual in order to be saved.

The circumcision controversy in other churches

To the Corinthians, Paul made it clear that if a person was called while uncircumcised, he should not attempt to change his appearance of his flesh (1 Corinthians 7:18). And his reason is surprising: “Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God’s commands is what counts” (verse 19). The surprise is that circumcision *had been* one of God’s commands, and yet it doesn’t count. Paul was apparently talking about New Testament commands, not old ones. The law of circumcision was a religious rite that had nothing to do with our moral responsibilities to our neighbors.

Because the Gentiles were uncircumcised, they were once excluded from the covenants of promise and cut off from God. But now, through the blood of Christ, they have been brought near to God (Ephesians 2:11-13). In Jesus’ own flesh, by his own obedience to the laws of Moses, he has abolished the commandments and regulations that separated Jews from Gentiles (verses 14-15). He gave all ethnic groups access to God and made them fellow citizens with each other; it is in Christ that we are being built together as a spiritual temple for God (verses 19-22). (We’ll look at Ephesians 2 in more detail in chapter 14.)

Paul also warned the Philippians about the circumcision advocates. “Watch out for those dogs,” he said (using Jewish slang for Gentiles) in reference to the Judaizers (Philippians 3:2). They are evil men, “mutilators of the flesh.” But the Spirit wars against the flesh; Paul emphasizes that the physical rite takes away from its spiritual meaning. It is *believers* who are the true circumcision — all “who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh” (verse 3). We do not look to fleshly things as evidence of spiritual salvation.

Paul himself was circumcised (verse 5), but he counted it as of no value for the sake of Christ (verses 7-8). His righteousness did not come from the law, but from faith in Christ (verse 9). Justification by faith has made circumcision obsolete.

The principle of *salvation by faith*, which Abraham had before his circumcision, gave Paul the logical foundation for saying that obedience to a command of Scripture was not necessary for salvation. A physical requirement cannot eliminate a promise of God that is given through faith.

Paul told Gentiles in Colosse that they were circumcised in Christ (Colossians 2:11). Since he is our righteousness, and we are in him, we have been given fullness in him (verse 10). We are counted as righteous because *he* is righteous. We are as good as circumcised if we are putting off our sinful nature — if our new nature is in Christ. We are keeping the old law in a new way.

Christians *are* circumcised, and our circumcision is not done by humans, but by Christ himself. How? Through baptism (verse 12). That is how we show publicly that we have faith in Jesus as our Savior, that

our old life is ended, that we — now circumcised in the heart — intend to live from then on in his service.

When we were separated from God in our sinful nature, we were spiritually uncircumcised. But God has now made us alive again with Christ (verse 13). He forgave our sins, canceling our spiritual debts (which we got through transgressing the written code) and the regulations that concerned the symbolic forgiveness of sins (verse 14). Sacrifices are obsolete.

Similarly, he canceled the regulation of circumcision, which symbolized repentance and sanctification. Since the fullness of those regulations has come in Christ, the symbol is no longer required. Christ has given us the fulfillment. (We'll look at Colossians 2 again in chapter 14).

Review 3

- God commanded Abraham and his descendants to be circumcised.
- Christians are also considered descendants of Abraham.
- We obey this law in a spiritual sense, and the literal sense is not necessary.
- Question: How strong could the argument for circumcision be? How many misleading arguments are in the “speech” on pages 2-3?

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