

Circumcision

Under the New Covenant

*Compiled by Rachel Cory-Kuehl, March 9, 2014
Scripture is from New King James Version unless otherwise noted.*

1 Corinthians 7:18-20 “Was anyone called while circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Was anyone called while uncircumcised? Let him not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God is what matters. Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called.”

PETER MEETS CORNELIUS (Acts Chapters 10 and 11)

Peter is praying on the roof of Simon’s house at Joppa. He receives a vision from the LORD. A sheet is lowered holding all sorts of “unclean” animals, birds and creeping things. “Rise, Peter; kill and eat.” Peter objects strenuously, “No so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean.”

A voice spoke to Peter again, “What God has cleansed you must not call common.” This was repeated three times, before the sheet disappeared up into heaven. While Peter was wondering what the vision meant, the servants of Cornelius called out from the gate, asking whether Simon Peter was lodging there. The Spirit said to him, “behold, three men are seeking you. Arise therefore, go down and go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them.”

The next day Peter with several brethren, accompany the two servants and one soldier of Cornelius to Caesarea. Cornelius is a Roman, a centurion of the Italian Regiment. He has been seeking the true God, and the day before Peter received the vision with the sheet, an angel had appeared to Cornelius. “Send men to Joppa, and send for Simon whose surname is Peter.” “He will tell you what you must do.”

When he arrives at the home of Cornelius, Peter says “You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. **But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean.**” So THAT was the gist of the vision with the sheet. *It wasn’t about food.* It was about men.

Let’s detour for just a moment to look at a few of those “laws” forbidding the association of Israelites with the uncircumcised.

Exodus 34:12 “Take heed to yourself, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land where you are going, lest it be a snare in your midst.” (See also Exo 23:31-32.)

To share a meal with another *implied* covenant. In the Ancient Middle East you would never share the salt with someone you did not trust. To do so meant that you could not henceforth seek to harm that person. It was called a “covenant of salt”. (*“The Salt Covenant”, by H. Clay Trumbull, Impact Christian Books, Inc. 1999*) Most interesting - that every sacrifice to Yahweh was to be “salted with salt”.

Deuteronomy 7:3-4 “Nor shall you make marriages with them. You shall not give your daughter to their son, nor take their daughter for your son.”

Solomon blew-it big with this one. He made hundreds of “marriages” for political reasons, and his “wives” brought their pagan gods with them, right into the heart of Jerusalem. The decline of Israel began with him.

Ezekiel 44:9 “Thus says the Lord GOD: ‘No foreigner, uncircumcised in heart or uncircumcised in flesh, shall enter My sanctuary, including any foreigner who is among the children of Israel.’”

After the Greeks desecrated the Temple, a defensive wall was built to keep Gentiles OUT. By the time of Christ, King Herod had built another wall outside of the first one, making the “court of the Gentiles”. Signs were posted warning that any Gentile who passed through the gate into sacred Temple ground would be summarily executed. The Temple guard could not know the heart, so they focused on the flesh.

Ezra 9:12 “Now therefore, do not give your daughters as wives for their sons, nor take their daughters to your sons; and never seek their peace or prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good of the land, and leave it as an inheritance to your children forever.”

Back to our story of Peter and Cornelius:

Almost as soon of Peter tells the household of Cornelius about Jesus of Nazareth, the Holy Spirit is poured out upon “all those who heard the word”. Peter and all of those who had come with him “*were astonished*, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the [uncircumcised] Gentiles also.” Peter commanded that they be baptized in water, in the name of Yeshua Messiah. He did NOT demand they be circumcised.

The apostles and brethren in Judea heard about all of this, and “when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those of the circumcision contended with him.” You ate with them!!! - with uncircumcised men. That’s against the law! So Peter told the whole story from the beginning. “Who was I that I could withstand God?” Peter asked.

From this story we would gather that physical circumcision was NOT necessary before water baptism or the receipt of the Holy Spirit of God with His gifts.

Acts 1:5 [Jesus said] “for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

Acts 2:38 [On the Day of Pentecost] “Then Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’”

In the meantime: Saul had an encounter with the risen Christ on the Damascus road. He then began to preach Christ in every synagogue, and had to escape for his life. He fled into Arabia for 3 years. Then he visited Jerusalem for 15 days and met with Peter and James. Then it was back to Syria and Cilicia for 14 more years.

After the death of Stephen, many who believed in Jesus fled Jerusalem and Judea. But where ever they went, they told the good news of the risen Christ. When they came to Antioch, they were preaching the word only to Jews, but then some began preaching to the Hellenists, “and the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord” (*Acts 11:20-21*). The council at Jerusalem heard about this, and sent out Barnabas. And Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul. He brought Saul to Antioch to work with him, building up the church there. It was at Antioch that Saul and Barnabas were “called” to their first missionary journey. And that is where the next part of our story begins.

NOTE: Paul is Greek for the Hebrew Shaul (Saul). It is the SAME name.

Acts 15:1 “And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’”

These men from Judea were NOT sent by James or by the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:24).

Acts 15:2 “Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders about this question.”

Acts 15:5 [At the council meeting] “But 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.’”

THE LETTER FROM THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL

Acts 15:14 “Since we [the Jerusalem Council] 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 ...” (Also Acts 15:24).

The whole dispute about circumcision was a dispute about HOW to induct Gentile converts into “the commonwealth of Israel” (*Eph. 2:12*).

The believing Pharisees were teaching that every Gentile convert must be circumcised and take a vow to keep ALL of the Torah, including the offering of animal sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem, including all of the added laws called the “Oral Torah”. It was NOT just about circumcision.

Most folks do not realize that a person of another nation *could* come under the Sinai Covenant. They simply had to be circumcised, and take a vow to keep The Law - all of it - including the sacrifice of animals at the Temple, and the Oral Torah of the Pharisees.

Under the First Covenant, only men who were circumcised could partake of the Passover meal (*Exo. 12:48*). It was unlawful for an Israelite to enter into any covenant with an uncircumcised man (*Exo. 23:32, Deut. 7:2*). From this had arisen the “law” that the circumcised were not to “eat with” the uncircumcised - because this implied covenant (especially if they shared the salt). An Israelite was not to give his daughter in marriage to an uncircumcised man (*Gen. 34:14*).

Exodus 12:48 “And when a stranger dwells with you and wants to keep the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it; and he shall be as a native of the land. For no uncircumcised person shall eat it.”

Paul and Barnabas (with Titus) traveled to Jerusalem for the Council meeting to debate THIS issue. **Should physical circumcision be required for the new converts from the Gentiles?** At the conclusion of the meeting, the council issued a letter to be sent to “the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia”. These were areas - not individual congregations. In other words - all the places where Paul had so far founded a congregation with believing Gentiles. The Jerusalem Council did NOT require physical circumcision for new converts. Quite the contrary!

Confusion stems from the actions of Paul in circumcising Timothy (*Acts 16:3*). But the passage does not say that Paul did this because the LORD required it. He did this because he wanted to take Timothy with him, to train him for the gospel ministry. He did this to avoid lengthy confrontations with the Jews who were living in the region where he wanted to preach. They knew that Timothy’s father was a Greek but they knew his mother was a Jew, which meant that Timothy would also be considered a Jew. (NOTE: This custom of maternal ancestry, had come about because of all the rape perpetrated by Babylonian, Greek and Roman conquerors.)

The Jews had accused Paul of teaching that Jews should no longer circumcise their infant males (*Acts 21:21*). The charge was false, but Paul wanted to head off criticism based on this issue. If you compare this action of Paul, with his earlier treatment of Titus (who accompanied Paul to Jerusalem for the Council meeting) - you can see that physical circumcision was NOT something Paul believed should be required of Gentile converts. Paul called Titus, “a true son in our common faith” (*Titus 1:4*).

Galatians 2:1,3 “Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and also took Titus with me.” “Yet not even Titus who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised.”

Acts 16:3 [Concerning Timothy] Paul wanted to have him go on with him. And he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in that region, for they all knew that his father was Greek.” [But his mother was a Jew.]

NOTE: The letter from the Jerusalem Council was sent only to congregations with large numbers from the Gentile converts, who were uncircumcised. It was not circulated throughout Judea, to congregations made up mostly of Jews. If this letter was primarily to tell Jews that the Law concerning circumcision was now to be considered non-binding for Jews, why send it only to uncircumcised Gentiles? I personally do not buy the argument that only the Oral Law was now to be considered obsolete - that this was the “unbearable yoke”. But that is the subject of another study.

Galatians 2:7 “But on the contrary, when they saw that the gospel for the uncircumcised had been committed to me, as the gospel for the circumcised was to Peter.”

Galatians 2:9 “and when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that had been given to me, they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.”

THE LETTER TO THE GALATIANS

Galatians is the first letter we have, written by Paul to congregations he founded, and he used a lot of space in that letter to deal with the issue of circumcision.

I will put the references from Paul’s letters in the order that he is believed to have written them.

Galatians 5:2 “Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing.”

Galatians 5:3 “And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law.”

In the days of Paul, circumcision was only one step in the conversion of a Gentile to Judaism. Circumcision was performed after the man had received at least two years of instruction, and finally had taken an oath to keep ALL of the written Law as well as the Oral Law (traditions) added by the Pharisees.

Galatians 5:6 “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love.”

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.”

Galatians 6:12 “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.”

NOTE: Yes - so called Christians have persecuted Jews. I say “so called” because no true Christian would persecute anyone. But the first century writings make it clear that Jews were first to persecute Christians. They came close to killing Paul several times. The exclusivity of the Jews - rejecting persons of all other nations, caused hatred in return, against the Jews.

Galatians 6:15 “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation.”

Before leaving Galatians, we need to look at what happened when those believing Pharisees (the circumcision party) came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. The text in Galatians says they “came from James” but James makes it clear later, that he did NOT send them. They must have been very influential or powerful men, because Peter feared them, and stopped eating with the uncircumcised converts. Paul writes that “the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy.” Well, Paul let Peter have it! He “withstood him to his face” “before them all” - right in front of everyone. The story is in Galatians Chapter 2.

THE LETTERS TO THE CORINTHIANS

The first and second letters to the Corinthians are the 4th and 5th letters preserved for us, which were written by Paul to congregations which he had visited or founded.

1 Corinthians 7:18-20 “Was anyone called while circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Was anyone called while uncircumcised? Let him not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God is what matters. Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called.”

I will let you make up your own minds, but for me Paul could not have written it any more clearly. Physical circumcision is a non-issue, so far as the kingdom of God is concerned.

THE LETTER TO THE ROMANS

Romans 2:26-29 “Therefore, if an uncircumcised man [a Gentile convert to the gospel] 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?”

If he “keeps the righteous requirements of the law” (love for God and love for fellow men) the uncircumcised man will be regarded as circumcised in the eyes of God. It should be noted that one can keep every one of the Ten Commandments without being physically circumcised - especially if that Law is written on the heart (Romans 2:13-15).

Romans 2:25 “For circumcision is indeed profitable if you keep the law; but if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision.”

No one kept the law perfectly (except Christ), so all would be considered uncircumcised in the eyes of God. Only Christ can circumcise the heart. And one day soon, He will also circumcise our flesh - when we are “changed in a moment”.

Romans 2:28-29 “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.

Romans 3:30 “There is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.”

Both circumcised and uncircumcised are “justified” by faith.

Romans 4:11-12 “And he 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.

Both the circumcised and the uncircumcised must “walk in the steps of faith” as Abraham did. They will be saved - in the SAME way - thru faith.

THE LETTER TO THE COLOSSIANS

The letter to Colosse was written after Paul’s arrest at Jerusalem.

Colossians 2:11 “In Him [in Christ] 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,”

There is a circumcision of the flesh, and there is a circumcision of the heart - and we KNOW which one counts with God. The point is that *we ARE circumcised* - by Christ, when we believe in Him. Physical circumcision was a TYPE. It was a *shadow prophecy* of what Jesus Christ would do for us and in us.

Colossians 3:11 “there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all.”

The circumstances in which you find your physical self - slave or free, male or female, Gentile or Jew, barbarian or Scythian - it just does not matter. The only thing that matters is your faith in Christ as the Son of God, who died for your sins.

THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

Ephesians 2:11-15 “Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh-- who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hand, that at that time you 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.

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace,”

What commandments caused “enmity” (hatred) between Jew and Gentile - circumcised and uncircumcised? Would the commandments not to steal, not to murder, not to dishonor parents, not to commit adultery, not to covet - would those commandments have caused hatred between Jew and Gentile? Not likely. Maybe the commandment not to serve idols? Well - that one did get Paul into a lot of trouble with the ones who made the idols. But that commandment is preserved under the New Covenant. The letter from the Jerusalem Council to the Gentile churches says so. So how could that be one of the commandments that Christ abolished?

The commandments which would cause enmity between Jew and Gentile would be those concerning circumcision - not to enter into any covenant, or even to eat with anyone who is uncircumcised. Peter said, “You know how unlawful it is for a Jew to keep company with or go to one of another nation” (*Acts 10:28*).

The “commandments” which are “abolished” by the death of Christ are those which separated Jew and Gentile - circumcised from uncircumcised.

Yeshua Messiah “is our Passover” and we partake of Him, by faith - whether or not we have been physically circumcised. Yeshua Messiah fulfilled every requirement of the Sinai Covenant. Because of this, He is heir to the promises of that “first Covenant”. He will share His inheritance with His “bride.” We who were never Jews, will partake of that inheritance because we belong to Him.

To “abolish” any commandment given by God, is to “change” the law. We will discuss this “change of the law” in our study titled “One Jot or One Tittle”.

THE LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS

Philippians 3:2-3 “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,”

CROSSING JORDAN - WITH JOSHUA

Joshua 3:15-17 “and as those who bore the ark came to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests who bore the ark dipped in the edge of the water (for the Jordan overflows all its banks during the whole time of harvest), that the waters which came down from upstream stood still, and rose in a heap very far away at Adam, the city that is beside Zaretan. So the waters that went down into the Sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea, failed, and were cut off; and the people crossed over opposite Jericho. Then the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood firm on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan; and all Israel crossed over on dry ground,”

Joshua 5:2-10 “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.

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. Then the LORD said to Joshua, ‘This day I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you.’

Now the children of Israel camped in Gilgal, and kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the month at twilight on the plains of Jericho.”

This story is a prophecy. It is type.

The name Joshua is the same as Yeshua (in Hebrew) or Jesus (in the Greek). We will cross the sky with our Joshua, as it is “rolled up like a scroll” (Isa. 34:4, Rev. 6:14). And He will circumcise our flesh. We will be “changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye”. The old mortal flesh will be gone, and we will receive new spiritual bodies (1Cor. 15:44). Then we will eat of the Passover with Him, in the Kingdom. Jesus said, “With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I say to you, I will no longer eat of it UNTIL it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God” (Luke 22:15-16).

We MUST grasp this concept. Every command given to Israel is a prophecy of Messiah - of what He will do for us and in us. Yes - even the Ten Commandments are a prophecy of the Law that He will write on our hearts (Jer. 31:31, Ezek. 36:26). Everything that happened to Israel is a prophetic type, or a lesson for us in these last days (1Cor. 10:4).

Deuteronomy 30:6 “And 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.”

This is the promise of the LORD to Israel. And it is His promise to us. Study the result of that circumcision. You will love the LORD your God with all your heart.

Ezekiel 44:9 “Thus says the Lord GOD: ‘No foreigner, uncircumcised in heart or uncircumcised in flesh, shall enter My sanctuary, including any foreigner who is among the children of Israel.’”

*Ezekiel’s Temple will be the Temple of Messiah’s reign on the earth, during the 8th millennium. I used to wonder what this verse meant. Are we going back to physical circumcision? But then I realized that **Christ will circumcise BOTH flesh and heart**, and we will serve Him as “priests of God and of Christ”.*

Zechariah said it a different way. “There will no longer be a Canaanite in the house of the Lord of hosts” (Zech. 14:21).

Please look at “The 8th Day” studies for more information on the Temple seen by Ezekiel.

CHILD SACRIFICE AND CIRCUMCISION

The study of Ancient Middle Eastern customs is very interesting when studied in light of the laws given to Israel. Israel did not exist in a vacuum. They existed within the greater Ancient Middle East - with all of its customs. The LORD simply adapted many of those customs to fit His needs as He revealed Himself to Abraham and his descendants. We all know about the “Blood Covenant”. Some of us know about the “Threshold Covenant” and the “Covenant of Salt”. I remember the day that I came to realize that every sacrifice was actually a meal with Yahweh. Every sacrifice was to be offered with a grain offering, and a drink offering, and sprinkled with salt - all of the elements of a “covenant meal”.

One custom in many cultures throughout the Ancient Middle East was the sacrifice of sons - especially first born sons, to the god or gods to ensure bountiful harvests or victory in war, or other such “blessings”. (Israel actually fell into this pagan practice for a time.) I believe the LORD adapted this custom to give us a beautiful prophecy. Rather than the life of the infant son, the LORD required a “blood” offering in the form of circumcision. It was considered a “blood sacrifice”. The child was then adopted by Yahweh.

*We pray this study will prove a blessing.
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