

## Doctrine of Circumcision

### A Survey of Circumcision in the New Testament

#### Part 1

#### An Initial Review of Circumcision in the Old Testament

1. In the Old Testament, circumcision was instituted of God's covenant with Abraham. It was a sign pledge of the covenant between the Lord and Abraham.
  - *Genesis 17:11 And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you.*
  
2. When Israel entered into the Land of Promise there was a second circumcision that took place because the Exodus Generation died off without making sure their children, born in the Wilderness Journey, had received the sign of the covenant.
  - *Joshua 5:2 At that time the Lord said unto Joshua, Make thee sharp knives, and circumcise again the children of Israel the second time. 3 And Joshua made him sharp knives, and circumcised the children of Israel at the hill of the foreskins. 4 And this is the cause why Joshua did circumcise: All the people that came out of Egypt, that were males, even all the men of war, died in the wilderness by the way, after they came out of Egypt. 5 Now all the people that came out were circumcised: but all the people that were born in the wilderness by the way as they came forth out of Egypt, them they had not circumcised. 6 For the children of Israel walked forty years in the wilderness, till all the people that were men of war, which came out of Egypt, were consumed, because they obeyed not the voice of the Lord: unto whom the Lord sware that he would not shew them the land, which the Lord sware unto their fathers that he would give us, a land that floweth with milk and honey. 7 And their children, whom he raised up in their stead, them Joshua circumcised: for they were uncircumcised, because they had not circumcised them by the way. 8 And it came to pass, when they had done circumcising all the people, that they abode in their places in the camp, till they were whole.*
  
3. Circumcision was not limited to the body, but was expanded to include a spiritual circumcision of the heart. This was a self-circumcision of sanctification of the heart.
  - *Deuteronomy 10:16 Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiff-necked.*
  - *Deuteronomy 30:6 And the Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live.*
  - *Jeremiah 4:4 Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, and take away the foreskins of your heart, ye men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem: lest my fury come forth like fire, and burn that none can quench it, because of the evil of your doings.*

***Special Note.***

One of the distinguishing characteristics of Israel was that the nation consistently maintained an uncircumcised heart. One of the great hopes of Israel was that the day would come when the Lord would circumcise the hearts of His people. Those who were uncircumcised would be judged.

**Addition Revelation of Circumcision in the New Testament**

4. The tension that closed the Old Testament era between those circumcised in body but not in heart, is addressed in the New Testament beginning with John the Baptist.
5. The forerunner of Christ, John the Baptist, was circumcised on the eighth day in order to establish a continuity between the OT and the NT era.
  - *Luke 1:59 And it came to pass, that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child; and they called him Zacharias, after the name of his father. 60 And his mother answered and said, Not so; but he shall be called John.*
6. Because He was born under the Law, because He was subject to and obedient to the Law, Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day.
  - *Luke 2:21 And when eight days were accomplished for the circumcising of the child, his name was called JESUS, which was so named of the angel before he was conceived in the womb.*
7. In Leviticus 12, Jesus reminded the Jews that it was Moses who embellished the patriarchal ordinance of circumcision in the Law, even though circumcision did not originate with him.
  - *John 7:21 Jesus answered and said unto them, I have done one work, and ye all marvel. 22 Moses therefore gave unto you circumcision; (not because it is of Moses, but of the fathers;) and ye on the sabbath day circumcise a man. 23 If a man on the sabbath day receive circumcision, that the law of Moses should not be broken; are ye angry at me, because I have made a man every whit whole on the sabbath day? 24 Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment.*

***Special Note.***

Even as it was no violation of the Law to commit the work of circumcision on the Sabbath, day, so it was no violation of the Law for Christ to perform the good work of healing a man on the Sabbath. A deed of piety on the Sabbath did not violate the Law.

8. Speaking before the High Priest, and the leaders of the Jewish nation, Stephen reflected on Genesis 15, in Acts 7:1-7, and then he reflected on Genesis 17, in Acts 1:8 as he spoke of circumcision.

- *Acts 7:8 And he gave him the covenant of circumcision: and so Abraham begat Isaac, and circumcised him the eighth day; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat the twelve patriarchs.*

***Special Note.***

The Covenant of Circumcision is once again identified with the Abrahamic Covenant. The sign of the covenant is identified with the covenant itself, much like a wedding ring is identified with the promised pledge. The elements of the Lord's Supper are identified with the New Covenant itself.

9. Despite being physically circumcised according to the Abrahamic Covenant, Stephen declares the men of Israel to be uncircumcised in heart leading to betrayal and murder.
  - *Acts 7:51 Ye stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye. 52 Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? And they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers: 53 Who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it. 54 When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth.*

***Special Note.***

A distinguishing trait of the Hebrews was that, while being circumcised in body, they were uncircumcised in heart and so killed the prophets. Stephen told the people of his generation they were doing the same thing. They were circumcised in body but uncircumcised in heart leading them to kill the Lord of Glory.

10. In the house of Cornelius, Peter preached to the uncircumcised, much to the chagrined of the circumcised.

**The Uncircumcised**

- *Acts 10:45 And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost. 46 For they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God. Then answered Peter, 47 Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we? 48 And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then prayed they him to tarry certain days.*

**The Circumcised**

- *Acts 11:2 And when Peter was come up to Jerusalem, they that were of the circumcision contended with him, 3 Saying, Thou wentest in to men uncircumcised, and didst eat with them. 4 But Peter rehearsed the matter from the beginning, and expounded it by order unto them, saying,*

***Special Note.***

Circumcision created a social problem for Jewish Christians when the time came to have fellowship with uncircumcised Gentiles.

11. Circumcision became an open controversy in the early church. It was declared that circumcision of the body was essential to salvation. A council in Jerusalem was called to resolve the controversy.
  - *Acts 15:1 And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved. 2 When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question.*
  
12. The erroneous doctrine concerning the necessity of circumcision for salvation came from within the church.
  - *Acts 15:5 But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the Law of Moses.*
  
13. The overemphasis of circumcision, and keeping the Law of Moses for salvation, was vigorously opposed by Paul and Barnabas. This doctrinal heresy was rejected outright by the church council in Jerusalem.
  - *Acts 15:24 Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment:*
  
14. In Acts 16, circumcision is again brought up. After fighting so hard against circumcision, Paul took Timothy, a Gentile, and had him circumcised. This was a practical decision in order to advance the work of the gospel. He was being expedient in order to defuse that issue and expand the ministry of Timothy.
  - *Acts 16:1 Then came he to Derbe and Lystra: and, behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timotheus, the son of a certain woman, which was a Jewess, and believed; but his father was a Greek: 2 Which was well reported of by the brethren that were at Lystra and Iconium. 3 Him would Paul have to go forth with him; and took and circumcised him because of the Jews which were in those quarters: for they knew all that his father was a Greek.*
  
15. Another important passage in the New Testament development of circumcision is found in Acts 21. Paul had returned to Jerusalem where people had heard what he was teaching.

- *Acts 21:21 And they are informed of thee, that thou teachest all the Jews which are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children, neither to walk after the customs.*
16. Paul was pressured by Jewish brethren to give reassurance that there was no truth to Paul's opposition to circumcision, and his teaching that the children did not have to be circumcised.
- *Acts 21:22 What is it therefore? The multitude must needs come together: for they will hear that thou art come. 23 Do therefore this that we say to thee: We have four men which have a vow on them; 24 Them take, and purify thyself with them, and be at charges with them, that they may shave their heads: and all may know that those things, whereof they were informed concerning thee, are nothing; but that thou thyself also walkest orderly, and keepest the law.*
17. The truth of the matter was that Paul did not teach men not to be circumcised. He did not teach parents to stop circumcising their children. Paul did not teach that the Law of Moses should not be kept.
18. Concerning the Gentiles, it was concluded that circumcision of their body was not essential for salvation.
- *Acts 21:25 As touching the Gentiles which believe, we have written and concluded that they observe no such thing, save only that they keep themselves from things offered to idols, and from blood, and from strangled, and from fornication.*
19. As far as the Jewish believers, circumcision was not done away with and replaced with something else.
20. The discussion of circumcision continues in the New Testament in Romans 2. In this important passage, Paul tells the Jews that they too, like the Gentiles, are under the wrath of God apart from gospel repentance and the embracing of Christ.
- *Romans 2:22 Thou that sayest a man should not commit adultery, dost thou commit adultery? Thou that abhorrest idols, dost thou commit sacrilege? 23 Thou that makest thy boast of the law, through breaking the law dishonourest thou God? 25 For circumcision verily profiteth, if thou keep the law: but if thou be a breaker of the law, thy circumcision is made uncircumcision. 26 Therefore if the uncircumcision keep the righteousness of the law, shall not his uncircumcision be counted for circumcision? 27 And shall not uncircumcision which is by nature, if it fulfil the law, judge thee, who by the letter and circumcision dost transgress the law? 28 For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: 29 But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.*
21. It is not the visible Jew, it is not visible circumcision of the body that makes a person approved before God, but the person whose heart has been circumcised. Once again a distinction is made between physical circumcision, and spiritual circumcision.

22. Prior to being circumcised, Abraham believed in God and it accounted to Him for righteousness.

- *Romans 4:9 Cometh this blessedness then upon the circumcision only, or upon the uncircumcision also? For we say that faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness. 10 How was it then reckoned? When he was in circumcision, or in uncircumcision? Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision. 11 And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised; that righteousness might be imputed unto them also: 12 And the father of circumcision to them who are not of the circumcision only, but who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham, which he had being yet uncircumcised.*

23. The place of circumcision in redemptive history was designed by God to be a special sign of the righteousness of faith which Abraham had while he was still uncircumcised. In this manner, Abraham would be the father of all who believed.

24. Circumcision was a sign of something that already existed, namely the righteousness of faith in Abraham and in him alone. It is not everyone who is the father of all who believe, only Abraham.

***Special Note.***

For those who insist that baptism has replaced circumcision, where is the equivalent of Abraham who becomes the template?

25. The circumcision of Abraham was distinct from the circumcision of Ishmael, the servants, and any other Jewish male circumcised on the eighth day.

26. For them circumcision was not the sign of the righteousness of a faith which they already possessed in an uncircumcised condition. Some of them, like Esau, never possessed faith at all.

27. Circumcision did not have the same spiritual significance for everyone that it had for Abraham.