

## Circumcision and the Christian

Circumcision was instituted by God as an old covenant sacrament. Prior to the institution of water baptism under the new covenant, circumcision was the sacred ordinance by which a person became a member of the old covenant Church. It was a mark of Jewish identity, a mark of being a part of the Jewish nation, and a mark of being a member of God's covenant people. Even though it was only applied to males, females were included by virtue of their status as wives or daughters, under the protection and oversight of their husbands or fathers. Circumcision is mentioned frequently in the Old Testament as well as in the New. Yet, to many people today, it may seem to be one of the most unusual things we find in the Bible. Why did God institute circumcision? What was its purpose? And what is its significance for Christians today? We will seek to answer these and other questions, as we consider many of the passages that speak to this issue throughout the word of God.<sup>1</sup>

### The Old Testament: The institution of circumcision – Genesis 17

Circumcision was first instituted by God as a religious rite in **Genesis, chapter 17**. God instituted circumcision as a sign of the Abrahamic Covenant. We read in Genesis 17:10-14, 23-27:

"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."

So Abraham took Ishmael his son, all who were born in his house and all who were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very same day, as God had said to him.

Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. That very same day Abraham was circumcised, and his son Ishmael; and all the men of his house, born in the house or bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.

From Genesis 17 we learn several truths about circumcision. Circumcision was a sign of God's covenant with Abraham, which covenant is "an everlasting covenant" (Gen. 17:7, 13, 19).

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All Hebrew boys, including those who were foreign-born servants, were to be circumcised on their eighth day of life. Abraham was 99 years old when he was circumcised, Ishmael was 13 years old, and many other adult men were circumcised, too. Soon after, "Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him" (Gen. 21:4). In the New Testament, Stephen refers to the Abrahamic Covenant as "the covenant of circumcision" (Acts 7:8). Circumcision was an important sign of God's covenant with His people.

### Lessons on circumcision from Genesis 34

For the infants who were circumcised, the ritual was not so burdensome a procedure, but for the adult men who were circumcised, they would have experienced considerable pain, bleeding, and other adverse reactions.

The Scriptures speak of this painful aspect of circumcision in Genesis 34. Here we read of Dinah, the daughter of Jacob and Leah, who was raped by Shechem, the son of Hamor the Hivite, prince of the country. After violating Dinah, Shechem decided that he loved the young woman and wanted to marry her. Shechem's father, Hamor, went to Jacob to discuss his son's interest in marrying Jacob's daughter Dinah. Yet, Dinah's brothers were grieved and very angry because Shechem had taken away their sister's virginity by sleeping with their sister in an act of fornication; Shechem had brought disgrace upon their family. Hamor asked Jacob to allow his daughters to marry the Hivite men and for Jacob's sons to take Hivite wives for themselves. He and his son Shechem extended hospitality to Jacob's family; Shechem promised to pay "ever so much dowry and gift" as they required for him to take Dinah as his wife (v. 12). Yet Jacob's sons could not forgive Shechem for defiling their virgin sister Dinah. So they spoke to Shechem and Hamor his father with deceit:

They said to them, "We cannot do this thing, to give our sister to one who is uncircumcised, for that *would be* a reproach to us. But on this *condition* we will consent to you: If you will become as we *are*, if every male of you is circumcised, then we will give our daughters to you, and we will take your daughters to us; and we will dwell with you, and we will become one people. But if you will not heed us and be circumcised, then we will take our daughter and be gone" (Gen. 34:14-17).

Hamor and his son Shechem consented to Jacob's sons' terms. He and his father spoke with the men of their city and told them:

These men are at peace with us. Therefore let them dwell in the land and trade in it. For indeed the land is large enough for them. Let us take their daughters to us as wives, and let us give them our daughters. Only on this condition will the men consent to dwell with us, to be one people: if every male among us is circumcised as they are circumcised. Will not their livestock, their property, and every animal of theirs be ours? Only let us consent to them, and they will dwell with us. (Gen. 34:21-23)

So the males of the city were circumcised. And, then, "it came to pass on the third day, when they were in pain, that two of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, each took his sword and came boldly upon the city and killed all the males. And they killed Hamor and Shechem his son with the edge of the sword, and took Dinah from Shechem's house, and went out" (Gen. 34:25-27). Not only did Jacob's sons murder all the males of the city, including Hamor and Shechem, but also they plundered the city, as revenge for their sister Dinah's defilement. They took all their wealth and took all their wives and children captive.

Obviously, Simeon and Levi's actions were very sinful and unjust. Jacob reproved his sons for troubling him by making him "obnoxious among the inhabitants of the land" (Gen. 34:30). Jacob's sons took justice into their own hands, and their form of justice was not even just, as they murdered many men on account of Shechem's sin, without God's command.

In any event, this Old Testament incident shows us both the importance of circumcision for being a member of God's old covenant people and the debilitating pain of circumcision for the men who submitted to it. The Hivite men were unable to defend themselves against the murderous attacks of Simeon and Levi because they were in pain and incapacitated as they were healing from their circumcisions.

### **Circumcision for cleansing and purity – Exodus & Leviticus**

In the Old Testament, the people of God were very cautious to implement circumcision, as God had commanded. Slaves could not partake of the Passover until they had been circumcised (Exodus 12:44). Likewise, if a foreigner or "stranger" entered Israel, all his males must be circumcised before they could celebrate the Passover. Once they were circumcised, they were to be treated "like a native of the land," but God warned that "no uncircumcised person may eat of it" (Exodus 12:48).

In Leviticus 12:2-3, we read, "Speak to the children of Israel, saying: 'If a woman has conceived, and borne a male child, then she shall be unclean seven days; as in the days of her customary impurity she shall be unclean. 'And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.'" Here we begin to see one of the meanings of circumcision. Circumcision is a symbol of cleansing from sin's defilement.

In most of the world today, circumcision is not widely practiced. In recent decades, the American medical community has not generally advocated circumcision for medical purposes. However, modern science does generally show that circumcision does have medical benefits for those who lack access to the clean water and good hygiene of advanced civilizations. In such environments, circumcision has been shown to lessen the occurrence of several diseases and medical conditions.

In the context of the Middle East in Old Testament times, it becomes clear that there might have been physical, health benefits to circumcision. These benefits have spiritual, symbolical meaning: circumcision represents the cleansing from sin's defilement and purification. It also serves as a sign and seal of faith, as we will see later when we look at Paul's teaching in the New Testament.

### **Circumcision in Joshua**

In the book of **Joshua**, we read again of the importance of circumcision, in which God commanded Joshua to circumcise those who had been born during the wilderness years but had not yet been circumcised. We read in Joshua 5:2-8:

At that time the LORD said to Joshua, "Make flint knives for yourself, and circumcise the sons of Israel again the second time." So Joshua made flint knives for himself, and circumcised the sons of Israel at the hill of the foreskins. And this *is* the reason why Joshua circumcised them: All the people who came out of Egypt *who were* males, all the men of war, had died in the wilderness on the way, after they had come out of Egypt. For all the people who came out had been circumcised, but all the people 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 the people *who were* men of war, who came out of Egypt, were consumed, because they did not obey the voice of the LORD -- to whom the LORD swore that He would not show them the land which the LORD had sworn to their fathers that He would give us, "a land flowing with milk and honey." Then Joshua circumcised their sons *whom* He raised up in their place; for they were uncircumcised, because they had not been circumcised on the way. So it was, when they had finished circumcising all the people, that they stayed in their places in the camp till they were healed.

So circumcision, as a sign of God's everlasting covenant with Abraham, continued to be an important ordinance of God's people in the days of Joshua.

During the time of the Jewish theocracy, the time of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, circumcision did serve as a nationalistic marker, as all citizens would have been circumcised. However, it was far more than a nationalistic marker; it was chiefly a religious ordinance. From the time of Abraham through the time of Christ, it was the sacred ordinance that identified a man as a part of God's covenant community, God's people.

### **Regeneration by circumcision, works righteousness, and religious hypocrisy repudiated**

The rite of circumcision never regenerated or "saved" anyone. It was always intended to be symbolic of a far greater spiritual truth—the spiritual circumcision of the heart. It was intended to be a symbol of the regeneration of the Spirit, in which a man is born again, in which God gives him a new heart, a new mind (the mind of Christ), and a new spirit.

Like those today who foolishly trust in their water baptism to save them or think that they are a Christian merely because they were once baptized, many of the Jews falsely believed that they were saved on account of their circumcision. They boasted in their physical circumcision, even though their hearts were uncircumcised; they were spiritually dead.

God warned the Jews in **Jeremiah 9:25-26**: "Behold, the days are coming," says the LORD, "that I will punish all *who are* circumcised with the uncircumcised--Egypt, Judah, Edom, the people of Ammon, Moab, and all *who are* in the farthest corners, who dwell in the wilderness. For all *these nations are* uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel *are* uncircumcised in the heart."

The Jews and Israelites thought they were better than the pagan nations because of their circumcision. Paul says that the Gentiles in the flesh were disparagingly called "Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands [i.e., the Jews]" (Ephesians 2:11). In the days of the Old Testament, the Gentile nations were "without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12). Yet, ironically, God warned in Jeremiah that the circumcised Jews of Judah and Israel would be punished along with the uncircumcised pagan nations because, despite their physical circumcision, they were "uncircumcised in the heart." That is, they were uncircumcised spiritually; they were Jews in name only.

Much earlier in the days of Moses, God had admonished His people to "circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer" (**Deuteronomy 10:16**). Moses also taught that, for true believers, "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” (**Deut. 30:6**). Man does not save himself; God must act first. The Holy Spirit must act first to regenerate the man who is dead in his trespasses and sins, to make him willing and able to believe. We are born again in Christ, not of natural descent, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:13).

Jeremiah also exhorted God’s people, 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” (**Jeremiah 4:4**).

The passages just quoted from Deuteronomy and Jeremiah, teach us that circumcision was to serve as a sign for the Jews of their need for dying to the old man, cutting off the corruption of the flesh and of the carnal nature, purification, cleansing, faith, and the remission of sins. The Jewish men of Moses’ and Jeremiah’s day were physically circumcised but spiritually uncircumcised. They thought they were God’s chosen people because their foreskin had been taken away, but they were “stiff-necked” and in their pride and rebellion had failed to “take away the foreskins” of their hearts; they lacked repentance and saving faith, which are of far greater, eternal importance. They needed to humble themselves, turn from their sins, and submit themselves to God, obeying all that He commanded them.

### The New Testament

Having concluded a condensed overview of the Old Testament’s teachings regarding circumcision, let us now turn to the New Testament.

#### John the Baptist

John the Baptist, as the last of the old covenant prophets, the forerunner of the Messiah, was circumcised. In **Luke 1:59-60**, we read that Zacharias and Elizabeth came to circumcise their son “on the eighth day,” at which time Zacharias declared that his name shall be John. As the forerunner of Christ, John the Baptist, was obligated to keep circumcision. And yet, he prepared the way for the Lord, as he baptized in the wilderness and preached “a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins” (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3).

Our Lord was also circumcised on the eighth day, at which time “his name was called JESUS” (**Luke 2:21**). Jesus submitted Himself to the law of God by being circumcised, but He also was baptized by water (Matt. 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22), at which time the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove upon Him. Jesus serves as the bridge, the transitional figure, between the old and new covenants. In fulfilling the law of God, His advent and ministry marked the transition from physical circumcision to water baptism as the sign of entrance into God’s church. In the Great Commission, He commanded His church to go, make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the triune God, and teaching them to observe all things that He commanded. Note that He did not command them to circumcise the disciples. No, quite to the contrary, they were to baptize the Christian disciples of all the nations (including the Jews) and teach them to obey all that Christ commanded, which would include water baptism.

Jesus abolished circumcision as a holy ordinance for God’s people to observe. Yet, in principle, as we will see later, the ordinance continues under the new symbol Christ instituted, which is water baptism. Through water baptism, the *everlasting* covenantal promise made to Abraham that believers and their sons should receive the sign and symbol of faith, cleansing, and

purification continues, albeit under a different sign—namely, that of water baptism instead of circumcision.

This is in accordance with Jesus' own teaching regarding His relation to the old covenant ceremonial law. Jesus said, "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17). The Westminster Confession of Faith, written in the 1600s in England, and used by Presbyterian churches ever since, explains:

This covenant [of grace] was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel; under the law it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, **circumcision**, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foreshadowing Christ to come, which were for that time sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation; and is called the Old Testament. 2 Cor. 3:6,7,8,9. Heb. 8,9 & 10; Rom. 4:11; Col. 2:11,12; 1 Cor. 5:7. 1 Cor. 10:1,2,3,4; Heb. 11:13; John 8:56. Gal. 3:7,8,9,14. (WCF 7.5, emphasis added)

Under the gospel, when Christ the substance was exhibited, the ordinances in which this covenant is dispensed are the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments of **Baptism** and the Lord's Supper, which, though fewer in number, and administered with more simplicity and less outward glory, yet in them it is held forth in more fullness, evidence, and spiritual efficacy, to all nations, both Jews and Gentiles; and is called the New Testament. There are not therefore two covenants of grace differing in substance, but one and the same under various dispensations. Col. 2:17. Matt. 28:19,20; 1 Cor. 11:23,24,25. Heb. 12:22-27; Jer. 31:33,34. Matt. 28:19; Eph. 2:15-19. Luke 22:20. Gal. 3:14,16; Acts 15:11; Rom. 3:21,22,23,30; Ps. 32:1; Rom. 4:3,6,16,17,23,24; Heb. 13:8. (WCF 7.6, emphasis added)

### **Religious hypocrisy in New Testament times**

In the New Testament, much mention is made of the hypocrisy of the circumcised Jews of the first century. The Jews are frequently referred to as "the circumcision" or "those of the circumcision" (cf. Acts 10:45). Jesus pointed out the hypocrisy of the Jews who would circumcise a man on the Sabbath, in accordance with the law of Moses and yet were angry with Him for healing a man on the Sabbath (John 7:22-24). "Those of the circumcision" also contended with Peter for maintaining fellowship with "uncircumcised men" and eating with them (Acts 11:2-3).

### **Acts 15 – The Jerusalem Council**

At the time when the Jerusalem Council was convened, certain men had come down from Judea and taught the Christian brethren that "unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (**Acts 15:1**). Some "of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command *them* to keep the law of Moses" (Acts 15:5). The apostles and elders met at Jerusalem, at which time the Christian Church clearly decreed that circumcision was no longer binding on Christians, that circumcision was not to be a sacrament of the new covenant Church.

The apostle Peter told the council that God had chosen him to preach the gospel to the Gentiles and that God had “acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us (Jews), and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith” (Acts 15:7-9). Peter concluded, “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” (Acts 15:10-11). Here Peter affirms the true gospel of grace and repudiates the false gospel of merits. Circumcision was not necessary as a meritorious work; it was not necessary for salvation.

Then, after Barnabas and Paul spoke, James concluded that the Gentiles who were turning to God should not be troubled by such calls to circumcision. Instead, the council should write to them “to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood” (Acts 15:19-20).

In their decree, the Jerusalem council stated,

Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, “*You must* be circumcised and keep the law” -- to whom we gave no *such* commandment -- (Acts 15:24)

For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell. (Acts 15:28-29)

So the apostles and elders who represented the early church denied that Christians were commanded to be circumcised and keep the old covenant ceremonial law. Yet, certain Jews, known as the Judaizers, continued to spread their deadly poison, proclaiming that true Christians must be circumcised and keep the Old Testament ceremonial law with its dietary laws and its holy days and seasons (Gal. 4:9-11; Col. 2:16-23).

Despite the fact that circumcision was no longer compulsory on God’s people nor a sacrament of the church, many men still submitted to it during the transitional era of the apostolic age. The apostle Paul circumcised his disciple Timothy so that his lack of circumcision would not hinder his ministry among the Jews (Acts 16:3); yet when faced with the Judaizer heretics, Paul refused to circumcise Titus, lest he abandon his Christian liberty to pander to the legalists (Galatians 2:3).

### **Acts 21:20-21**

When Paul later visited Jerusalem, he was told by the Christians there of Jewish criticism of his ministry:

“You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law; but they have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise *their* children nor to walk according to the customs.” **(Acts 21:20-21)**

John Calvin explains this passage in this way:

Though that were a true report, in some respect, with which the Jews were offended, yet was it mixed with a slander. Paul did teach the abrogating of the law, that notwithstanding by this means the authority of the law did not only continue sound and perfect, but it was more holy. For as we said, in the seventh chapter, the ceremonies should be vain, unless the effect of them had been showed in Christ. Therefore, those who say that they were abolished by the coming of Christ, are so far from being blasphemous against the law, that they rather confirm the truth of it. We must consider two things in ceremonies; the truth, to which is annexed the efficacy; secondly, the external use. Furthermore, the abrogating of the external use, which Christ brought, depends on this, in that He is the sound body, and that nothing was shadowed in times past which is not fulfilled in Him. To show the true end of the law differs much from falling away from the law; although the figures have reached their end, the spiritual truth of the law always will be in force. Therefore we see that they were malicious and unjust interpreters, who laid apostasy to Paul's charge, though he did call away the faithful from the external worship of the law. . . .

**Paul taught that both Jews and Gentiles were set at liberty from keeping the old covenant ceremonial law. They ought not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs of the ceremonial law.** These sentences are general with him: Circumcision is nothing (1 Corinthians 7:19). We are circumcised by baptism in Christ, not with circumcision made with hands; Let no man judge you in meat or drink, or in the choice of festivals, which are shadows of things to come; but the body is in Christ (Colossians 2:11, 16). Whatever is sold in the meat market, and whatever is set before you, that eat, asking no questions for conscience' sake (1 Corinthians 10:25). Do not be entangled again with the yoke of bondage (Galatians 5:1). Seeing that Paul spoke in this way everywhere without exception, he freed the Jews from the necessity of keeping the law. And lest I stand too long on this, one place shall be sufficient, where he compares the law to a tutor, under which the old Church was, as in the childhood of it; but now knowing the grace of Christ, the new Church is grown up, that it may be free from ceremonies. In that place he speaks undoubtedly both of the Jews and Gentiles. Also, when he says that the hand-writing of the law, which did consist in decrees (Colossians 2:14) is blotted out and nailed to the cross by Christ, he sets free the Jews, as well as the Gentiles, from the ceremonies, which he calls in that place decrees. . . .

Even though Paul taught the Jews not to continue to circumcise their sons, he did not entirely forbid circumcision immediately (Acts 16:3). Paul taught the early church to bear with their weaker brethren whose consciences convinced them to continue to observe the Jewish religious holidays and dietary laws that God had prescribed their forefathers to observe under the old covenant (Romans 14:1-8). In Hebrews 8:13, we read this regarding the transition from the old covenant to the new: "In that He says, "A new *covenant*," He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away." In a similar way, while Christ brought an end to the old covenant ceremonial rite of circumcision, in a sense it was still becoming obsolete and preparing to vanish away. While circumcision could be tolerated for a time, Paul vigorously refuted the idea that such observances were meritorious or necessary for salvation, and he maintained the Christian liberty of both Jews and Gentiles to abstain from observing the old covenant ceremonial law. He opposed any attempt to impose the ceremonial law on Christ's church.

### **Romans 2:25-29**

In his epistle to the Romans, Paul addresses the subject of circumcision at several points.

In Romans 2:25-29, we read,

For circumcision is indeed profitable if you keep the law; but if you are 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 contrasts two groups of Jews: true Jews who were spiritually circumcised, as evidenced by their keeping of the law (as an evidence of their genuine faith), and false Jews who were physically circumcised but were spiritually uncircumcised, as evidenced by their lawlessness. He argues that “an uncircumcised man,” a Gentile, who “keeps the righteous requirements of the law” is viewed by God as circumcised, as a true Jew. In fact, the physically uncircumcised man, if he possess true faith (as evidenced by his fulfilling the law) will judge the false Jew who transgresses the law, despite his adherence to the external trappings of Judaism (i.e., being physically circumcised and keeping the written code of laws and regulations). A true Jew is not seen by the outward mark of circumcision; circumcision should not be viewed as something that is “outward in the flesh.” Christ has fulfilled the law, and physical circumcision is no longer of any importance for the Christian. A true Jew 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.”

For the old covenant Jew, God expected him to submit to the rite of physical circumcision and to be spiritually circumcised as well. For the new covenant Christian, God only requires spiritual circumcision, a circumcision of the heart, which makes a man a true Jew and a true Christian, whether he is ethnically Jewish or not.

John Calvin has this to say regarding this passage:

Circumcision looks to the law, and must therefore be inferior to the law; it is then a greater thing to keep the law than to keep circumcision, which was instituted for the sake of the law. It hence follows, that the uncircumcised man, provided he keeps the law, far excels the Jew with his barren and unprofitable circumcision, if he is a transgressor of the law; and though he is by nature polluted, he shall yet be so sanctified by keeping the law, that uncircumcision will be imputed to him for circumcision. . . . “The Gentile,” he says, “being a keeper of the law, shall judge you who are a transgressor, though he is uncircumcised, and you have the literal circumcision.” . . .

Paul does not mean that the Jews violated the law, because they had the literal circumcision; but because they continued, though they had the outward rite, to neglect the spiritual worship of God, even piety, justice, judgment, and truth, which are the chief matters of the law.

. . . [A] real Jew is not to be ascertained, either by natural descent, or by profession, or by an external symbol; the circumcision which constitutes a Jew, does not consist in an outward sign only, but must be an inward reality. What Paul subjoins with regard to true circumcision, is taken from various passages of Scripture, and even from its general teaching; for the people are everywhere commanded to circumcise their hearts, and it is what the Lord promises to do. The foreskin was cut off, not indeed as the small

corruption of one part, but as [representative] of the whole nature. Circumcision then signified the mortification of the whole flesh. . . .

[The] whole importance of signs and rites [like circumcision] depends on what is designed; when the end in view is not regarded, the letter alone remains, which in itself is useless. And the reason for this way of speaking is this—where the voice of God sounds, all that He commands, except it is received by men in sincerity of heart, will remain in the letter, that is, in the dead writing; but when it penetrates into the heart, it is in a manner transformed into spirit. And there is an allusion to the difference between the old and the new covenant, which Jeremiah points out in Jeremiah 31:33, where the Lord declares that His covenant would be firm and permanent when engraven on the inward parts. Paul had also the same thing in view in another place (2 Corinthians 3:6) where he compares the law with the gospel and calls the former “the letter,” which is not only dead but kills; and the latter he signalizes with the title of “spirit.” . . .

As men fix their eyes only on those things which are visible, Paul denies that we ought to be satisfied with what is commendable in the estimation of men, who are often deceived by outward splendor; but that we ought to be satisfied with the all-seeing eyes of God, from which the deepest secrets of the heart are not hidden. He thus again summons hypocrites, who soothe themselves with false opinions, to the tribunal of God.

In the next verse of Romans, Paul anticipates the objection of some Jews that this teaching makes their ethnicity of absolutely no meaning any more. Isn't there some advantage to being a Jew; isn't there some profit to be obtained from the whole instruction our forefathers received under the old covenant in receiving circumcision? Paul responds, “Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God” (Romans 3:1-2).

John Calvin comments,

Though Paul has clearly proved that bare circumcision brought nothing to the Jews, yet since he could not deny that there was some difference between the Gentiles and the Jews, which by that symbol was sealed to them by the Lord, and since it was inconsistent to make a distinction, of which God was the author, void and of no importance, it remained for him to remove also this objection.

It was indeed evident, that it was a foolish glorying in which the Jews on this account indulged; yet still a doubt remained as to the design of circumcision; for the Lord would not have appointed it had not some benefit been intended. He therefore, by way of an objection, asks, what it was that made the Jew superior to the Gentile; and he subjoins a reason for this by another question, *What is the benefit of circumcision?* For this separated the Jews from the common class of men; it was a partition-wall, as Paul calls ceremonies, which separated the two groups.

In verse 2, he begins to give the sacrament of circumcision its own praise; but he does not concede, that on this account the Jews ought to have been proud; for when he teaches that they were sealed by the symbol of circumcision, by which they were counted the children of God, he does not allow that they became superior to others through any merit or worthiness of their own, but through the free mercy of God. If then regard be given to them as men, he shows that they were on a level with others; but if the favors of God be taken to the account, he admits that they possessed what made them more eminent than other men.

The advantage of circumcision is not made to consist in the naked sign, but its value is derived from the word of God; for Paul asks here what benefit the sacrament conferred on the Jews, and he answers, that God had deposited with them the treasure of celestial wisdom. It hence follows, that, apart from the word, no excellency remained. By *oracles* he means the covenant which God revealed first to Abraham and to his descendants, and afterwards sealed and unfolded by the law and the Prophets.

Now the oracles were committed to them, for the purpose of preserving them as long as it pleased the Lord to continue His glory among them, and then of publishing them during the time of their stewardship through the whole world: they were first depositories, and secondly dispensers. But if this benefit was to be so highly esteemed when the Lord favored one nation only with the revelation of His word, we can never sufficiently reprobate our ingratitude, who receive His word with so much negligence or with so much carelessness, not to mention disdain.

### **Romans 3:30**

In Romans 3:30, Paul reminds us that “there is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.” Here, we see that God has only had one plan of salvation, one gospel, throughout all of redemptive history. There is not one gospel for the Jews and a different gospel for Gentile believers. Both the circumcised Jews and the uncircumcised Gentiles are justified by faith alone. The writer to the Hebrews likewise compares believers today to the Jews in Moses’ day, “For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it” (Hebrews 4:2). Thus, there is only one gospel of salvation. The only way any man has ever been declared righteous in God’s sight is by faith alone, by trusting in the merits of Christ, the promised Messiah, by faith apart from works.

### **Romans 4:9-12**

In Romans 4:9-10, Paul explains justification by faith and its relation to circumcision, by reviewing the Genesis account of Abraham: “Does this blessedness then *come* upon the circumcised *only*, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say that faith was accounted to Abraham for righteousness. How then was it accounted? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised.”

A key principle of sound Biblical interpretation (hermeneutics) is that the New Testament interprets the Old; as redemptive history progressed, God’s revelation progressed. The Old Testament is the New in seed form; the New Testament is the fuller revelation of what was less clear (shadowy) under the Old.

Here we see that Abraham was justified by faith, prior to his being circumcised. Contrary to the false notion of so many Jews in Paul’s day, circumcision did not regenerate a man or make him a true believer; it was only a sign of a spiritual reality. Abraham, the father of the faithful, was justified by faith while still an uncircumcised man. Thus, a man does not need to be circumcised in order to be saved.

Paul continues in Romans 4:11-12: “And he [Abraham] received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised, that righteousness might be

imputed to them also, and the father of circumcision to those who not only *are* of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham *had while still* uncircumcised.”

Here the inspired apostle teaches us that circumcision was a *sign* and *seal* of faith. Contrary to what many modern-day evangelicals maintain, circumcision, just like baptism, was a sign and seal of faith. It was the sign and seal of the righteousness of the **faith** which Abraham had prior to his being circumcised. Thus, Abraham is not only the father of the Jews but the father of the Gentiles also; he is the spiritual father of all those who believe, even though they are not circumcised. The mystery of the gospel that Abraham would be “heir of the world” (Romans 4:13) and that in his seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed is fulfilled in Christ and His church. Paul tells us explicitly that Abraham’s seed “is Christ” (Gal. 3:16) and that the mystery of Christ is that “the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (Eph. 3:4-6, NAS).

John Calvin comments,

In order to anticipate an objection, he shows that circumcision was not unprofitable and superfluous, though it could not justify; but it had another very remarkable use, it had the office of sealing, and as it were of ratifying the righteousness of faith. And yet he means at the same time, by stating what its object was, that it was not the cause of righteousness; it indeed tended to confirm the righteousness of faith, and that already obtained in uncircumcision. He then derogates or takes away nothing from circumcision.

We have indeed here a remarkable passage with regard to **the general benefits of sacraments**. According to the testimony of Paul, they are **seals** by which the promises of God are in a manner imprinted on our hearts, and the certainty of grace confirmed. And though by themselves they profit nothing, yet God has designed them to be the instruments of His grace; and He effects by the secret grace of His Spirit, that they should not be without benefit in the elect. And though they are dead and unprofitable symbols to the reprobate, they yet ever retain their import and character; for though our unbelief may deprive them of their effect, yet it cannot weaken or extinguish the truth of God. Hence it remains a fixed principle, that sacred symbols [sacraments] are testimonies, by which God seals His grace on our hearts.

As to the symbol of circumcision, this especially is to be said, that a twofold grace was represented by it. God had promised to Abraham a blessed seed, from whom salvation was to be expected by the whole world. On this depended the promise—“I will be a God to you” (Genesis 17:7). Then a gratuitous reconciliation with God was included in that symbol, and for this reason it was necessary that the faithful should look forward to the promised seed. On the other hand, God requires integrity and holiness of life; He indicated by the symbol how this could be attained, that is, by cutting off in man whatever is born of the flesh, for his whole nature had become vicious. He therefore reminded Abraham by the external sign, that he was spiritually to cut off the corruption of the flesh; and to this Moses has also alluded in Deuteronomy 10:16. And to show that it was not the work of man, but of God, he commanded tender infants to be circumcised, who, on account of their age, could not have performed such a command. Moses has indeed expressly mentioned spiritual circumcision as the work of divine power, as you will find in Deuteronomy 30:6, where he says, “The Lord will circumcise your heart,” and the Prophets afterwards declared the same thing much more clearly.

As there are two points in baptism now, so there were formerly in circumcision; for it was a symbol of a new life, and also of the remission of sins. But the fact as to Abraham himself, that righteousness preceded circumcision, is not always the case in sacraments, as it is evident from the case of Isaac and his posterity, but God intended to give such an instance once at the beginning, that no one might ascribe salvation to external signs.

Mark how the circumcision of Abraham confirms our faith with regard to gratuitous righteousness; for it was the sealing of the righteousness of faith, that righteousness might also be imputed to us who believe. And thus Paul, by a remarkable dexterity makes to recoil on his opponents what they might have adduced as an objection; for since the truth and meaning of circumcision were found in an uncircumcised state, there was no ground for the Jews to elevate themselves so much above the Gentiles. But as a doubt might arise, whether it behooves us, after the example of Abraham, to confirm also the same righteousness by the sign of circumcision, why did the Apostle make this omission? . . . [Since] circumcision availed only to seal the grace of God, it follows, that **it is now of no benefit to us, who have a sign instituted in its place by our Lord.** As then there is no necessity now for circumcision, where baptism is, he was not disposed to contend unnecessarily for that respecting which there was no doubt, that is, why the righteousness of faith was not sealed to the Gentiles in the same way as it was to Abraham. . . .

[The] carnal descendants of Abraham, having nothing but outward circumcision, confidently gloried in it. The other thing, which was the chief matter, they neglected; for the faith of Abraham, by which alone he obtained salvation, they did not imitate. It hence appears, how carefully he distinguished between faith and the sacrament; not only that no one might be satisfied with the one without the other, as though it were sufficient for justifying; but also that faith alone might be set forth as accomplishing everything. For while Paul allows the circumcised Jews to be justified, he expressly makes this exception—provided in true faith they followed the example of Abraham; for why does he mention faith while in uncircumcision, except to show, that it is alone sufficient, without the aid of anything else? . . .

Paul adds in Romans 15:8-9, "Now I say that Jesus Christ has become a servant to the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises *made* to the fathers, and that the Gentiles might glorify God for *His* mercy, as it is written: "For this reason I will confess to You among the Gentiles, And sing to Your name.""

John Calvin comments,

Paul now shows that Christ has embraced us all, so that **he leaves no difference between the Jews and the Gentiles**, except that in the first place he was promised to the Jewish nation, and was in a manner peculiarly destined for them, before He was revealed to the Gentiles. But he shows, that with respect to that which was the seed of all contentions, there was no difference between them; for he had gathered them both from a miserable dispersion, and brought them, when gathered, into the Father's kingdom, that they might be one flock, in one sheepfold, under one shepherd. It is hence right, he declares, that they should continue united together, and not despise one another; for Christ despised neither of them.

He then speaks first of the Jews, and says, that Christ was sent to them, in order to accomplish the truth of God by performing the promises given to the Fathers: and it was

no common honor, that Christ, the Lord of heaven and earth, put on flesh, that he might procure salvation for them; for the more He humbled Himself for their sake, the greater was the honor He conferred on them. . . . And lest the Gentiles should claim any *excellency* above the Jews, Paul *expressly* declares, that the salvation which Christ has brought, belonged by covenant to the Jews; for by His coming He fulfilled what the Father had formerly promised to Abraham, and thus He became the minister of that people. It hence follows that **the old covenant was in reality spiritual, though it was annexed to earthly types**; for the fulfillment, of which Paul now speaks, must necessarily relate to eternal salvation. . . .

### 1 Corinthians 7:18-19

In his first epistle to the Corinthians, Paul again raises the subject of circumcision:

Is any man called being circumcised? let him not become uncircumcised. Is any called in uncircumcision? let him not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God *is what matters*. (1 Corinthians 7:18-19)

This profound, succinct statement demonstrates that physical circumcision is no longer of any religious or spiritual importance for Christians today. Are you circumcised? Don't worry about it. Are you uncircumcised? Do not think that you need to become circumcised to be a good Christian. Circumcision is nothing! God does not care if you are uncircumcised. Physical circumcision was merely a type, a sign and seal, that was fulfilled in Christ, and has now been replaced. Don't concern yourself about circumcision. What you need to concern yourself with is "the keeping of the commandments of God." Focus on living in obedience to God's moral law. Circumcise your heart, and live by every word of God (Matt. 4:4; Luke 4:4). Meditate on God's word day and night, and do not sin against Him. Put off the old man, renew your mind, and put on the new man, created to be like Christ in true righteousness and holiness (Eph. 4:22-24; Rom. 12:1-2).

John Calvin comments,

The sum [of Paul's teaching] is that in external things you must not rashly abandon the *calling* on which you have once entered by the will of God. And he begins with *circumcisions*, respecting which many at that time disputed. Now, **he says that with God it makes no difference whether you are a Gentile or a Jew**. Hence he exhorts every one to be content with his condition. . . .

While this similitude ("circumcision is nothing") was suited to the subject in hand, it appears to have been designedly made use of with the view of reprovng, in passing, the superstition and haughtiness of the Jews. For, as the Jews gloried in circumcision, it was possible that many might feel dissatisfied with the lack of it, as if their condition were the worse on that account. Paul, therefore, places both conditions on a level, lest, through hatred of the one, the other should be foolishly desired. These things, however, must be understood as referring to the time [after Christ] when circumcision was at length abolished; for, if he had had an eye to the [old] covenant of God, and His commandment, he would, without doubt, have estimated circumcision higher. In another passage, it is true, he makes light of *the letter of circumcision* (Romans 2:27) and declares that it is of no account in the sight of God; but here, as he simply contrasts

circumcision with uncircumcision, and makes both alike, it is certain that **he speaks of it as a matter of indifference and of no importance.**

For **the abolishing of circumcision had this effect**—that the mystery which had been previously conveyed under it, does not now any longer belong to it: nay more, **it is now no longer a sign, but a thing of no use.** For baptism has come in the place of the symbol used under the law on this footing, that it is enough that we be circumcised by the Spirit of Christ, while our old man is buried with Christ.

As circumcision was one of the *commandments*, so long as the Church was bound to legal ceremonies, we see that **it is taken for granted, that circumcision had been abolished by the advent of Christ, so that the use of it, indeed, was allowed among the ignorant and weak, but there was no advantage in it.** For Paul speaks of it here as a thing of no importance: “As these are outward things, let them not take up your attention, but devote yourself rather to piety and the duties which God requires, and which are alone precious in His sight.” . . . “Do not occupy yourselves to no purpose in things of no profit, but, on the contrary, exercise yourselves in duties that are well pleasing to God.”

Calvin argues that it is taken for granted that circumcision had been abolished by Christ's coming. In accordance with Paul's teaching regarding things indifferent and the weaker brethren in Romans 14, Calvin states that circumcision was “allowed among the ignorant and weak” Jews, but there was no advantage in it. So just because a Christian was ethnically Jewish, that does not mean that Paul encouraged him to continue to circumcise his sons. However, if his conscience bound him to do so, on account of the Old Testament injunction, then Paul said it could be allowed. Again, Paul laid down a principle that new covenant believers should resist the temptation to be distracted by matters of no importance. Instead, they should devote themselves to what God has commanded new covenant believers to do in His Word, taking into account the fuller revelation of the New Testament.

Paul just spoke of circumcision as a thing indifferent, and yet in his letter to the Galatians, he prevented Titus from being circumcised. What was going on in the Galatian churches?

## Galatians 2

In Galatians 2:3, Paul wrote, “Yet not even Titus who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised.” In the Galatian context, false brothers, known as Judaizers, had infiltrated the churches. Paul says that they “came in by stealth to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage. They were legalists, who sought to impose circumcision and the rest of the old covenant ceremonial law on new covenant believers. While they sought to make such things meritorious (salvation by works), they also were seeking to bind the consciences of believers to keep that which Christ had fulfilled. In other words, the weaker brethren (Romans 14) were intolerant of the strong and were seeking to take away their Christian liberty. Paul says that he and the brethren “did not yield submission” to the Judaizers “even for an hour, that the truth of the gospel might continue” to persevere (Gal. 2:4-5).

John Calvin comments,

This is an additional argument to prove that the Apostles held the same views with Paul; for he had brought to them an uncircumcised man, whom they did not hesitate to

acknowledge as a brother. The reason is assigned why he was not circumcised: circumcision, being a matter of indifference, might be neglected or practiced as edification required. Our invariable rule of action is, that, if “all things are lawful for us,” (1 Corinthians 10:23) we ought to inquire what is expedient. Paul circumcises Timothy (Acts 16:3) in order to take away a ground of offense from weak minds; for he was at that time dealing with weak minds, which it was his duty to treat with tenderness. And he would gladly have done the same thing with Titus, for he was unwearied in his endeavors to “support (Acts 20:35) the weak;” but the case was different. For some false brethren were watching for an opportunity of slandering his doctrine, and would immediately have spread the report: “See how the valiant champion of liberty, when he comes into the presence of the apostles, lays aside the bold and fierce aspect which he is accustomed to assume among the ignorant!” Now, as it is our duty to “bear the infirmities of the weak” (Romans 15:1), so concealed foes, who purposely watch for our liberty, must, be vigorously resisted. The duties of love to our neighbor ought never to be injurious to faith; and therefore, in matters of indifference, the love of our neighbor will be our best guide, provided that faith shall always receive our first regard.

In Galatians 2:7-9, Paul goes on to explain that God had given Paul and Peter diverse ministry assignments. The “gospel for the uncircumcised [the nations] had been committed” to Paul, as “the gospel for the circumcised” had been committed to Peter. Of course, there is only one Gospel (Galatians 1:6-9), but what Paul is saying is that Peter was specifically sent to the Jews and Paul to the non-Jews. Paul remarks that the same God “who worked effectively in Peter for the apostleship to the circumcised also worked effectively in him toward the Gentiles. He then adds that James, Cephas [Peter], and John, who were regarded as pillars of the Church, perceived the grace that God had given to Paul, and thus they gave him and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, affirming that Paul and Barnabas should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.

In Galatians 2:12, Paul tells a sad story of the apostle Peter’s weak faith. The same Peter who had denied Christ three times prior to His crucifixion, again essentially denied Christ by submitting to the legalism of the Judaizers. Paul writes, “for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy.” So out of fear of the Judaizer heretics, Peter withdrew and separated himself from the uncircumcised. Paul was shocked by such religious hypocrisy.

Paul would fight to the death for Christian liberty and the right to enjoy the freedom that Christ brings from the doctrines and commandments of men, the traditions of men (Col. 2:8). He testifies that he withstood Peter to his face, because he was to be blamed for not being straightforward about the truth of the gospel (Gal. 2:11-14). The good news is that we are justified by faith alone, apart from the works of the law (Gal. 2:15-3:14). The good news is that “the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty” (2 Corinthians 3:17).

## **Galatians 5**

Paul continues in Galatians 5:1-3, exhorting his readers and all believers today:

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.

Of course, Paul does not mean that you will be condemned for becoming circumcised for medical reasons. He is talking about those who become circumcised thinking that this will merit God's favor and salvation or those who become circumcised as a means of submitting to false teachers who seek to bind their consciences to manmade religious rules. Paul is essentially saying, "If you think that by becoming circumcised you will earn God's favor, I have something to tell you: you are now indebted "to keep the whole law," and no one has succeeded at doing that, but Jesus Christ Himself" (Hebrews 4:15).

John Calvin explains,

He could not have pronounced a severer threatening than that it would exclude them entirely from the grace of Christ. But what is the meaning of this, that Christ will *profit nothing* to all who are circumcised? Did Christ *profit nothing* to Abraham? No, it was in order that Christ might profit him that he received circumcision. If we say that it was in force until the coming of Christ, what reply shall we make to the case of Timothy [who Paul circumcised]?

We must observe, that **Paul's reasoning is directed not so properly against the outward rite or ceremony, as against the wicked doctrine of the false apostles, who pretended that it was a necessary part of the worship of God, and at the same time made it a ground of confidence as a meritorious work.** These diabolical contrivances made Christ to *profit nothing*; not that the false apostles denied Christ, or wished Him to be entirely set aside, but that they made such a division between His grace and the works of the law as to leave not more than the half of salvation due to Christ.

The apostle contends that Christ cannot be divided in this way, and that He "profits nothing," unless He is wholly embraced. And what else do our modern Papists thrust on us, in the place of circumcision, trifles of their own invention? The tendency of their whole doctrine is to blend the grace of Christ with the merit of works, which is impossible. Whoever wishes to have only half of Christ, loses the whole. And yet the Papists think themselves exceedingly smart when they tell us that they ascribe nothing to works, except through the influence of the grace of Christ, as if this were a different error from what was charged on the Galatians. They did not believe that they had departed from Christ, or relinquished His grace; and yet they lost Christ entirely, when that important part of evangelical doctrine was corrupted. . . .

He who is *a debtor to do the whole law* will never escape death, but will always continue to be held as guilty; for no man will ever be found who satisfies the law. Such being the obligation, the man must unavoidably be condemned, and Christ can render him no service. We see then the contradictory nature of the two propositions, that we are partakers of the grace of Christ, and yet that we are bound to fulfill the whole law. But will it not then follow, that none of the fathers were saved? Will it not also follow that Timothy was ruined, since Paul caused him to be circumcised? (Acts 16:3). Woe to us then, until we have been emancipated from the law, for subjection is inseparable from circumcision!

It ought to be observed that Paul is accustomed to view circumcision in two

different aspects. . . . In the Epistle to the Romans (Romans 4:11) he calls it “a seal of the righteousness of faith;” and there, under circumcision, he includes Christ and the free promise of salvation. But here he contrasts it with Christ, and faith, and the gospel, and grace—viewing it simply as a legal covenant, founded on the merit of works. The consequence is, as we have already said, that he does not always speak about circumcision in the same way; but the reason of the difference must be taken into account.

When he views circumcision in its own nature, Paul properly makes it to be a symbol of grace, because such was the appointment of God. But **when he is dealing with the false apostles, who abused circumcision by making it an instrument for destroying the Gospel**, he does not there consider the purpose for which it was appointed by the Lord, but attacks the corruption which has proceeded from men. A very striking example occurs in this passage.

When Abraham had received a promise concerning Christ, and justification by free grace, and eternal salvation, circumcision was added, in order to confirm the promise; and thus it became, by the appointment of God, **a sacrament**, which was subservient to faith. Next come **the false apostles**, who **pretend that it is a meritorious work**, and recommend the observance of the law, making a profession of obedience to it to be signified by circumcision as an initiatory rite. Paul makes no reference here to the appointment of God, but attacks the unscriptural views of the false apostles.

**[The] Divine appointment of circumcision was only for a time. After the coming of Christ, it ceased to be a Divine institution, because baptism had succeeded in its place. Why, then, was Timothy circumcised?** Not certainly on his own account, but for the sake of weak brethren, to whom that point was yielded. To show more fully the agreement between the doctrine of the Papists and that which Paul opposes, it must be observed, that the sacraments, when we partake of them in a sincere manner, are not the works of men, but of God. In baptism or the Lord’s supper, we do nothing but present ourselves to God, in order to receive His grace. Baptism, viewed in regard to us, is a passive work; we bring nothing to it but faith, and all that belongs to it is laid up in Christ. But what are the views of the Papists? They contrive the *opus operatum*, by which men merit the grace of God; and what is this, but to extinguish utterly the truth of the sacrament? Baptism and the Lord’s supper are retained by us, because it was the will of Christ that the use of them should be perpetual; but those wicked and foolish notions are rejected by us with the strong abhorrence which they deserve.

Paul adds soon after in Galatians 5:6, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love.” Or, as the NIV translation, expresses, “in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.”

John Calvin adds,

The reason why believers now wait for the hope of righteousness through the Spirit is, that **in Christ, that is, in the kingdom of Christ, or in the Christian church, circumcision with its appendages is abolished**; for, by a figure of speech in which a part is taken for the whole, the word *circumcision* is put for ceremonies. While Paul declares that they no longer possess any influence, he does not admit that they were always useless; for he does not maintain that they were repealed until after the

revelation of Christ [note the words “in Christ Jesus”]. . . . **under the kingdom of Christ, Paul pronounces circumcision to be on a level with uncircumcision, because the coming of Christ has put an end to legal ceremonies [the ceremonies of the old covenant law].**

The contrast here introduced, between ceremonies and the exercise of love, was intended to prevent the Jews from thinking too highly of themselves, and imagining that they were entitled to some superiority; for towards the close of the Epistle, instead of this clause, he uses the words, *a new creature* (Galatians 6:15). As if he had said, Ceremonies are no longer enjoined [commanded] by Divine authority; and, if we abound in the exercise of love, all is well.

Meanwhile, this does not set aside our sacraments, which are aids to faith, but is merely a short announcement of what he had formerly taught as to the spiritual worship of God.

There would be no difficulty in this passage, were it not for the dishonest manner in which it has been tortured by the Papists to uphold the righteousness of works. When they attempt to refute our doctrine, that we are justified by faith alone, they take this line of argument. If the faith which justifies us be that “which works by love,” then faith alone does not justify. I answer, they do not comprehend their own silly talk; still less do they comprehend our statements. **It is not our doctrine that the faith which justifies is alone; we maintain that it is invariably accompanied by good works; only we contend that faith alone is sufficient for justification.**

The Papists themselves are accustomed to tear faith after a murderous fashion, sometimes presenting it out of all shape and unaccompanied by love, and at other times, in its true character. We, again, refuse to admit that, in any case, faith can be separated from the Spirit of regeneration; but **when the question comes to be in what manner we are justified, we then set aside all works.** With respect to the present passage, Paul enters into no dispute whether love cooperates with faith in justification; but, in order to avoid the appearance of representing Christians as idle and as resembling blocks of wood, he points out what are the true exercises of believers. When you are engaged in discussing the question of justification, beware of allowing any mention to be made of love or of works, but resolutely adhere to the exclusive particle. Paul does not here treat of justification, or assign any part of the praise of it to love. Had he done so, the same argument would prove that circumcision and ceremonies, at a former period, had some share in justifying a sinner. **As in Christ Jesus Paul commends faith accompanied by love, so before the coming of Christ ceremonies were required.** But this has nothing to do with obtaining righteousness, as the Papists themselves allow; and neither must it be supposed that love possesses any such influence.

Paul adds in Galatians 5:11, “And I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why do I still suffer persecution? Then the offense of the cross has ceased.” John Calvin explains,

[Paul argues,] “It would be completely in my power to avoid the displeasure of men, and every kind of danger and persecution, if only I were to mix ceremonies with Christ. The earnestness with which I oppose them is not on my own account, nor for my own advantage.”

But does it therefore follow that his doctrine is true? I answer, proper feelings and pure conscience, when manifested by a teacher, have no small share in obtaining confidence.

Besides, it cannot be believed that any man would be so mad as to take measures, of his own accord, for bringing distress upon himself. Lastly, Paul throws upon his adversaries the suspicion, that, in preaching circumcision, they were more disposed to consult their own ease than to be faithful in the service of Christ. In short, Paul was at the farthest remove from ambition, covetousness, or regard to personal interest, since he despised favor and applause, and exposed himself to the persecutions and fury of the multitude rather than swerve a hair's-breadth from the purity of the gospel.

In Paul's day, the false brethren who preached circumcision were likely driven by ambition, the love of money, and regard to their own popularity and self-advancement; what better way to win fans among the Jews than to spark their nationalistic and ethnic pride, to disparage the uncircumcised Gentiles, and to make a church that would appeal to those most proud of their Jewish heritage.

The apostle Paul himself was circumcised. We read in Philippians 3:5-6 Paul's own testimony that he was "circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless." We can trust Paul, not only because He was an apostle divinely sent by God, whose writings are the very word of God (2 Peter 3:15-16), the inspired, inerrant, infallible Scriptures, but also because Paul suffered much for the truth of the gospel. He was a Jew, an Israelite, a Hebrew, a circumcised man, a once zealous religious Jew, and yet he was completely willing to admit that his physical circumcision did not matter, that the old covenant ceremonial law was abrogated, and that the Gentiles were fellow heirs of the one body of Christ. He was not a racist or nationalist; Paul was first and foremost a Christian, and he loved both the Jews and the Gentiles. He evidenced his sincerity and love in preaching to them the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, no matter how unpopular the truth might be.

John Calvin comments further on the statement, "if I still preach circumcision . . . then the offense of the cross has ceased":

Willingly does Paul, in speaking of the gospel, call it the cross, or the preaching of the cross, when he wishes to bring its poor, simple style, into contrast with the "great swelling words" (Jude 1:16) of human wisdom or righteousness. For the Jews, puffed up with an ill-founded confidence in their righteousness, and the Greeks, with a foolish belief of their wisdom, despised the simplicity of the gospel. When therefore he says that now, if the preaching of circumcision be admitted, the offense of the cross will no longer exist, he means that the gospel will meet with no annoyance from the Jews, but will be taught with their entire concurrence. And why? Because they will no longer take offense at a pretended and false gospel, gathered out of Moses and out of Christ, but will look with greater indulgence on that mixture which will leave them in possession of their former superiority.

The Judaizers were quickly gaining a foothold among the Galatians because their message appealed to the carnal, sinful nature of the Jews in Galatia. Their false gospel allowed the Jews to embrace Christ while also continuing to hold to circumcision and the ceremonial law of Moses. They will not have to embrace change; they will be able to cling to their traditions. They will not have to embrace the nations into their synagogues; their synagogues can remain distinctively Jewish. They can retain synagogues that worship the Messiah, Jesus, but they do not have to embrace equality with the uncircumcised; the circumcised Jews can maintain their superiority, their supremacy. Such a message might prove popular to some people, but it was a

false gospel. The true gospel calls Jew and Gentile to unite as one church, as we have “one Lord, one faith, and one baptism” (Eph. 4:5).

### Galatians 6

In a similar vein, Paul warns the Galatians in Galatians 6:12-13, “As many as desire to make a good showing in the flesh, these *would* compel you to be circumcised, only that they may not suffer persecution for the cross of Christ. For not even those who are circumcised keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh.” John Calvin comments,

Such men pay no regard to edification, but are guided by an ambitious desire to hunt after popular applause. . . . He charges the false apostles with ambition, as if he had said, “When those men lay circumcision on you as a necessary burden, do you wish to know what sort of persons they are, what are the objects of their regard or pursuit? You are mistaken if you imagine that they are at all influenced by godly zeal. To gain or preserve the favor of men is the object they have in view in offering this bribe.” It was because they were Jews that they adopted this method of retaining the good-will, or at least allaying the resentment, of their own nation. It is the usual practice of ambitious men meanly to fawn on those from whose favor they hope to derive advantage, and to insinuate themselves into their good graces, that, when better men have been displaced, they may enjoy the undivided power.

This wicked design he lays open to the Galatians, in order to put them on their guard. . . . The pure preaching of the gospel is again designated by the cross of Christ. But there is likewise an allusion to their favorite scheme of resolving to preach Christ without the cross. **The deadly rage by which the Jews were animated against Paul, arose from their being unable to endure a neglect of ceremonies.** To avoid persecution, [the false Judaizer teachers] flattered the Jews. Yet after all, if they had themselves kept the law, their conduct might have been suffered. On the contrary, they disturbed the whole church for the sake of their personal ease, and scrupled not to lay a tyrannical yoke on the consciences of men, that they might be entirely freed from bodily uneasiness. A dread of the cross led them to corrupt the true preaching of the cross.

[Paul essentially is saying,] “It is not from a strong attachment to the law that they bind you with the yoke of ceremonies; for, even with their own circumcision, they do not keep the law. It is no doubt under the pretext of the law that they require you to be circumcised; but, though they have themselves been circumcised, they do not perform what they enjoin upon others.” . . . [He] insinuates against them [the Judaizers] a charge of insincerity, because, except when it suited their own designs, they found themselves at liberty to despise the law.

Even now this disease rages everywhere with virulence. You will find many who are prompted more by ambition than by conscience to defend the tyranny of the papal system. I speak of our courtly apostles, who are attracted by the smell of a kitchen, and who pronounce, with an air of authority, that the decrees of the holy Church of Rome must be observed with reverence. And what is their own practice all the while! They pay no more regard to any decisions of the Roman see than to the braying of an ass, but they take care to avoid personal risk. In short, Paul had the same kind of controversy with those impostors as we now have with hypocritical professors of the gospel, who hold out to us a monstrous union between Christ and the Pope.

Paul therefore declares that they are not acting the part of honest men, and that they have no other object in enjoining circumcision than to boast to the Jews of the converts they have made. Such is the meaning of the words, *that they may glory in your flesh*. “They wish to triumph over you, and to gratify their own desire of applause, by offering up your mutilated flesh to the false zealots of the law, as a token of peace and harmony.”

And so it is this day with those in the Church who pander to those who desire to observe false worship, to keep manmade traditions and commandments, instead of holding to the simplicity of the word of God and teaching Christ’s disciples to obey all that *He* commanded us in His word. These false pastors, priests, and Bible teachers, appeal to the false zealots of legalism and human tradition, while persecuting those who preach Christ alone, faith alone, grace alone, and Scripture alone. They live to the applause of men and to the glory of themselves instead of living to the glory of God alone, as the apostle Paul did.

In Galatians 6:15-16, Paul sums up all that he has said about circumcision in the epistle: “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation. And as many as walk according to this rule, peace and mercy *be* upon them, and upon the Israel of God.” Calvin comments,

The reason why Paul is crucified to the world, and the world to him, is, that in Christ, to whom he is spiritually united, nothing but a new creature [a new creation] is of any avail. Everything else must be dismissed, must perish. I refer to those things which hinder the renewing of the Spirit. “If any man be in Christ” says he, “let him be a new creature” (2 Corinthians 5:17). That is, if any man wishes to be considered as belonging to the kingdom of Christ, let him be created anew by the Spirit of God; let him not live any longer to himself or to the world, but let him be raised up to “newness of life” (Romans 6:4). His reasons for concluding that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any importance, have been already considered. The truth of the gospel swallows up, and brings to nothing, all the shadows of the law.

Not only circumcision but all the other shadows of the law (e.g., the Passover, old covenant ceremonial worship, the priesthood, the old covenant holy days and dietary laws) have been swallowed up by the truth of the gospel which has brought all the shadows of the law to nothing. Those who obey God’s true gospel will be the recipients of divine mercy and peace. The true Israel of God is not those who are only physically circumcised, but those, both Jew and Gentile, who have the faith of Abraham.

Sadly, we see in several places in Paul’s writings, that despite his best attempts to win over the Jews, of which he was one (Phil. 3:5-6), few of the Jews supported his ministry. We read in Colossians 4:10-11: “Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, with Mark the cousin of Barnabas (about whom you received instructions: if he comes to you, welcome him), and Jesus who is called Justus. **These are my only fellow workers for the kingdom of God who are of the circumcision;** they have proved to be a comfort to me.” Paul here reveals that there were few Jews at Rome who showed themselves to be followers of Christ; as a whole, the Jewish people remained opposed to Christ, despite their circumcision.

#### Titus 1:10-11

Paul also warned Titus that “there are many insubordinate, both idle talkers and deceivers, **especially those of the circumcision**, whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole

households, teaching things which they ought not, for the sake of dishonest gain” (Titus 1:10-11). John Calvin comments that the people Paul was addressing were incorrigible; they could not endure to be brought to obey, and they threw off the yoke of subjection:

[The vain talkers] not only included both the authors of false doctrines and also those who, addicted to ambitious display, occupy themselves with nothing but useless subtleties. [Idle talking] is contrasted with useful and solid doctrine, and therefore includes all trivial and frivolous speculations, which contain nothing but empty bombast, because they contribute nothing to piety and the fear of God. And such is all the scholastic theology that is found, in the present day, in Popery.

[Paul] calls the same persons *deceivers of minds*. . . . the teachers of such trifles entice and fascinate the minds of men, so as no longer to receive sound doctrine.

[Who were these false teachers? They were “chiefly those who are of the circumcision.”] He says that they are chiefly of the Jews; for it is highly essential that such plagues should be known by all. We ought not to listen to those who plead that we should spare the reputation of this or that individual, when the matter in question is the great danger of the whole Church. And so much the greater danger was to be apprehended from that nation, because it claimed superiority above others on account of the sacredness of its lineage. This is therefore the reason why Paul reproveth the Jews more sharply, in order to take from them the power of doing injury.

*Whose mouths must be stopped.* A good pastor ought therefore to be on the watch, so as not to give silent permission to wicked and dangerous doctrines to make gradual progress, or to allow wicked men an opportunity to spread them. But it may be asked, “How is it possible for a bishop to constrain obstinate and self-willed men to be silent? For such persons, even though they are vanquished in argument, still do not hold their peace; and it frequently happens that, the more manifestly they are refuted and vanquished, they become the more insolent; for not only is their malice strengthened and inflamed, but they give themselves up to indolence.” I reply, when they have been smitten down by the sword of God’s word, and overwhelmed by the force of the truth, the Church may command them to be silent; and if they persevere, they may at least be banished from the society of believers, so that they shall have no opportunity of doing harm. Yet by “shutting the mouth” Paul simply means—“to refute their vain talking, even though they should not cease to make a noise; for he who is convicted by the word of God, however he may chatter, has nothing to say.

*Who subvert whole households.* If the faith of one individual were in danger of being overturned, (for we are speaking of the perdition of a single soul redeemed by the blood of Christ) the pastor should immediately gird himself for the combat; how much less tolerable is it to see whole households overturned?

*Teaching things which they ought not.* The manner in which they were overturned is described in these words. Hence we may infer how dangerous it is to make even the smallest departure from sound doctrine; for he does not say that the doctrines, by which they overturned the faith of many, were openly wicked; but we may understand by this designation every kind of corruptions, when there is a turning aside from the desire of edification. Thus it is in reality, that, amidst so great weakness of the flesh, we are exceedingly prone to fall; and hence it arises, that Satan easily and speedily destroys, by his ministers, what godly teachers had reared with great and long-continued toil.

He next points out the source of the evil, a desire of *dishonest gain*; by which He reminds us how destructive a plague greed is in teachers; for, as soon as they give themselves up to the pursuit of gain, they must labor to obtain the favor and approval of men. This is quickly followed by the corruption of pure doctrine. [These false pastors give the people what they want, based on public opinion polls.]

And so it is today, that the time has come when the majority inside and outside the Christian churches “will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they [have heaped] up for themselves teachers; and they [have turned] their ears away from the truth, and [have] turned aside to fables” (2 Timothy 4:3-4). Human interest stories, fictional tales of C.S. Lewis, Tolkien, and other religious authors have replaced the preaching of sound doctrine in many churches and seminaries in our day. The audience wants to hear captivating stories; the word of God is not enough for them; and now the preachers, pastors, and teachers give the people the fables for which they yearn. “Doctrine divides, but love unites.” “Give us a good story.” “Give us showy, glitzy, ceremonial worship.”

In Paul’s day, it was chiefly the Jews that were perpetuating false theology, seeking to bind the consciences of men to their legalistic beliefs. Today, the apostasy is far broader, and all types of people are seeking to overthrow the sound doctrine and true worship of Christ’s Church, seeking to bring the bride of Christ into bondage to a works righteous, manmade religion, founded upon human writings, manmade tradition, and manmade worship.

### **Colossians 3:10-11**

What did Paul mean in Colossians 3:10-11, when he taught that in Christ Jesus, in the Christian church, “there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave *nor* free, but Christ *is* all and in all”? Colossians 3:11 should serve as a thunderbolt to awaken people to the truth of the new covenant: in the church of Christ, ethnic and socioeconomic divisions and hostilities should cease to exist. Are you an ethnic Greek, Jew, Italian, or Mexican? In Christ, you are a Christian. Are you a physically circumcised or not a circumcised man? That doesn’t matter; you are a Christian, and circumcision is now irrelevant. Are you poor or part of a disfavored social or ethnic group? There is no such status in Christ; the church is to embrace you equally. Of course, Christianity should civilize the barbarian, provide literacy to the illiterate, and provide maturity to the immature. But the point is that in Christ we are one despite our differences.

Even more broadly than circumcision, Paul has in mind all the ceremonial laws of the old covenant (e.g., dietary laws, holy days and seasons) and the traditions of men, as he has spoken of all these in Colossians, chapter 2. John Calvin comments,

Paul has added this intentionally, that he may again draw the Colossians away from ceremonies. For the meaning of the statement is this, that Christian perfection does not stand in need of those outward observances, no, even more, that they are things that are altogether at variance with perfection. For under the distinction of *circumcision* and *uncircumcision*, of *Jew* and *Greek*, he includes, by *synecdoche* [a figure of speech in which a part is taken for the whole], all outward things.

Christ alone holds . . . the beginning and the end. By *Christ*, he means the spiritual righteousness of Christ, which puts an end to ceremonies, as we have formerly seen. They are, therefore, superfluous in a state of true perfection, no, even more, they ought

to have no place [in Christ's church], inasmuch as injustice would otherwise be done to Christ, as though it were necessary to call in those helps for making up His deficiencies.

### Philippians 3:2-3

In Philippians 3:2-3, Paul adds a warning, consistent with what he has elsewhere taught: "Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the mutilation! For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh."

Paul refers to those who sought to impose circumcision on God's people as "the mutilation." These false teachers were obsessed with the outward rite of circumcision. In conjunction with proclaiming a works-righteous, merit-based religion, they sought to impose circumcision on the adult Gentile males (and their sons) who were converting in large numbers to Christianity from among the nations. All this they did so that they could "boast in their flesh" (Gal. 6:13). Paul stood as a true prophet to warn the churches to beware of these mutilators of the flesh. They were distorting the true gospel of Christ. For added emphasis, Paul warns the church in Philippi three times to "beware" of these false teachers. Paul warns Gentile male converts that they need not submit to the mutilation, neither they nor their sons.

The true circumcision, Paul says, is those who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and place their trust in Christ alone by faith alone, not those who trust in their physical circumcision. John Calvin comments,

We are the true seed of Abraham, and heirs of the [covenant] which was confirmed by the sign of circumcision. For the true circumcision is *of the spirit* and *not of the letter*, inward, and situated in the heart, not visible according to the flesh (Romans 2:29). By *spiritual worship* he means that which is recommended to us in the gospel, and consists of confidence in God, and invocation of Him, self-renunciation, and a pure conscience. We must supply an antithesis, for he censures, on the other hand, legal worship [i.e., the ceremonial worship of the Old Testament law], which was exclusively pressed on them by the false Apostles. In essence, he is saying, "They command that God should be worshipped with outward observances, and because they observe the ceremonies of the law, they boast on false grounds that they are the people of God; but we are the truly circumcised, who worship God in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23).

But here some one will ask, whether *truth excludes* the sacraments, for the same thing might be said as to Baptism and the Lord's Supper. I answer, that this principle must always be kept in view, that figures were abolished by the advent of Christ, and that circumcision gave way to baptism. It follows, also, from this principle, that **the pure and genuine worship of God is free from the legal ceremonies, and that believers have the true circumcision without any figure** [i.e., without physical circumcision].

We must always keep in view the antithesis. "We deal with the reality, while they rest in the symbols; we deal with the substance, while they look to the shadows." . . . *We have no confidence in the flesh*. For under the term *flesh* he includes everything of an external kind in which an individual is prepared to glory, as will appear from the context, or, to express it in fewer words, he gives the name of *flesh* to everything that is apart from Christ. He thus reproveth, and in no slight manner, the perverse zealots of the law, because, not satisfied with Christ, they have recourse to grounds of glorying apart from Him. . . .

### Colossians 2:11-12

The final New Testament passage for us to consider is Colossians 2:11-12. This passage is a pivotal one for rightly understanding the close relationship between circumcision under the old covenant and water baptism under the new covenant. Here Paul relates their spiritual counterparts, spiritual circumcision (“the circumcision made without hands”) with spiritual baptism. In Colossians 2:11-12 Paul writes,

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.

John Calvin comments,

From this it appears, that Paul has a controversy with the false apostles, who mixed the law with the gospel, and by that means made Christ have, as it were, two faces. He specifies, however, one instance by way of example. **He proves that the circumcision of Moses is not merely unnecessary, but is opposed to Christ, because it destroys the spiritual *circumcision of Christ*.** For circumcision was given to the Fathers that it might be the figure of a thing that was absent: those, **therefore, who retain that figure after Christ’s advent, deny the accomplishment of what it prefigures.**

Let us, therefore, bear in mind that outward *circumcision* is here compared with spiritual, just as a figure with the reality. The figure is of a thing that is absent: hence it puts away the presence of the reality. What Paul contends for is this—that, **inasmuch as what was shadowed forth by a *circumcision made with hands*, has been completed in Christ, there is now no fruit or advantage from it.** Hence he says, that the circumcision which is made in the heart is the *circumcision of Christ*, and that, on this account, that which is outward is not now required, because, where the reality exists, that shadowy emblem vanishes, inasmuch as it has no place except in the absence of the reality. . . .

The *body of the sins of the flesh*, therefore, is the *old man with his deeds*; only, there is a difference in the manner of expression, for here he expresses more properly the mass of vices which proceed from corrupt nature. He says that we obtain this through Christ, so that unquestionably our entire regeneration is His benefit. **It is Christ that circumcises the foreskin of our heart**, or, in other words, mortifies all the lusts of the flesh, not with the *hand*, but by His Spirit. Hence there is in Him the reality of the figure.

*Buried with Him, in baptism.* He explains still more clearly **the manner of spiritual circumcision**—because, being *buried with Christ*, we are partakers of His death. He expressly declares that we obtain this by means of baptism, that it may be the more clearly apparent that **there is no advantage from circumcision under the reign of Christ.** For some one might otherwise object: “Why do you abolish circumcision on this pretext—that its accomplishment is in Christ? Was not Abraham, also, circumcised spiritually, and yet this did not hinder the adding of the sign to the reality? *Outward* circumcision, therefore, is not superfluous, although that which is *inward* is conferred by Christ.”

Paul anticipates an objection of this kind, by making mention of baptism. **Christ, he says, accomplishes in us spiritual circumcision**, not through means of that ancient sign, which was in force under Moses, but **by baptism. Baptism, therefore, is a sign of the thing that is presented to us, which while absent was prefigured by circumcision.**

When Paul says that we are *buried with Christ*, this means more than that we are *crucified* with Him; for burial expresses a continued process of mortification. When he says, that this is done through means of baptism, as he says also in Romans 6:4, he speaks in his usual manner, ascribing efficacy to the sacrament, that it may not fruitlessly signify what does not exist. By baptism, therefore, we are *buried with Christ*, because Christ does at the same time accomplish efficaciously that mortification, which he there represents, that the reality may be conjoined with the sign.

*In which also you are risen. He magnifies the grace which we obtain in Christ, as being greatly superior to circumcision.* “We are not only,” says he, “ingrafted into Christ’s death, but we also rise to newness of life:” **hence the more injury is done to Christ by those who endeavor to bring us back to circumcision.** He adds, *by faith*, for unquestionably it is by it that we receive what is presented to us in baptism. But what *faith*? That of His *efficacy* or *operation*, by which he means, that faith is founded on the power of God. As, however, faith does not wander in a confused and undefined contemplation, as they speak, of divine power, he intimates what *efficacy* it ought to have in view—that by which *God raised Christ from the dead*. He takes this, however, for granted, that, inasmuch as it is impossible that believers should be severed from their head, the same power of God, which showed itself in Christ, is diffused among them all in common.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

God instituted circumcision as the old covenant sign of God’s everlasting covenant of grace which He made with Abraham. Up until Christ, circumcision served as a sacrament, a holy ordinance, of the Jewish church, to distinguish those who were followers of the covenant Lord from the pagan, Gentile world that did not know Christ. Circumcision served as a symbol of purification, cleansing, the mortification of the flesh, and faith. It symbolized the removal of man’s defilement. And yet from Abraham’s time to Jesus’ to Paul’s, it was misunderstood by the majority of the Jews. The church degenerated and so did its understanding of circumcision. The Jews became known as those of “the circumcision.” While this peculiar rite of circumcision became a distinguishing characteristic of the Jewish people, unfortunately, for a majority of the people, its meaning was only “skin deep.” The people were stiff-necked, prideful, arrogant, and uncircumcised in heart. They were not true followers of the one, true Lord. They trusted in their own self-righteousness, their law keeping, and their circumcision to merit God’s favor. Yet, God does not accept such works righteousness; to merit God’s favor a man would have to be perfect, and Jesus is the only man who ever was sinless. It is only by trusting in His works, in His merits; by denying yourself, taking up your cross, and following Him; by believing in Christ and His cross work alone as your only hope for salvation, that you can be saved. We are justified by faith, apart from the works of the law (Galatians 2:16). God “made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21). When we are justified, our sins are imputed (transferred) to Christ’s account, and His perfect righteousness is imputed to us.

As we just saw from Paul's exposition in Colossians 2, baptism has replaced circumcision as the outward sign of the everlasting covenant made with Abraham. Under the old covenant, the sign was circumcision. Under the new covenant, the sign is water baptism.

The new covenant sign of entrance into the covenant community is water baptism, which is a far more appropriate sign for New Testament worship. Old covenant worship was more visual and fleshly: the sacrifice of animals, the musical instruments, the ornate beauty of the tabernacle and temple, the observance of religious holidays and seasons, the intricate clothing of the priests, and the cutting off of the foreskins of boys and men.

New covenant worship lacks ceremony and is far more simple: the reading and preaching of the Word of God, the singing of psalms, prayer, baptism by water, and the Lord's Supper, among other things.

Circumcision is still very relevant for Christians today. All Christians have been spiritually circumcised by Christ (Colossians 2); therefore, it is imperative that we rightly understand the meaning and purpose of circumcision, so that we understand Christ's work in making us a new creation in Him.

But what about physical circumcision? As Paul repeatedly teaches and John Calvin helped us further consider, physical circumcision was abolished at the coming of Christ. It no longer has any spiritual meaning or value. In fact, as Calvin noted above, those who attribute spiritual meaning to circumcision today destroy the spiritual circumcision of Christ and deny that Christ fulfilled the law of circumcision.

The Bible never teaches that it is a sin to be circumcised or to circumcise your son for medical reasons. If there are compelling medical reasons that necessitate a circumcision, then you have the liberty to have this procedure performed. However, Christian boys and men should not be circumcised for religious reasons. If a man chooses to be circumcised for other non-religious (i.e., cultural) reasons, he has that liberty, but he never should feel compelled to do so. He also should keep in mind the principle that Christians are not to be conformed to this world but transformed by the renewing of their minds by God's word (Romans 12:1-2). While Paul had Timothy circumcised as a result of the weakness of the Jews of his day, surely the doctrine of Christian maturity would suggest strongly that he did not intend for the church to submit to the consciences of the weak for the long term; by doing so, it would seem that everyone would once again be under the bondage of circumcision.

No one has the right to impose circumcision on the males of Christ's church, as Paul repeatedly warns that this amounts to legalism. Christ has set us free from the old covenant ceremonial law, with its ceremonial worship, its dietary laws, its religious clothing, its religious holidays and seasons, and its observance of circumcision and the Passover. To continue to observe these things is to deny the importance of who Christ is and what He did. Yet, even so, Paul encouraged the early church to bear with the weaker brethren, raised in Judaism since childhood, who still felt bound by their conscience to retain some of these things (Romans 14). And, yet, at the same time, they were forbidden from imposing their weakness on the rest of Christ's church.

Since baptism has replaced circumcision for the Christian, we need to heed the same warnings from Scripture that were given to the Jews regarding their circumcision. Do not trust in your infant or adult baptism to save you; do not trust in a certificate of baptism given to you by a church; baptize your hearts! You need to be sprinkled with the blood of the Lamb. You need to

be cleansed and purified spiritually, in your heart, by Christ's Spirit. You need to be baptized by the Holy Spirit, regenerated, and born again. Jesus said, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Don't be known as people of "the baptism," be known as those who are Christians, those who have been baptized by the Holy Spirit. Circumcise your heart; be baptized in the Spirit; be born again. How do you do this?

Paul tells us clearly how we are saved:

"not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior" (Titus 3:5-6).

It is not by our good works that we are saved. No, it is by God's sovereign mercy alone that He chooses us, He saves us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He pours out on us through Christ.

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