



FEED MY SHEEP

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Circumcision of the Heart and Ear

Previously, we showed that the New Testament concept of circumcision was not new. The prophet Jeremiah had clearly spoken about the concept of the circumcision of the heart, not a physical but a spiritual circumcision. He, no doubt, had obtained the idea from the writings of Moses; specifically, the book of Deuteronomy. As we concluded in the last issue, we noted that spiritual circumcision involves yielding one's entire heart, soul, mind and strength to Yahweh. But there is more.

In physical circumcision, when the foreskin is removed, that which is beneath is thereby exposed. With circumcision of the heart, God says to "take away the foreskins of your hearts" (Jeremiah 4:4). In other words, we must willingly expose our heart, our innermost self to God. It is a matter of our submission and obedience, or rebellion and disobedience. Spiritual uncircumcision is synonymous with rebellion and rejection of God's word. This is verified in:

Jeremiah 6:10 To whom shall I speak, and give warning, that they may hear? behold, their ear is uncircumcised, and they cannot hearken: behold, the word of YHWH is unto them a reproach; they have no delight in it.

A new element is introduced here: circumcision of the ear. What is the consequence of one whose ears are uncircumcised? "They cannot hearken." They have no ability to hear and obey the word of the Lord. Clearly, the circumcision of the heart and circumcision of the ear are inextricably linked. Obedience to God is not merely a matter of external conformity with the law — that is to say, the letter of the law; but the true obedience to Yahweh is an expression of our deepest attitudes, feelings, and desires to *willingly* obey — that is to say, in the *spirit* of the law.

It is not a matter of obeying because "It's the law!" The Pharisees specialized in that. But they failed in the spirit of the law; that is, obeying because our heart is upright, be-

cause we desire to please our heavenly Father. Ultimately, the bringing of our attitudes, our feelings, our desires and our wills into submission to God is made possible only through the grace provided by Christ and his Holy Spirit. This was prophesied in Ezekiel 36 where we learn what God will do with our hearts under the New Covenant:

Ezekiel 36: 25 Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you.

26 A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh.

27 And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do *them*.

The stony heart is the uncircumcised heart. The heart of flesh is the heart which has been circumcised by God whereby He *causes* us to be obedient. The circumcision of the heart and ear go together. When we hear (spiritually), our heart is softened (circumcised). Conversely, when God softens our hearts, we are enabled to hear. The martyr Stephen understood this interconnection between the circumcision of the heart and ear. In giving his long sermon which led to his martyrdom, he was not concerned one whit about outward or physical circumcision. He mentions it only in passing when recounting the history of Israel, beginning with the call of Abram (Acts 7:8). In vv. 46 through 49, Stephen shows how the original physical tabernacle was a type of a spiritual reality. In the same manner, he then uses the term *uncircumcised* to refer to the spiritual (not physical) condition of his listeners.

Acts 7: 51 Ye stiffnecked 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 showed 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.

Circumcision in the New Testament

The question of physical circumcision became a contested issue in the early church. The book of Acts records how Peter got in trouble with his fellow disciples simply because he had lunch with some physically uncircumcised proselytes.

Acts 11:1 And the apostles and brethren that were in Judaea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God.

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,...

The reference here is clearly to physical circumcision, but those who are critical of Peter's behavior just did not get it yet: that it is the circumcision of the heart which really matters, not that of the flesh. Many of these critics were undoubtedly converts from the sect of the Pharisees and were having a difficult time letting go of their "letter of the law" denominational baggage, as it were. The issue became so heated that it required a ruling of the first recorded church council under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to come to the truth of the matter concerning physical circumcision.

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.

The apostles had recognized that with the coming of the Messiah they were now in a new era, the New Testament era. Given that, the burning question of the day was: does one have to be physically circumcised in order to be a Christian, i.e., in order to be saved.

Acts 15: 4 And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church, and of the apostles and elders, and they declared all things that God had done with them.

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.

This passage is one which is frequently quoted by antinomians (anti-law teachers) to support their contention that we in the New Covenant times are no longer under obligation to keep the laws, statutes and judgments found in the Old Testament. Not wishing to stray too far from the subject of circumcision, we are not going to give all the reasons why the antinomians are in error, but in reference to this passage we must clarify it. We must understand the context here.

Evidently, some believers who were coming out of Pharisaism were adamant in their belief that it was necessary for new believers to be circumcised in order "to keep the law of Moses;" that is, the law concerning circumcision. The issue here is the blood ritual of circumcision, not the issue of adultery or murder or theft or coveting, etc. Therefore, for antinomians to use this verse (and verse 24) to "prove" that the entire Decalogue and the subsidiary statutes and judgments are abolished for Christians is a classic case of wrenching a verse out of context.

Acts 15: 6 And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter.

[For the sake of space, we will not quote the intervening verses, but would request that the reader read this passage now before continuing.]

20 But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood.

Here again, concerning the antinomian position, we would point out that the apostle James, the president of this church council, is not delineating a complete list of the requirements of the law for believers. He listed only four things (v. 20). Since he did not mention murder here, does that mean that the Gentile converts can commit murder? Can they steal? Can they bear false witness against their neighbor since they are "not under the law but under grace?" God forbid! What a nonsensical doctrine that would be, but yet that is essentially what one would have to logically conclude if one follows the antinomian line of reasoning.

In the council's decision letter to the Gentiles, James is only giving a few of the items which were among the most prominent sins of the Gentiles in those days. This is evident because in the next verse he is basically saying: "After all, you Gentiles can find out the rest of the laws, statutes and judgments wherever you are, because in every major city in the world, you can visit the local synagogue and get the complete copy of the law. We're just sending you Gentiles a short letter on our decision on circumcision. We're not intending to quote to you the entire Pentateuch."

Acts 15:21 For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day.

22 Then pleased it the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; *namely*, Judas surnamed Barsabas, and Silas, chief men among the brethren: ...

...30 So when they were dismissed, they came to Antioch: and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the epistle:

31 Which when they had read, they rejoiced for the consolation.

So the bottom line was that the Gentiles were not required to become physically circumcised in order to be saved. Yet, in Acts 16:3 we find Paul circumcising Timothy. This might lead to confusion except for the fact that Luke, the human author of the book of Acts, tells us why Paul circumcised him. Paul was a very practical man, and he realized that Timothy, being half-Judahite and half-Greek, would be hampered in his ministry to Judahites if he were not circumcised. So it was done as a practical matter, so as not to create a stumbling block for those to whom he was ministering.

Acts 16:3 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.

The case of Timothy contrasts with that of Titus:

Galatians 2:1 Then fourteen years after I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and took Titus with me also.

2 And I went up by revelation, and communicated unto them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to them which were of reputation, lest by any means I should run, or had run, in vain.

3 But neither Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised:

4 And that because of false brethren unawares brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage:

5 To whom we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour; that the truth of the gospel might continue with you.

Paul is recalling here the great controversy over circumcision written about in Acts 15. Paul realized this was going to be an important test case on whether or not the Israelite Christian converts of the Dispersion to whom Paul ministered (commonly called "Gentiles") or other Gentiles would be required to submit to physical circumcision in order to become Christians. He is here pointing out that he

did not budge in his position for even an hour. Titus was with him as a Greek Christian, and Titus and Paul left the conference with Titus still physically uncircumcised. The Spirit of God had led the apostles at Jerusalem to agree with Paul that there was no need for physical circumcision for anyone anymore.

In Romans 2, beginning in verse 17, Paul carries on a dialogue with an imaginary opponent. He is writing to Christian Israelites of the Dispersion who are at Rome with the goal of instructing them on the differences between them, the descendants of the ten tribes of Israel, and the remnant of the Judah kingdom in Judea. In verse 25, he comes to the topic of circumcision:

Romans 2:25 For circumcision verily profiteth, if thou keep the law: but if thou be a breaker of the law, thy circumcision is made uncircumcision.

In Romans 2:10 Paul quotes the Old Testament to show that everyone is a lawbreaker, all have sinned. Therefore, your physical circumcision, he says, has become meaningless; you may as well be uncircumcised.

Romans 2:26 Therefore if the uncircumcision [non-Judahites] 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 [true Judahite—one who accepts his King and Savior], 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.

Paul goes on with this imaginary dialogue about circumcision, the law and justification for most of chapter 3. In vs. 21 he introduces the conclusion of the whole matter.

Romans 3:21 But now the righteousness of God without the law [i.e., among the Gentiles] is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets;

22 Even the righteousness of God *which is* by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference:

23 For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;

24 Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus:

25 Whom God hath set forth *to be* a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God;

26 To declare, *I say*, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which be-

lieveth in Jesus.

27 Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay: but by the law of faith.

28 Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.

29 Is he the God of the Jews only? is he not also of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also:

30 Seeing it is one God, which shall justify the circumcision by faith, and uncircumcision through faith.

Then to forestall any objections that the entire Mosaic law is thereby made null and void, Paul immediately adds:

31 Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: ye, we establish the law.

It has become abundantly clear that physical circumcision is wholly unnecessary for any religious purpose under the New Covenant. If one believes it serves some hygienic purpose, that is another matter. But we would encourage prospective parents to diligently seek out both pro and con articles on that issue. To pile evidence upon evidence as to its religious futility, notice the Lord's teaching through Paul in Colossians.

Colossians 2:11 In whom [Christ] also ye are circumcised [Indeed, but what kind of circumcision is Paul talking about here?] with the circumcision made without hands, [And how is that kind of circumcision performed?] in [by] putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ:

What then is the process through which we put off the body of sins? Paul answers:

Colossians 2:12 Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead.

13 And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened [made alive] together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses;

How are we as believers made alive and how do we have our trespasses forgiven? Is it only by believing in Christ? That is the first step of salvation, but one must proceed on to be baptized. Baptism in the New Testament is the sign and seal of the covenant, because it is at that point that the Holy Spirit begins to dwell in our heart. In FMS #25, we saw that Paul stated in Romans 4:11 that Abraham received "the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith." In like manner, baptism is where we are sealed under the New Covenant.

2 Corinthians 1:21 Now he which stablisheth us

with you in Christ, and hath anointed us, is God;

22 Who hath also sealed us, and given the earnest of the Spirit in our hearts.

Ephesians 1:13 In whom ye also *trusted*, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise,

14 Which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory

We close this study in 1 Corinthians 7. For here, Paul makes it unmistakably clear how unimportant and useless physical circumcision is for the believer:

1 Corinthians 7: 17 But as God hath distributed to every man, as the Lord hath called every one, so let him walk. And so ordain I in all churches.

18 Is any man called being circumcised? let him not become uncircumcised. Is any called in uncircumcision? let him not be circumcised.

Note: Concerning becoming uncircumcised, history records that in the Greek-style games, athletes competed in the nude. Therefore, some men, especially Judean or other circumcised athletes, actually had skin grafts to restore the foreskin. Whatever your physical condition, Paul says forget about it; it's insignificant. The conclusion of the whole matter is:

1 Corinthians 7:19 Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God [is what matters].

Whether one is physically circumcised or not is meaningless now insofar as our relationship with God is concerned. What matters is circumcision of the heart — obedience to His laws in the spirit of the law, not the letter of the law. And how are we as Christians enabled to keep the spirit of the law? We read about it earlier in Ezekiel 36.

Under the terms of the New Covenant, YHWH gives us a new heart and He dwells in our hearts by His Holy Spirit beginning at baptism, and thus He seals us for the day of redemption. With the Holy Spirit in our hearts, we are circumcised in heart. We remain so as we daily yield our mind, will, emotions and desires in submission to His will. In the OT, *physical* circumcision was a sign of the covenant. In the NT, *spiritual* circumcision (circumcision of the heart and ear) is the sign of the covenant. Ω

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