

Biblical Circumcision, Spiritual By Pastor Harry

Synopsis

On its own, the physical sign of circumcision is no guarantee of finding favour in the sight of God. It was intended to be the outward sign of inward consecration and should be accompanied by repentance, faith and obedience. Paul stresses that circumcision confers no special privileges upon individuals; it is faith in God, rather than any outward sign, that ensures that believers stand in a right relationship to God.

Physical circumcision has no value without the obedience of the heart

[Dt 30:6](#)

Deuteronomy 30:6 (NASB95) — 6 “Moreover 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, so that you may live.

See also [Dt 10:14–16](#); [Je 4:4](#)

Deuteronomy 10:14–16 (NASB95) — 14 “Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the highest heavens, the earth and all that is in it. **15** “Yet on your fathers did the LORD set His affection to love them, and He chose their descendants after them, even you above all peoples, as it is this day. **16** “So circumcise your heart, and stiffen your neck no longer.

Jeremiah 4:4 (NASB95) — 4 “Circumcise yourselves to the LORD And remove the foreskins of your heart, Men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, Or else My wrath will go forth like fire And burn with none to quench it, Because of the evil of your deeds.”

[Ro 2:28–29](#)

Romans 2:28–29 (NASB95) — 28 For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. **29** But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.

See also [Ro 2:25–27](#); [1 Co 7:19](#)

Romans 2:25–27 (NASB95) — 25 For indeed circumcision is of value if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. **26** So if the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? **27** And he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law,

will he not judge you who though having the letter of the Law and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law?

1 Corinthians 7:19 (NASB95) — 19 Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God.

Circumcision and faith

[Ga 5:6](#)

Galatians 5:6 (NASB95) — 6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love.

See also [Ro 3:30](#)

Romans 3:30 (NASB95) — 30 since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one.

Abraham's righteousness depended on his faith, not on the covenant of circumcision

[Ga 3:6](#); [Ge 15:6](#); [Ro 4:9–12](#)

Galatians 3:6 (NASB95) — 6 Even so Abraham BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.

Genesis 15:6 (NASB95) — 6 Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Romans 4:9–12 (NASB95) — 9 Is this blessing then on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised also? For we say, "FAITH WAS CREDITED TO ABRAHAM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS."
10 How then was it credited? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised; **11** and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them, **12** and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised.

Paul values the law as part of God's plan

[Ro 3:1–2](#)

Romans 3:1–2 (NASB95) — 1 Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision? **2** Great in every respect. First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God.

The sharp debate about circumcision for Christians

The Council of Jerusalem

[Ac 15:1–19](#)

Acts 15:1–19 (NASB95) — **1** Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” **2** And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue. **3** Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren. **4** When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. **5** But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses.” **6** The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. **7** After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. **8** “And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; **9** and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. **10** “Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? **11** “But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.” **12** All the people kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. **13** After they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, “Brethren, listen to me. **14** “Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. **15** “With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written, **16** ‘AFTER THESE THINGS I will return, AND I WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE OF DAVID WHICH HAS FALLEN, AND I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS, AND I WILL RESTORE IT, **17** SO THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD, AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME,’ **18** SAYS THE LORD, WHO MAKES THESE THINGS KNOWN FROM LONG AGO. **19** “Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles,

Jewish Christians in Jerusalem criticise Peter for accepting hospitality from Cornelius and his (uncircumcised) friends

[Ac 11:1–3](#)

Acts 11:1–3 (NASB95) — **1** Now the apostles and the brethren who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. **2** And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those who were circumcised took issue with him, **3** saying, “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.”

God’s acceptance of uncircumcised Gentiles is clear from the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon them

[Ac 10:44–46](#)

Acts 10:44–46 (NASB95) — **44** While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. **45** All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. **46** For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered,

See also [Ac 10:34](#)

Acts 10:34 (NASB95) — **34** Opening his mouth, Peter said: “I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality,

Peter’s misgivings about Gentile believers and the law

[Ga 2:11–16](#) the dispute between Paul and Peter

Galatians 2:11–16 (NASB95) — **11** But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. **12** For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. **13** The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. **14** But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, “If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews? **15** “We are Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles; **16** nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified.

Imposing circumcision upon Gentile Christians denies the freedom of the gospel

[Ga 5:1–6](#) To insist on circumcision is to nullify the work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Galatians 5:1–6 (NASB95) — **1** It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. **2** Behold I, Paul, say to

you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. **3** And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. **4** You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. **5** For we through the Spirit, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness. **6** For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love.

See also [Ga 2:3–5](#); [Ga 3:14](#)

Galatians 2:3–5 (NASB95) — **3** But not even Titus, who was with me, though he was a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised. **4** But it was because of the false brethren secretly brought in, who had sneaked in to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, in order to bring us into bondage. **5** But we did not yield in subjection to them for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel would remain with you.

Galatians 3:14 (NASB95) — **14** in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

“Judaisers” should be resisted

[Ga 5:7–12](#); [Ga 6:12–13](#); [Ga 6:15](#); [Php 3:2–3](#); [Tt 1:10–11](#)

Galatians 5:7–12 (NASB95) — **7** You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth? **8** This persuasion did not come from Him who calls you. **9** A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough. **10** I have confidence in you in the Lord that you will adopt no other view; but the one who is disturbing you will bear his judgment, whoever he is. **11** But I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? Then the stumbling block of the cross has been abolished. **12** I wish that those who are troubling you would even mutilate themselves.

Galatians 6:12–13 (NASB95) — **12** Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh try to compel you to be circumcised, simply so that they will not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. **13** For those who are circumcised do not even keep the Law themselves, but they desire to have you circumcised so that they may boast in your flesh.

Galatians 6:15 (NASB95) — **15** For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.

Philippians 3:2–3 (NASB95) — **2** Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision; **3** for we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh,

Titus 1:10–11 (NASB95) — 10 For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, **11** who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach for the sake of sordid gain.

To be “in Christ” is to be spiritually circumcised

[Col 2:11–12](#)

Colossians 2:11–12 (NASB95) — 11 and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; **12** having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.

See also [Col 3:11](#)

Colossians 3:11 (NASB95) — 11 a renewal in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all.

Paul’s confidence in Jesus Christ

[Php 3:4–9](#)

Philippians 3:4–9 (NASB95) — 4 although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: **5** circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; **6** as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless. **7** But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. **8** More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, **9** and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith,

The relationship between baptism and circumcision in the NT

[Col 2:11–13](#) Both circumcision and baptism may each be described as a “seal”. Baptism signifies entry into the new covenant in the same way that circumcision marked initiation into the old; [Ro 4:11](#) Abraham the father of all believers; [2 Co 1:21–22](#); [Eph 1:13](#)

Colossians 2:11–13 (NASB95) — **11** and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; **12** having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. **13** When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions,

Romans 4:11 (NASB95) — **11** and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them,

2 Corinthians 1:21–22 (NASB95) — **21** Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and anointed us is God, **22** who also sealed us and gave us the Spirit in our hearts as a pledge.

Ephesians 1:13 (NASB95) — **13** In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise,