

Circumcision

Today we finish the second chapter of Romans. The predominant topic contained in these verses: circumcision.

Romans 2:25 For indeed circumcision is of value if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision.

Romans 2:26 So if the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?

Romans 2:27 And he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter of the Law and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law?

Romans 2:28 For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh.

Romans 2:29 But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.

As we read the end of Romans chapter 2, we encounter some concepts that are not part of “Western” culture. There are some vocabulary words

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in the Greek and Hebrew that do not neatly translate into English. Because of this, some topics will be covered point by point.

Let us look at circumcision. There are some basic questions that must be answered?

1. What is circumcision?
2. When did circumcision start?
3. Why circumcision?
4. Who misapplied circumcision?
5. Does it have a spiritual significance?

I. What is circumcision?

“Circumcision is the surgical removal of the prepuce, or foreskin, of a male. The word circumcise literally means “to cut around.” As a religious rite, circumcision was required of all of Abraham’s descendants as a sign of the covenant God made with him (Genesis 17:9–14; Acts 7:8). The Mosaic Law repeated the requirement (Leviticus 12:2–3), and Jews throughout the centuries have continued to practice circumcision (Joshua 5:2–3; Luke 1:59; Acts 16:3; Philippians 3:5). There are different issues involved in the question of whether or not males today should be circumcised. One issue is that of religious teaching: what does the Bible, God’s Word, say? Another issue is, as a matter of health, should males be circumcised? The Christian view of circumcision is probably best described as a combination of the two.”

“Concerning the first issue, New Testament Christians are no longer under the Old Testament Law, and circumcision is no longer required. This is brought out in a number of New Testament passages, among which are Acts 15; Galatians 2:1–3; 5:1–11; 6:11–

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16; 1 Corinthians 7:17–20; Colossians 2:8–12; and Philippians 3:1–3. As these passages proclaim, being delivered from our sins is the result of faith in Christ; it is Christ’s finished work on the cross that saves, not the observance of an external rite. Even the Law acknowledged that circumcision alone was insufficient to please God, who specified the need to “circumcise your hearts” (Deuteronomy 10:16; cf. Romans 2:29). In salvation, the works of the flesh accomplish nothing (see Galatians 2:16).¹”

In the Jewish culture, circumcision is required to be performed on every male baby at eight days. In our Gentile culture, circumcision is an option that is sometimes performed but not required.

II. When did circumcision start?

Biblically, the first mention is a command of God to Abraham.

Genesis 17:9 God said further to Abraham, “Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations.

Genesis 17:10 This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised.

Genesis 17:11 And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you.

¹ <https://www.gotquestions.org/circumcision.html>

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Genesis 17:12 And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations, a servant who is born in the house or who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of your descendants.

Genesis 17:13 A servant who is born in your house or who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised; thus shall My covenant be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant.

Genesis 17:14 But an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.”

Per Robby Dean:

“Circumcision doesn’t originate with this. It had been practiced by different cultures, different peoples, at different times long before Abraham. There is evidence among Egyptians and among most of western Semitic people. It was often a practice that related to puberty but it didn’t have a spiritual significance. God takes a practice that is already present (as He does with baptism; other religious groups baptized) and assigns it a particular meaning and significance in relation to His plan.²”

III. Why Circumcision?

Circumcision is a sign of the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 17:11).

² <https://deanbible.org/new-testament-menuitem/romans-menuitem/message/2010-romans-027b/read>

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Genesis 17:11 And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you.

An obvious related question. What is a sign?

The Hebrew word for sign is sometimes paired with other Hebrew synonyms that provides a glimpse into the meanings of “sign.” Based upon discussion in the TDOT³, here are some perspectives on the meaning.

1. **Wonder.** This does not apply to the context of circumcision.
2. **Memorial or remembrance.** As a sign of the covenant, it should remind Jews that there was a covenant between God and Abraham and later between God and Moses/Israel. It is a sign that looks back to these covenants to remind the “owner” of this sign of his responsibilities under the covenant. Sexual fidelity is often paralleled with spiritual fidelity.

A clarification or disclaimer is needed here. In Genesis chapter 17, circumcision is clearly a sign of the Abrahamic covenant. The text says so. Although the requirement for circumcision is stated as a requirement in Leviticus chapter 17, it is not there specifically identified as a sign of the Mosaic covenant. Indeed, the Sabbath appears to be a sign between God and Israel. It is related to knowledge of the relationship between God and Israel.

Exodus 31:12 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying,

³ G Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (n.d.). Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament. V. 1. Tr. fr. German J.T. Willis. Eerdmans Pub. Co., U.S., S.C.M.P. Mar 78. pages 168-169

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Exodus 31:13 “But as for you, speak to the sons of Israel, saying, ‘You shall surely observe My sabbaths; for this is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the Lord who sanctifies you.

3. **Witness/Credential.** Circumcision is a witness to the fact that the Jewish man was descendant from Jacob/Israel. It was a credential imposed on his body identifying him as an Israelite. It was a one-time operation that was a lasting witness.
4. **Signal/Communication.** Circumcision was a signal to him and to his wife/wives that he was a Jew under the covenant. A Jewish woman should not be married to a non-Jewish man. If the man was not circumcised, then he did not carry the credential or certification that he was Jewish.
5. **Miscellaneous.** “Male circumcision is widespread in the Muslim world, and accepted as an established practice by all Islamic schools of jurisprudence. It is considered a sign of belonging to the wider Muslim community (Ummah).⁴”

IV. Who Misapplied Circumcision. Circumcision does not save. Yet, that is how it is sometimes interpreted.

In Genesis 34, Jacob’s sons impose circumcision on the town of Shechem. Ostensibly it was to make Shechem, who wanted to marry Dinah, to be like the sons of Jacob. But in actuality it was to disable the fighting men of Shechem so they could be defeated in battle easily.

⁴ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khitan_\(circumcision\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khitan_(circumcision))

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Genesis 34:13 But Jacob's sons answered Shechem and his father Hamor with deceit, because he had defiled Dinah their sister.

Genesis 34:14 They said to them, "We cannot do this thing, to give our sister to one who is uncircumcised, for that would be a disgrace to us.

Genesis 34:15 Only on this *condition* will we consent to you: if you will become like us, in that every male of you be circumcised,

Genesis 34:16 then we will give our daughters to you, and we will take your daughters for ourselves, and we will live with you and become one people.

Genesis 34:17 But if you will not listen to us to be circumcised, then we will take our daughter and go."

Jews in the New Testament era demanded that Christians be circumcised as a condition of being accepted as saved. This became such a problem that there was an apostolic conference called in Jerusalem to resolve this issue.

"The Jerusalem Conference, discussed in Acts 15, was convened in order to settle a hotly debated but crucial teaching within the early New Testament church. Occurring in the fall of 49 A.D., the outcome of this gathering (possibly the last of its kind) of apostles, other church

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leadership, and brethren in Jerusalem would affect the course of Christianity to the present day.”

“The catalyst for organizing the Jerusalem Conference occurred in the city of Syrian Antioch. A sect of the Jews known as the Pharisees, who had become believers in Jesus Christ, began to openly teach (especially to gentiles) that salvation could not be achieved unless a person was circumcised.⁵”

Acts 15:1 Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”

Acts 15:2 And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.

Acts 15:3 Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren.

Acts 15:4 When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them.

⁵ <https://www.biblestudy.org/maturart/the-jerusalem-conference.html>

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Acts 15:5 But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses.”

Acts 15:6 The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter.

Acts 15:7 After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe.

Acts 15:8 And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us;

Acts 15:9 and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith.

Acts 15:10 Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?

Acts 15:11 But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.”

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V. Circumcision of the Heart

For this point, I rely heavily on Robby Dean's exposition of this passage.

“The focal point of Paul's discussion here comes down to circumcision, and that is because in second temple Judaism the rite of circumcision had become a symbol of one's identification with Abraham and the Abrahamic covenant which was viewed as salvific. They believed that if they were in right relationship to God through the covenant with Abraham then they were saved. They were counting on obedience to the Law to get them into heaven. The mistake that is made is that they are identifying a position of privilege in relation to knowledge about God and God's revelation as equivalent to a position of salvation. Yet all of those blessings that God gave the Jewish people were designed to teach them about God so that they could then have salvation. Those privileges in and of themselves did not save them.⁶”

Deuteronomy 30:5 The Lord your God will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it; and He will prosper you and multiply you more than your fathers.

Deuteronomy 30:6 “Moreover 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, so that you may live.”

“But then we start getting to the spiritual significance of the physical act in Leviticus 26:41. This is the chapter that outlines the various stages of divine judgment upon Israel for their disobedience. NASB “I also was

⁶ <https://deanbible.org/new-testament-menuitem/romans-menuitem/message/2010-romans-027b/read>

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acting with hostility against them, to bring them into the land of their enemies—or if their uncircumcised heart becomes humbled so that they then make amends for their iniquity, [42] then I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and I will remember also My covenant with Isaac, and My covenant with Abraham as well, and I will remember the land.” This is in the middle of the fifth cycle of discipline. The only way they can get back on the land is if [v.40] they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers and their unfaithfulness. The issue is their mental attitude, their spiritual relationship to God; not the physical—physical was to demonstrate a physical reality.”

“This is confirmed by the next use which is in Deuteronomy 10:16 NASB “So circumcise your heart, and stiffen your neck no longer.” It is not physical, it is spiritual. “Stiff-necked” is an attitude of rebellion and arrogance towards God. The issue is obedience and submission to God.⁷”

The topic of the circumcision of the heart deserves an entire lesson. Maybe at another time.

“Paul’s argument against the Jews in Rom. 2 has come in for severe criticism. These critics charge that the argument of the chapter is basically “un-Christian,” or at least “un-Pauline,” in its assumptions. Few have gone as far as O’Neil, who dismisses large sections of the chapter as later glosses. But it is more widely believed that Paul’s teaching in this chapter cannot be easily harmonized, or perhaps harmonized at all, with his teaching elsewhere. Some have been so struck by these differences that they think Paul may have taken over almost intact a synagogue homily. Why so radical a conclusion? Three areas of difficulty are singled out: the teaching that justification can come by works (2:6-11, 13, 26-27), that the law can be fulfilled (2:14-15, 26-27), and related to both of these, that Gentiles also have ability and virtue.”

7 <https://deanbible.org/new-testament-menuitem/romans-menuitem/message/2010-romans-027b/read>

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Let me attempt to answer these criticisms, briefly.

First consider the previously stated fact that the word for “faith” does not show up in this argument (1:18-2:29). A natural question would be why does he not bring that word into this argument but then does bring it in later in chapter 3?

Second, consider the flow of the argument. Paul starts out with a criticism of the immoral degenerate. He has just grabbed the attention and affirmation from the religious crowd. The immoral degenerate either does not care what Paul is saying or they realize they need the faith alone in Christ alone. But the religious crowd believes they have been saved because they are descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, they follow the Law and they are circumcised. Case closed.

But, Paul is using their own concepts and vocabulary to keep them attentive to his message and in doing so show with their own language that their reliance on heritage, Law and circumcision are of no value apart from a spiritual “circumcision of the heart” accomplished by God.

Let me emphasize. Paul is using their own dialogue to show a contradiction. At the end of this discussion, those still listening would logically ask, “So, Paul, what is the answer.” His response will be, “faith.”

I feel humbled by this passage. It is so packed with information. I have barely scratched the surface.