

## THE TRUE CIRCUMCISION

In Romans 2:17-29 Paul took the "Jew" of that time to task on three points, three points that they counted on to save them...

1. He dealt with their standing as Jews: "You are called a Jew ... and make your boast in God" (Romans 2:17).
2. He dealt with their Law, the Torah: "You are called a Jew and rest on the law" (Romans 2:17).
3. He dealt with their works, circumcision being his example: "Circumcision is indeed profitable" (Romans 2:25).

Paul confronted these particulars because the Jews boasted about who they were, what they had, and what they did. The purpose of this article is to consider these points in light of how they apply to us today respecting our standing, our law, and our works.

### Boasting in One's Standing (Romans 2:17-20)

History has shown time after time how the Jews rejected and rebelled against God. Being called a "Jew," then, was actually nothing to be proud of. In present-day application, the question for us is, "How do we respond to who we are?" The Jews responded with arrogance and haughtiness, and they were condemned because of it. The same applies to anyone called a "Christian," for it means nothing to be called "Christians" if we do not manifest humility, love, and service.

Many times for the Jews, having God's law was to no avail. In present-day application, "What do we do with what we have?" The Jews were guilty of hearing and not doing, for Paul said, "Not hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified" (Romans 2:13). Christians today are blessed with having the truth revealed in the completed New Testament, but this is advantageous only if we are doers—not merely hearers.

Circumcision for many Jews was a mere ritual. In present-day application, "Why do we do what we do?" It seemed that the Jews received some personal glory from carrying out works of the Law. What about Christians today since we are not under the Old Law? The New Testament acts of obedience such as baptism are nothing for us to glory in either. If the motive is not to glorify God, our works are dead.

### Circumcision that Is Uncircumcision (Romans 2:25)

What was it that Jews claimed? "Oh, but we're of the circumcision!" They placed great stock in that. Charles Hodge quoted Rabbi Menachen as saying, "Our Rabbins have said that no circumcised man will see Hell." What did they mean by that? It almost sounds like the modern-day "once saved, always saved" doctrine. One thing that should be recognized here is that Paul did not criticize the importance of circumcision for the Jew under the Law, rather he desired them to know that it was only profitable if he kept the Law—and that meant keeping it to the letter, obeying it in every detail. However, fleshly circumcision under the New Covenant is completely immaterial: "In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation" (Galatians 6:15). Paul was putting himself in danger when he taught this doctrine, because Jews tended to become very irritated with anyone who would presume to say that one could be saved without being circumcised.

When Paul was evidently attempting to get the Galatians to realize that there were false teachers teaching that it was absolutely necessary to be circumcised, he wrote, "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 to whole law. You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love" (Galatians 5:2-6).

If the Jew was a transgressor of God's Law, his circumcision was worthless. Apparently, Paul was speaking of the Jew whose life was characterized by sin rather than obedience. There is no good in having a covenant if one is bent on violating its conditions! Although circumcision was a sign and seal of God's old covenant, it was the covenant itself which was the most important thing, not the sign. A good modern example of this can be found in marriage: the ring is only a symbol—the vows or the covenant are what are important. The ring and the marriage certificate are only good as long as the ones involved are faithful; if that marriage vow is broken, the ring and the marriage certificate are virtually meaningless.

### **Uncircumcision that Is Circumcision (Romans 2:26)**

"The uncircumcision" referred to those who were not circumcised and who Jews considered to be "heathens." However, Paul did speak of "an uncircumcised man who keeps the righteousness of the Law" of Moses. Normally, one would not suppose that a heathen would understand the requirements of the Law, but it appears that Paul was saying that one could understand and obey them. Paul rhetorically asked of such a person, "Shall not his uncircumcision be counted for circumcision?" Yes! Let us splice this with his earlier words: "When Gentiles (heathen), who do not have the Law, by nature do the things contained in the Law, these, although not having the Law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the Law written in their hearts" (Romans 2:14-15a). The Gentiles had not been given the promise of Abraham, the Law of Moses, or the covenant of circumcision that Jews held so highly; nevertheless, when they did what the Law prescribed as right, they were counted by God as if they had been circumcised (or as if they were Jews). What strong language for a Jew to swallow!

Paul continued to rhetorically ask, "Will not the physically uncircumcised, if he fulfills the law, judge you, who, even with your written code and circumcision, are transgressors of the Law" (Romans 2:27)? Yes! What Paul meant here is that the behavior of the uncircumcised in obeying the Law condemned the Jew who was disobedient to the Law that he was covenanted to through circumcision. The Gentile who was godly and lived a moral and reverent life stood higher in God's sight than the Jew who was rebellious and disobedient: the life of the obedient "dog" was a judgment or condemnation against the unfaithful Jew in passing judgment by means of contrast. Relatedly Paul wrote, "You are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for, you who judge practice the same things.... And, do you think his, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God? ... You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? You who say, 'Do not commit adultery,' do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law" (Romans 2:1, 3, & 21-23).

We can easily perceive, then, the sad fact that good people who have not been admitted into the new covenant through baptism are better off in God's sight than those who have been admitted into the covenant yet have lives marked by rebellion. Peter wrote along these lines, saying, "If, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning. For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them" (Second Peter 2:20-21).

### **The Genuine Jew (Romans 2:28)**

Just because someone is a descendant of Abraham, just because he is circumcised and thereby covenanted to Moses' Law, and just because he wears the title of "Jew" does not mean that he possesses the true character or spirit required of the genuine Jew. That circumcision which is externally performed does not make someone a genuine Jew! However, Paul revealed what the real Jew is: "He is a Jew who is one inwardly and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit and not in the letter, whose praise is not from men, but from God" (Romans 2:20).

So what exactly is a genuine Jew? (The present tense has been reverted to here because, as will be made clear momentarily, Paul was speaking figuratively of Christians.) The genuine Jew is someone

who is part of a family that has been separated as a special people, not a people who merely execute certain external observances, but who are holy in heart and life: Peter wrote to some of God's new covenant people saying, "You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people" (First Peter 2:9). The genuine Jew is one who has been circumcised in heart: Paul wrote, "In [Jesus] 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. And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses" (Colossians 2:11-13).

The design of circumcision was to be a sign of separation from the heathen world. This design was for the cutting off of everything which was offensive to God, the forsaking of all sins; and this was the work of the heart. This design was often stated and enforced in the Old Law. For example, "Circumcise, therefore, the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiff-necked" (Deuteronomy 10:16). Again, "Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, and take away the foreskins of your heart, you men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, lest My fury come forth like fire and burn that none can quench it, because of the evil of your doings" (Jeremiah 4:4). Later Paul said, "They are not all Israel who are of Israel" (Romans 9:6). (This is where it is affirmed that when Paul spoke of the genuine Jew he was speaking of Christians.)

Oh yes, a person who is "of Israel" is a Jew all right (nationally speaking), but the point Paul was making is that he is not God's Jew: it takes more than the flesh to make one a Jew who stands approved in God's sight. What more does it require? It takes walking "in the steps of the faith our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised" (Romans 4:12b). Paul also wrote, "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For, as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.... And, if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:26-29).

Notice back in Romans 2 that verse 28 presents the negative side, while verse 29 presents the same truth positively. Furthermore, this is not a new truth which was revealed for the first time by Paul: this was true under the Old Law as well. Ever since Adam and Eve, it has always taken, and continues to take, heart-filled, spiritual service to be acceptable. Those who merely follow the form of godliness and go through the motions of religion have never been pleasing.

Paul told some Gentile Christians that they were once aliens, but they had been brought near to God by Christ's blood. The Lord broke down the wall between Jew and Gentile, making us all, who are in Him, one (Ephesians 2:11-22), because whether one is a Jew or a Gentile is no longer of consequence (Galatians 3:28). Paul further declared, "We are the circumcision [1] who worship God in the Spirit, [2] [who] rejoice in Christ Jesus, and [3] [who] have no confidence in the flesh [that is, in our standing, our law, or our works]" (Philippians 3:3).

## Lessons Learned

1. It is not enough to be properly designated. In the Old Testament, we learn that the Jews were God's special people, but today Christians are His special people. What we must do is make sure that the product corresponds with the label: if we are going to be Christians, the lives we live must be Christ-like.
2. Membership with the right group does not guarantee salvation; we must follow the demands of Second Peter 1:5-11.
3. We learned that knowledge of the truth does not guarantee our salvation. We can know all there is to know about the truth, but if we do not obey it, we certainly do not have salvation. Paul asked, "Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin to death, or of obedience to righteousness" (Romans 6:16)?

4. We learned that following the external forms of religion does not guarantee we are righteous either: Jesus said, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For, you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Matthew 23:27-28).

[Dewey G. Denton, Jr., 1987.]

[Adapted/Revised by Tony E. Denton, Oct. 1988.]