

Circumcision
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Circumcision is not a topic that you hear preached upon very often. My first introduction to circumcision, was in a hospital in Liberty, Texas when I was born. Circumcision is a common occurrence in the United States with over 60% of the boys being circumcised. It is also very common in a number of other countries especially where the Christian, Jewish or Muslim faiths dominate. My second introduction to circumcision was almost as painful. Sitting in a small Baptist Sunday School with mixed sexes in the fifth grade and hearing about circumcision in the New Testaments, I was the kid who raised his hand and asked the Sunday School Teacher what circumcision was. I got the unabashed answer and that was about the last time I heard the topic taught upon at that church or any other church for that matter.

Circumcision is defined in Wikipedia as “the removal of the foreskin from the human penis.” The word comes from the Latin word “circumcidere”, which means to cut around. Circumcision is considered the oldest operation in the world and is first found in Egypt.

Circumcision became a sign of God’s covenant to build nations from Abram. The establishment of a people of God in this world is something that is done through the power of God and not the effort or might of man. At the same time, from this group of people called by God will come the Seed or the Messiah who will crush the head of Satan. It is for this reason that the very forces of Satan and Hell would come against the Nation and people of God and seek to eradicate them and make sure that no nation is born. In Satan’s view if there is no nation, then there would be no “Seed” and no Messiah.

Satan brings infertility and barrenness to Sarai. Sarai and Abraham decide to help carry out God’s will in Genesis 12 that God will give the land of Canaan to the descendants of Abraham (Gen. 12:7). However the promises of God to Abram cannot come about if Abram has no children. Sarai and Abram are unable to have children and Sarai decides to give her handmaid to Abram so that they might have children and Ismael is born who is the progenitor of the Arab races. But God has another plan.

In Exodus 17:1-2 God proposes a covenant to Abram. He states “I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless and I will make my covenant between Me and You, and will multiply you exceedingly”. In verse 4 God promises Abram that he “shall be a father of many nations.” In verses 5 and 6, God changes Abram’s name which meant “Exalted Father” to Abraham meaning “Father to Many.” In verses 6-7 God tells Abraham

”I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations from you and kings shall come from you.” In addition God promises Abraham that he will give to Abraham and his descendants the Land of Canaan.

As part of the covenant with God, Abraham is able to take the following actions described in Genesis 17: 10-14 which reads as follows:

This is my covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised; and you shall be

circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male child in your generations, he who is born in your house or bought with money from any foreigner, who is not your descendant. He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.

In Genesis, God promised that he would work through women to bring a Seed into the world who would defeat the Serpent of Old and bruise the head of the serpent. With Abraham, God promised to use a nation of people who will be His people and His nation upon earth. This nation will be a nation of promise and will come through the loins of a man who at the time of the promise was 99 years old. From this old man Abraham would come kings and from him kings did come including King David, King Solomon and King Jesus, the Messiah.

Failure to get circumcised came with a warning. Those who were not circumcised would be cut off from the people of God. In short they would be like the foreskin that was cut off and thrown away.

Man's efforts to carry out the promises are useless. An Ismael is not the answer to God's promise. Instead the answer will be Isaac. Isaac means laughter and not only will Abraham and Sarah laugh with joy at Isaac's birth but all who hear of it will laugh with them. In fact God laughs as well. Once again God brings about his promises when things appear impossible. A young shoot in a sense springs from what appears to be an old branch.

God's promise to Abraham that nations will come from him is tied up with God's command to circumcise all males. Circumcision deals with becoming part of the people of God. Below are few of my thoughts on circumcision:

- Circumcision is a sign. I have a child who seems to be incapable of keeping an ID establishing identity. The I.D. keeps getting lost and misplaced. The male Jewish child now has a sign as well to establish their identity. They can't lose it. You can lose your belongings and your clothes but you don't lose the sign of being a part of the family of God. If it gets wet it will not be destroyed. The sign may not be observable to most but it is there nonetheless. The sign can be remembered every time the male goes to the bathroom.
- The sign is a choice. The parents take the initiative in most cases and introduce the child into the people of God.
- There is a degree of pain and discomfort in becoming a member of the people of God but the rewards far exceed the cost. A foreskin is a small price to pay to become part of the people of God and to participate in the blessings of being the people of God.
- The promise relates to reproduction. As the person engages in sex both the male and the female will recognize the sign. Nations will come, people will be born. The sign is directly related to the result of there being a nation of people being built.
- The sign distinguishes the male, from the other males in the world.
- The cost of the sign is getting rid of a foreskin which had little value any way.

- People can join the people of God by taking on the sign. Foreigners have a way of becoming a part of the people of God and they are not excluded by their color or race or national type. They elect to take on the sign of the Jewish people.

Abraham at 99 enters into the covenant and he and his house, including Ishmael, are circumcised. (Gen. 17:23-27) Abraham is obedient to the commands of God. At age 100 and 90 for Sarah, Abraham and Sarah have a natural born son Isaac.

As Isaac become older Abraham will through his actions be willing to sacrifice his only begotten son, but God will not demand that sacrifice but will supply a lamb in lieu of the son. As all Christians know this is a picture of what God did through Christ. As John 3:16 says: "God gave his only begotten son." However, this son of God not only bore the wood on his back but bore our sins and died that we might live and have eternal life. Instead of a goat in the thicket, the Messiah was the Lamb of God and died for the sins of the world.

Circumcision had become the mark of God's people. It is believed to have been practiced from the time of Abraham until the time of the Exodus from Egypt.

We know that Jacob the son of Isaac practiced circumcision. When Jacob's daughter Dinah is raped by Prince Shechem. Shechem and Shechem's father Hamor seek to obtain Dinah for marriage to Shechem. Dinah's brothers respond at Genesis 34: 4: "We cannot do this thing, to give our sister to one who is uncircumcised, for that would be a reproach to us." The brothers agree that Dinah will be given to Shechem and that there can be marriages between the House of Jacob and the people of Shechem only if Hamor, Shechem and the people of the city of Shechem are circumcised. It was agreed and the men of Schechem were to be circumcised. While they were still in pain from the circumcision, Simeon and Levi, the brothers of Dinah, killed the males of Schechem. It is clear from this incident that circumcision had remained the practice of Jacob and his sons. Jacob is horrified by the actions of Simeon and Levi and Jacob and their families leave the area.

Jacob (also known as Israel) would later follow his son Joseph to Egypt where the Israelites would remain for 400 years. It is believed that circumcision was continued to be practiced. During the time that Moses was born, the Israelites used midwives, who not only assisted in the births but probably assisted in circumcisions. The two midwives mentioned in the first chapter of Exodus were Shiprach and Puah. (Exodus 1:15). The Pharaoh tried to have the midwives kill the male children but the midwives made the excuse that the women of Israel had their babies too fast. He later commands that every male child of the Jews be thrown into the Nile. (Ex. 2:23).

When Moses is born, he is hidden for three months. At three months of age, his mother is no longer able to hide him and he is placed into a bulrush boat and is discovered by the daughter of Pharaoh when she went down to bathe. The daughter of Pharaoh looks at the child when he cries and says, "This must be one of the Hebrews' children." (Ex. 2:6) She may have concluded that it was a Hebrew child because she knew that the Pharaoh's command to cast the children into the Nile; however she may have quickly concluded that the child was a Hebrew because he was circumcised. However, we know that circumcision was also practiced in Egypt.

Moses next encounter with circumcision may have occurred 80 years later. He spent 40 years as an Egyptian Prince and 40 years as a refugee in Midian. Moses has had an encounter with God and is in the

process of returning to Egypt with his family to free the Israelites. In Exodus 4:24-26 we come across verses which have discussed extensively by the Jewish sages. That passage reads as follows

And it came to pass on the way, at the encampment, that the Lord met him (Moses) and tried to kill him. Then Zipporah (the wife of Moses) took a sharp stone and cut off the foreskin of her son and cast it at Moses feet, and said, "Surely you are a husband of blood to me!"

This Scripture has engendered many comments and most do not seem to evidence much understanding regarding what is happening. Apparently God is angry because Moses has not circumcised his son. Although I cannot be sure, I suspect the problem was that Moses was returning to Egypt to lead the people of God. God's covenant with His people was evidenced by circumcision but Moses and Zipporah had not even taken the time to circumcise their own children. Moses own house was not in order and yet Moses was to lead the very house of God to fulfill their destiny and calling as the covenant people of God. Therefore circumcision and following God's instructions needed to happen in the personal house of Moses first. The circumcision was done by Zipporah much as circumcision was often done at that time by those who delivered the children the midwives.

Zipporah apparently did not think much about Moses house coming into order through circumcision or apparently much about Moses being the deliverer of Israel. After committing the circumcision, she throws the foreskin at Moses feet and says, "Surely you are a husband of blood to me!" This is not the type of submission that one would expect to the person who will lead millions out of bondage from Egypt. Also, these types of actions are not very supportive of the leadership and calling of Moses.

It is true that Moses was a husband of blood to Zipporah. She resented doing the circumcision. Yet it is through blood that covenant relationship is birthed. Circumcision involves blood and pain. It is also through blood that salvation is found. It is through innocent blood over the doorposts that the Angel of Death will be averted from the homes of the Israelites. The Passover is centered around blood. The sacrifices involve blood. The consecration of the Tabernacles, the priests and the priests clothing is through blood. The sacrifices involve blood of innocent animals. Blood was sprinkled upon the People of God. In the New Testament, salvation comes through the blood of the Lamb. Surely Moses was a bridegroom of blood when it came to Zipporah but he was also the deliverer who delivered the Israelites through the Blood of the Lamb and Goats when it came to Passover.

Unfortunately, those who are close to leadership often despise leadership because they are "family." Zipporah despises Moses because of the need to circumcise his family. The daughter of Saul despises King David when he dances in the streets. And even the family of Jesus was sure that they knew what was best for Jesus and came to see him as he was teaching. Jesus hearing that they were there said: "Those who are my mothers and brothers are those who know the word of God and obey it". (Mark 3:33-34; Luke 8:19-20; Matt. 12:46)

Zipporah and the children of Moses will not be going to Egypt with Moses because of Zipporah's disrespect to the leadership of Moses not only in his own family but also in his role to the larger Kingdom of God. Further, it will not be the children of Moses who will follow Moses in the leadership of the Israelites. Instead of the physical children it will be the spiritual child, Joshua (Jesus) who will lead the Israelites and take them into the Promised Land.

Circumcision before the Israelites Go into the Promised Land.

We next look at Joshua 5. Here the children of Israel have wandered in the desert for 40 years. God has dried up the waters of the Jordan River and the Children of Israel have crossed over to take the land and are getting ready to approach Jericho. It is at this point, that God tells Joshua that it is time for all of the males of Israel to be circumcised for a second time.

Just before Israel had left Egypt, God had commanded that all males who partook of Passover should be circumcised. In Exodus 12:43-44 God had commanded that Passover be kept. In addition all servants of the Israelites and all foreigners living with them had to be circumcised in order to participate in Passover with the Israelites. In other words, circumcision caused them to be accepted into the family of God and rest in the protection of God and the blood of the lamb. No one who was uncircumcised would be able to participate in Passover (Ex. 12:48.)

During the wandering in the desert, the circumcised Israelites (other than Joshua and Caleb) had died out and a new generation of males had grown up but the vast majority of them had for some reason not been circumcised. This is described in Joshua 5:5-6 which reads:

For all of the people who came out had been circumcised, but all of the people who had been born in the wilderness, on the way as they came out of Egypt had not been circumcised. For the children of Israel walked forty years in the wilderness, till all of the people who were men of war, who came out of Egypt were consumed because they did not obey the voice of the Lord....

In Joshua 5, Joshua is commanded to use flint knives and to circumcise the sons of Israel again the second time. It is important that flint knives be used. There were sharper metal knives available but God used natural stone that was sharpened to perform the ritual allowing people to come into the family of God. Also one should note that when Zipporah circumcised the sons of Moses that she had used a flint knife. God also required that altar stones be from uncut stones. The point is that it is through God's effort and provision that people enter into the family of God not through the provision of man's efforts such as man-made metal tools. The flint knives represented God's provision. From a New Testament perception, we come to God through faith (flint knives and the Rock of Ages) not through metal knives (man's efforts and works).

The place where the circumcisions were done and foreskins piled up was called Gilgal meaning "circle of stones." God says to Joshua at Joshua 5:9: "Then the Lord said to Joshua, "This day I have rolled away, the reproach of Egypt from you." " In short, God commanded that the male Israelites be circumcised before taking the Promised Land. Further, the Israelites were also ritually clean for the taking of Passover, which includes remembering and celebrating their deliverance from Egypt. The new generation of Israelite men were now included as part of the covenant of God and as heirs to God's promises to Abraham. These promises included having a land, the protection of God, the promise to Moses that a great prophet would come from the people of God and the promise made to Eve that a woman's seed would come to redeem all of mankind. The new Israelites going into the land under Joshua (Jesus) were warriors who were a covenant nation and heirs of all of the promises of God.

Circumcision of the Heart

It is interesting that the concept of the people of God through circumcision of the body was expanded to include a circumcision of the heart. In fact, Moses instructed the people of Israel to circumcise their

hearts at Deuteronomy 10:16 when Moses writes: “Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer.” Here Moses instructs Israel not to be stubborn or callous but instead to put away rebellion and sin and be tender toward God. The important thing is that even very early the concept was born that the true Children of God have a mark on their hearts which denote them as the true Children of God. Moses broaches this concept again when he is pronouncing the blessings and cursing on the People of God. He states in Deuteronomy 30:6 that when God brings the Israelites into the Promised Land that the following will happen: “And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.”

The concept of a spiritual circumcision continues to appear in the Old Testament in the Book of Jeremiah. At Jeremiah 4:4, Jeremiah reports God as saying :

“Circumcise yourselves to the Lord and take away the foreskins of your hearts you men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, lest My fury come forth like fire, and burn so that no one can quench it, because of the evil of your doings.

Thus there is the concept of a heart circumcision which is a real circumcision and involves a rejection of sin and rebellion and coming into the part of being a spiritual Israel.

Circumcision was generally unique to the Jews at least in the area of the Promised Land. Peoples other than the Jews were referred to as being “uncircumcised.” During the time of King Saul there were regular battles between the Philistines and the Jews. In fact David at 1 Samuel 17:26 says regarding Goliath: “For who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?” He calls him an “uncircumcised Philistine” again at 1 Samuel 17:36.

Later, Saul is interested in having David marry his youngest daughter, Michal, and offered to allow David to marry Michal for a dowry of 100 foreskins meaning that David and his men would need to kill 100 Philistines and circumcise the dead men and bring proof to Saul that the Philistines had been killed. 1 Samuel 18:25 says: “Then Saul said, “This you shall say to David: “The king does not desire any dowry but one hundred foreskins of the Philistines to take vengeance on the king’s enemies.” David and his men went and killed 200 Philistines.

1 Samuel 18:26-27 says:

Now the days had not expired; therefore David arose and went, he and his men , and killed two hundred men of the Philistines. And David brought their foreskins, And gave them in full count to the king, that he might become the king’s son-in-law.

In this instance circumcision was not used for inclusion into the people of God. Instead it was used more like scalps in early American history. The foreskins were a trophy and proof that the enemy had died.

Although circumcision was practiced by the Jews, it generally was not embraced by other countries excluding Egypt. Both the Babylonians and the Persians did not utilize circumcision. The Greeks were against circumcision feeling that it was barbaric and it took away from the beauty and usefulness of the body. In fact one of the successors of Alexander the Great, Antiochus Epiphanes went to great lengths to force the Jews to accept all of the Greek beliefs and this included that males not be circumcised.

Antiochus controlled Israel and sacrificed pigs on the altar in Jerusalem and forbade circumcision. Eventually Israel threw off the Greek rulership through the Revolt of the Maccabees.

As Roman came into political control, they did not forbid the Jews from circumcision but they did not practice it themselves. The Romans adopted many Greek customs and, like the Greeks, believed circumcision to be mutilation and a disagreeable practice. After the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132-135 A.D.) circumcision was banned by Rome but later Emperor Antoninus Pius (138 -161 A.D.) permitted an exemption to the law allowing Jews to be exempted from the law and therefore once again permitting circumcision for Jews only.

Because both Greeks and Roman males spent time in Gymnasia and the baths, and these activities were conducted in the nude, it was quite easy to determine whether attendees were circumcised or not.

Circumcision in the New Testament

By the time of Jesus, circumcision was the normal practice in Judaea and in Samaria. We know that John the Baptist was circumcised according to Luke 1:59. Likewise, Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day as required by Leviticus 12:3. (See Luke 2:21). The Apostle Paul was also circumcised on the eighth day according to Philippians 3:5.

Jesus had little to say regarding circumcision other than the fact that he found it ironic that the Pharisees would allow circumcision to occur on the Sabbath but at the same time object when a person was made whole and healed on the Sabbath. Jesus said the following at John 7:22-24:

Moses therefore gave you circumcision (not that it was from Moses, but from the fathers), and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath, so that the law of Moses should not be broken, are you angry with me because I made a man completely well on the Sabbath?

After the death of Jesus and his resurrection, the Day of Pentecost came and Christianity began to expand rapidly. At first it expanded in Jerusalem and then to those who were Jews attending Pentecost. Through Philip a revival began in Samaria and Peter and John went to Samaria and prayed for those Samaritans who were converted and the Holy Spirit fell upon them.

Christianity then spread to the Gentiles through Peter. In Acts 10, A Centurion named Cornelius living in Caesarea is instructed by an angel to send for Peter, who was staying with a tanner named Simon in Joppa, which was about 35 miles away.

God prepared Peter for the visit from the representatives from Cornelius by having a vision or trance described in Acts 10:9-16. In that vision, Peter sees a sheet let down from heaven with all kinds of clean and unclean animals with instructions to Peter "to kill and eat." (Acts 10:13). Peter refuses saying that he would never eat anything unclean. This same vision is repeated three times. It is at that time that the men from Cornelius arrive at the house of Simon the Tanner. An angel then tells Peter that three men are seeking him and that he is to go with them and that God has sent the three men to him.

The next day Peter along with some of the Christians from Joppa begin the journey to Caesarea. In the remaining part of Acts 10, Peter goes and preaches to the Gentiles in the house of Cornelius and the

Gentiles are converted, filled with the Holy Spirit and are baptized. The account is found at Acts 10:44 which reads as follows:

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word. And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God. Then Peter answered, "Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have. And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then they asked him to stay a few days.

When the apostles and the circumcised believers in Judea heard about what happen, they asked Peter in Acts 11 to explain. Peter repeated what happened and concluded as follows in Acts 11:17; "If therefore God gave them the same gift as He gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?" In Acts 11:18 it says, "When they heard these things they became silent and they glorified God saying, "The God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.""

In Chapter 11, God begins to work mightily in Antioch and Barnabas and Saul of Tarsus (Paul) begin to work in conjunction with the Antioch church where there were many Gentiles who had been converted.

At this point in time, there is a large church centered in Jerusalem made up of Jewish Christians including numerous Pharisees who have been converted. In Antioch, there are many Christians but the majority of them are Gentiles. In Acts 15 some of the members of the Jerusalem Church traveled to Antioch and begin to teach the Christians there: "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." (Acts 15:1). A dispute breaks out on this issue and Paul and Barnabas along with some other representatives go to Jerusalem to consult with the apostles and elders to get an answer to resolve this issue. The Pharisees who had become part of the church in Jerusalem took the position that the Gentile believers needed to be circumcised and instructed to keep the law of Moses.(Acts 15:5)

When the apostles and elders at Jerusalem met to consider the issue, Peter took the side of Paul and Barnabas and said the following at Acts 15:7-12:

And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: "Men and brethren you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they."

There is a hearing in Jerusalem to resolve this matter. Ultimately James who acted as head of the Jerusalem Church resolves the issue at Acts 15:15 by quoting a prophecy from Amos 9:11-12 which prophesized that the Lord would restore the Tabernacle of David so the rest of mankind including the Gentiles might seek the Lord. A compromise is reached whereby Gentiles can come into the faith without being circumcised but the Gentiles are asked to abstain from sexual immorality, from eating

blood, from eating things which have been strangled and from food polluted by idols. (Acts 15:30). In essence, the Gentiles can now be accepted into the faith without being circumcised but are given a few simple items to follow in an attempt to keep peace with Jewish Christians relating to dietary laws.

Further the Apostles and Elders at the Church in Jerusalem send a letter to the Gentile Christians in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia documenting this decision. The contents of that letter are repeated at Acts 15:23-29.

The decision by the Church at Jerusalem is remarkable. By this decision, the way into Christianity is opened without requiring Gentiles to touch all of the bases required by Jewish law including the need for circumcision which would have greatly impeded the growth of the church among the Gentiles. It is also remarkable because the Jerusalem leaders could have taken the position that circumcision was “everlasting covenant” by taking a conservative view of the commandment; however they did not do so! The decision was a compromise position in an effort to keep peace between the Gentile believers and Jewish believers yet to keep the door wide open for Gentile conversions.

The results of the decision by the Jerusalem Church spread throughout the Gentile Churches. Paul and Silas would communicate this decision on to the churches that Paul and Barnabas had planted in Asia Minor. In the process of doing this Timothy joins Paul and Silas as one of the individuals spreading the Gospel. According to Acts 16:1-3, Timothy came from a marriage where the woman was Jewish and the father was Greek. (See also Acts 16:3) Because he would be ministering to Jews in synagogues, Paul circumcised him. Keep in mind, that Timothy was presumed to be Jewish because in Judaism, you are “Jewish” if your mother is Jewish or if you have converted to Judaism. In this instance, Timothy’s mother is Jewish. Interestingly, Paul would take a totally different approach, with another young minister of the Gospel, Titus, who was from a family where both parents were Greek. When Titus accompanied Paul, everyone knew that he was a Gentile Christian so circumcision was not expected. (Gal. 2:3-5)

God had used Peter to open the door to the Gentiles for salvation. However, it is Paul who became the Apostle to the Gentiles. In Galatians 2, Paul speaks about going up to Jerusalem with Barnabas and having taken Titus with him to communicate the message that Paul had been spreading among the Gentiles. He describes going up to the church in Jerusalem at Galatians 2:7-9:

But on the contrary, when they saw that the gospel for the uncircumcised had been committed to me as the gospel for the circumcised was to Peter (for he who worked effectively in Peter for the apostleship to the circumcised also worked effectively in me toward the Gentiles), and when James, Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars perceived the grace that had been given to me, they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.

In short, Paul saw himself as the Apostle to the Gentiles. Increasingly, the views of Paul would focus upon the Gentiles and churches which were heavily Gentile in nature. Circumcision began over time to become increasingly unimportant.

The Writings of Paul on Circumcision

This section focuses on some of the writings of Paul to the churches where he had influence about circumcision.

Romans

In Romans 12:25-29 Paul writes:

For circumcision is indeed profitable if you keep the law; but if you a breaker of the law your circumcision has become uncircumcision. Therefore, if an uncircumcised man keeps the righteous requirements of the law, will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision? And will not the physically uncircumcised, if he fulfills the law judge you who even with your written code and circumcision are a transgressor of the law? For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.

Here Paul follows the Old Testament concept that circumcision is a matter of the heart not just a physical act.

Paul in the third chapter of Romans states that God is both God of the Jews and the Gentiles. Further there is only one God “who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.” (Rom. 3:30). Accordingly, to Paul, it is faith which counts not circumcision.

In the fourth Chapter of Romans, Paul deals with the concept that the blessings of Abraham fall both on the circumcised and the uncircumcised because Abraham’s faith was accounted to him as righteousness while he was uncircumcised. Accordingly, Abraham was the father of faith to both the circumcised (Jews) and to the uncircumcised (Gentiles). As such Abraham was the “father of many nations.” (Rom. 4:18).

1 Corinthians

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul sets forth the proposition that you should remain in whatever state you were in when you followed Christ-if you were circumcised, stay circumcised; if uncircumcised then remain uncircumcised. 1 Cor. 7:17-19 states:

But as God has distributed to each one, as the Lord has called each one, so let him walk. And so I ordain in all the churches. Was anyone called while circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Was anyone called while uncircumcised? Let him not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God is what matters. Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called.

Galatians

In Galatians, Paul had some of his strongest words against circumcision.

In Galatians 2, Paul recalls when he and Barnabas went to Jerusalem with Titus in order to make sure that they had the support of the Jerusalem Church in preaching the Gospel to Gentiles while not having them comply with the Jewish requirement of circumcision. Paul recounts that they did get the support of the Jerusalem Church including the “pillars of the Jerusalem Church, who were James, Cephas (Peter) and John. Further Paul recounts how Peter and even Barnabas ceased eating with the Gentiles when representatives from the Jerusalem church down to visit at Antioch. (Galatians 2:11-13). (I might add that the issue of Jews eating with Gentiles were a slightly different issue than whether the Gentiles needed to be circumcised to be saved.) At any rate, Paul saw the actions of Peter and Barnabas to have been hypocritical.

Here is Paul’s description of what he said to Peter in front of the Antioch Church which is recorded at Galatians 2: 14-19:

But when I saw that they were not straight forward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, “If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews? We who are Jews by nature and not sinners of the Gentiles, knowing a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not be the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh will be justified. But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, is Christ therefore a minister of sin? Certainly not! For if I build again those things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor.

At various places, Paul called those of the Circumcision Party “Judaizers” because they sought to make Gentile Christians into Jews first and then Christians (Ga. 2:14). In Galatians, Paul contrasts law and grace and discusses the law which brings bondage and the promises to Abraham which bring grace and freedom. In Galatians 4:8-20, Paul expresses his concerns that Judaizers are forcing the Galatian Christians back into legalistic bondage.

In Galatians 5, Paul encourages the Galatians to remain free and resist the temptation to comply with the law through circumcision as suggested by the Judaizers. Galatians 5:1-6 sets forth Paul’s plea not to return to the law and circumcision in the strongest of words:

Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law: you have fallen from grace. For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love.

In short, Paul uses the strongest of words and says that to return to the law and circumcision, means that Christ profits us nothing, causes us to come under the bondage of the law again and causes us to be

estranged from Christ and fall from grace. No rejection of the doctrine could be more clear. His refrain reechoes in Galatians 6:15 which says, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything but a new creation." God does not look for a removal of a foreskin but instead looks for us to become a whole new man in Christ.

Philippians

Paul warns the Philippians to avoid the Judaizers who were pushing circumcision. He uses very strong words at Philippians 3:2 where he says, "Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the mutilation! For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit...." In the Aramaic version of the Bible, the term "concising" or "cutters" is used. The Circumcision Party, according to Paul, were those who wanted to get dominance over people by cutting their flesh. In the verses to the Galatians, Paul made it clear that the Judaizers were really cutting off not flesh but cutting off believers from faith and from Christ. Paul in Galatians 5:12 had totally lost patience with the Circumcision Party and said "I could wish that those who trouble you would even emasculate themselves." In short, he said he thought they might as well go ahead and complete the job and make themselves eunuchs .

Colossians

Finally, we come to Colossians. In this book, Paul compares and contrasts baptism with circumcision. In circumcision, the foreskin is cut off and a person becomes no longer a citizen of the world but instead becomes part of the people of God. Baptism is the Christian response to circumcision. As a believer when one undergoes baptism, there is a cutting off of the flesh, sin and the world. As we come out of the water we become a part of the family of God. In essence baptism replaces the need for circumcision. As we are saved, our hearts are circumcised and our bodies are cleansed through baptism. Paul's view on this is summarized by Col. 2:11-14 which says:

In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God who raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us.

Conclusion

In the Old Testament, circumcision was the manner in which one became part of the people of God. It reminded all of the commitment of God to bless mankind through the Seed of Women and helped to incorporate men into the family of God and the families of men and women into the many promises made to Abraham. In the Torah and in the Prophets was the concept of a circumcision which transcended a physical circumcision, which was the circumcision of the heart.

After the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Holy Spirit was poured out not only upon Jewish Christians but upon Gentiles who were incorporated into the Body of Christ. The early church made a decision which I would call "inspired" that enabled Gentiles to become followers of Christ without strict compliance with circumcision and all of the many laws of the Jews. In an effort to keep peace, Gentiles

were asked to keep a few basic dietary restrictions but the early church recognized that God was no respecter of persons and that the Holy Spirit was poured out on Gentiles who did not adhere to Jewish law.

Through the efforts of Peter and Paul, compliance with circumcision was limited and there was an emphasis upon the circumcision of the heart, which was performed through faith. This position was totally consistent with a spiritual circumcision. People both circumcised and uncircumcised were included into the body of Christ and faith became of preeminent importance instead of physical circumcision and strict legal compliance with Jewish law.