



## What About Circumcision? Circumcision as a Religious Ceremony

This short paper does not address medical questions around circumcision, nor a possible reason why God directed circumcision on the eighth day. This paper rather deals with circumcision as a religious ceremony, a religious observance, or a religious rite. For issues around the first question, I would direct the reader to your healthcare provider. For the second question, I would direct you to the paper on our website entitled *Biblical Accuracy & Circumcision on the 8<sup>th</sup> Day* by Dr. Bert Thompson.

What about circumcision? Circumcision is first mentioned in the Old Testament in Genesis 18, where we see Abraham is told by Yahweh: *“<sup>10</sup> This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. <sup>11</sup> You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. <sup>12</sup> He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, <sup>13</sup> both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. <sup>14</sup> Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant”* (Gen 18:10b-14, ESV).

A few things become apparent about this religious ceremony that are worthy of mentioning:

- 1) This has something to do with the covenant that God made with Abraham back in Genesis: *“<sup>18</sup> On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, <sup>19</sup> the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, <sup>20</sup> the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, <sup>21</sup> the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites”* (Gen 15:18-21, ESV).
  - a. We will talk more about this later, but I want you to see this connection that goes all the way back to Genesis chapter 15.
- 2) The mark of circumcision is to be placed upon all males in the house, weather born or bought with money, Israelite or foreigner, even those not your offspring, if they are in your house they are to be circumcised.
- 3) The mark of circumcision is to be in the flesh of the foreskin.
- 4) The mark is to be placed upon males at the age of eight days.
- 5) Any person who refuses the mark is to be “cut off” from the people of God for this person has broken Yahweh’s covenant. Thus is it required for Abraham and all of Abraham’s descendants, and includes those who are part of their household. In class we discussed the wordplay here, take the cut or be cut off.

Important points that we cannot confuse:

- 1) Circumcision was not the covenant; the unconditional covenant was made by God back in Genesis 15 more than 13 years prior to the events in Genesis 17.

- 2) Circumcision is not how Abraham was justified. He was justified back in chapter 15 by faith: “<sup>6</sup> And he (Abram) believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness” (Gen 15:6, ESV).
- 3) Paul makes this very point in Romans chapter 4, so we cannot get the mixed up here. Circumcision was the method that men identified an interest in the covenant. But justification has always been by faith.

Circumcision was added as the method that men can identify an interest in and participation in the covenant, or lack of interest in God’s covenant. But it was not then, nor has it ever been the method by which men were made right before God. Paul explained it like this:

“<sup>9</sup> Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. <sup>10</sup> How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. <sup>11</sup> He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, <sup>12</sup> and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised” (Rom 4:9-12, ESV).

- 4) We will see this mark repeated as a requirement of the Mosaic Covenant. There at Mount Sinai, God directs that the mark of the Mosaic covenant (circumcision) is to be placed upon male children on the eighth day: “<sup>12</sup> *The LORD spoke to Moses, saying,* <sup>2</sup> *“Speak to the people of Israel, saying, If a woman conceives and bears a male child, then she shall be unclean seven days. As at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean.* <sup>3</sup> *And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised”* (lev 12:1-3, ESV).

As best we can tell this practice would continue through the centuries as the Israelites would circumcise their male children on the eighth day. As you consider this, John the Baptizer was circumcised on the eighth day (Luk 1:59). Likewise, Jesus the Christ was circumcised on the eighth day (Luk 2:21). In the old economy, circumcision was not the covenant, nor did it cause a person to be brought into a right relationship with God. But it was absolutely required. To reject to take the mark of the covenant, or to reject to place it on your children, was to reject Yahweh, it was to reject Yahweh’s covenant and such a person was to be “cut off” from the people.

Although the mark did not justify a person before Yahweh, that was always by faith (Gen 15:6) and the mark was not the covenant itself, it was merely a sign (Gen 17:11; Rom 4:11), the command to take the mark was serious and to reject the mark was to reject participation in the covenant. To understand how serious rejection of the mark was, we come across this account in Exodus. To set the stage, Moses has already had the burning bush experience, he has already been commissioned by God to lead the Israelites out of Egyptain bondage. He goes back to Midian where he tells his father-in-law all that has occurred and asks his father-in-law permission to go back to his brothers who are in Egypt. Jethro provides his blessing.

From there Moses gathers his oldest son, Gershom and his wife Zipporah and they head for Egypt. Then we read: “<sup>24</sup> At a lodging place on the way the LORD met him and sought to put him to death. <sup>25</sup> Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it and said, “Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me!” <sup>26</sup> So he let him alone. It was then that she said, “A bridegroom of blood,” because of the circumcision” (Exod 4:24-26, ESV).

This story makes no sense, outside of God’s command to place the mark of the covenant on those who would claim to be part of the covenant as well as all that are in their house. When that point is understood, the seriousness of not taking the mark, regardless of the reason is a very serious offense and one that almost cost Moses his life. God, it appears was going to cut Moses off!

We can speculate as to why Moses did not circumcise Gershom, but a couple of things are crystal clear.

- 1) Zipporah, knew that he should have been circumcised.
- 2) Zipporah, while Moses seems to be incapacitated or unable to respond circumcised Gershom.
- 3) It appears she found the whole ritual rather unsavory.

We have talked about the Abrahamic covenant and circumcision, we have also discussed the Mosaic covenant and circumcision, but we have not discussed the New Covenant and circumcision. It is to this later topic that we will shift our attention.

To begin to understand circumcision and the New Covenant it is important to understand a few different points. Let’s start with the most relevant and one that we discussed in our study through the book of Romans, namely that Christians, members of the New Covenant, are no longer under the Old Testament law, they are no longer under the Mosaic covenant. Obviously, this is a major point and one that not everyone agrees with, so I will bring in a few scripture references to make the point. Here are a few examples of where this point is clearly taught:

“<sup>7:1</sup> Or do you not know, brothers—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives? <sup>2</sup> For a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage. <sup>3</sup> Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress. <sup>4</sup> Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God” (Rom 7:1-4, ESV).

As a believer we are dead to the Mosaic law through the body of Christ. The Mosaic law can make no demands on us since we are dead to it and alive to serve Christ and obey His commands.

Further:

<sup>7:5</sup> For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. <sup>6</sup> But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code” (Rom 7:5-6, ESV).

We have been released from the Mosaic law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we should now serve King Jesus in a new way of the Spirit. We are not without law; we are without the Mosaic law.

Or:

<sup>6:1</sup> What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? <sup>2</sup> By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? <sup>3</sup> Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? <sup>4</sup> We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:1-4, ESV).

Having died to sin, the Mosaic law cannot make any claims on us and having died to sin and now raised to walk in newness of life, we should walk in that manner. Shall we (New Covenant Believers) continue in sin? Paul’s answer is crystal clear, absolutely not!

Or:

<sup>3:23</sup> Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. <sup>24</sup> So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. <sup>25</sup> But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, <sup>26</sup> for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. <sup>27</sup> For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. <sup>28</sup> There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. <sup>29</sup> And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.”

Or 7:11-14

<sup>7:11</sup> Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron? <sup>12</sup> For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well. <sup>13</sup> For the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar. <sup>14</sup> For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.”

Or:

<sup>8:13</sup> In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away” (Heb 8:13, ESV).

This whole matter exploded during Paul's ministry while he was in Antioch, after the first missionary journey. We read this in Acts 15:

“15:1 But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’” 2 And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question” (Acts 15:1-2, ESV).

Then we read:

15:4 When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. 5 But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.” 6 The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. 7 And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. 8 And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, 9 and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. 10 Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? 11 But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will” (Acts 15:4-11, ESV).

Ultimately, we read the summation as articulated by James:

“15:19 Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, 20 but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. 21 For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues” (Acts 15:19-21, ESV).

**Dead to the law and the elimination of the need to circumcise those who have placed faith in Jesus Christ (members of the New Covenant). These truths are confirmed by the apostles in roughly 49AD!**

I will stop here, but the New Testament contains additional references that the New Covenant believer is dead to the Mosaic law and given the power (through the indwelling Spirit to follow the King Jesus Christ)!

It is worth noting that Paul did not have Titus (Gentile believer) circumcised:

“2:1 Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. 2 I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain. 3 But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. 4 Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—

who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery— <sup>5</sup> to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you” (Gal 2:1-5, ESV).

Now Paul did have Timothy circumcised, but it is clear that is because Timothy was half-Jewish and Paul wanted to make sure that he was not a stumbling block to Jews.

16:1 Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. <sup>2</sup> He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. <sup>3</sup> Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek” (Acts 16:1-3, ESV).

The Bible is clear, a member of the New Covenant, regardless of nationality, is not required to be circumcised, but Timothy participated, we suspect under the idea that since he was part Jewish, he would willing become all things for all men. But read the book of Galatians, Paul completely rejected circumcising Gentile believers in Jesus Christ for religious reasons.

So what was the point of circumcision?

This is a great question and there are multiple answers, I will only touch upon three, for we have handled the matter of circumcision and the New Covenant believer. But the question does warrant a response.

- 1) It was a religious ritual that was commanded by God in both the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants. This alone is enough to put the matter to rest, but we will advance a little further.
- 2) It was a religious ritual that contained profound spiritual pictures.
  - a. It was a sign that was placed upon the man’s reproductive organ.
  - b. It was a sign that when executed involved the spilling of blood.
  - c. It was a sign that involved the cutting away and the removal of something.
- 3) It was a sign that pointed to a greater New Covenant reality, namely that men and women must be circumcised in their hearts.
  - a. This is accomplished when men and women believe in the Lord, they are born again, they are given a new heart and a new nature, they are circumcised in their heart.
  - b. The need for heart circumcision was declared in the Old Testament (Duet 10:16, 30:6; and Jer 4:4 to name a few) but how this was to be accomplished was not clearly articulated until the New Covenant.

In summation, in the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenant participants were expected to circumcise their male children on the eight-day after birth. To refuse to be circumcised or to refuse to circumcise your children was to “break” Yahweh’s covenant and Yahweh’s declaration was that the person who broke His covenant was to be ‘cut off’ from the people. But, justification was never the result of circumcision. Throughout time men and women have been justified by faith, by believing God (Rom 4).

Because the New Covenant believer is dead to the Mosaic law, the need to circumcise as a religious rite is eliminated. The New Covenant believer is circumcised in his heart (Rom 2:28-29) the very moment he places faith in Jesus Christ. He is given a new heart (Ez 36:26) and a new nature (II Cor 5:17). God takes away the heart of stone and gives the believer a heart of flesh (Ez 36:26).