

- *Circumcision a seal, a symbol and a summons*

### 1. Trust in religious symbols is a delusion

- *Misunderstood by the average Jew of Paul's day*

- *A similar mistake is made today with the Lord's supper and baptism*

- *A gentile who keeps the law has the spiritual reality but not the symbol*

- *The believer who walks by the Holy Spirit fulfils the righteous requirements of the law*

Now Paul brings in the question of circumcision. <sup>25</sup>*For circumcision is indeed of value if you keep the law, but if you are a transgressor of the law your circumcision has become un-circumcision.* Originally circumcision **sealed** Abraham's faith as the only way of being righteous before God. It **symbolized** Abraham's new nature, and it **summoned** Abraham to obedience.

1. **Trust in religious symbols is a delusion.** The average Jew of Paul's day misunderstood and misused circumcision. For him it spoke of Jewish nationality. It was the symbol of belonging to the people who possessed the law. And it was regarded as a seal of every Jew's salvation. So circumcision was regarded, one might say, as a piece of magic, guaranteeing salvation. But this is wrong. 'For circumcision is indeed of value if you keep the law, but if you are a transgressor of the law your circumcision has become un-circumcision.' Its value is that it points to the way of salvation. It talks about faith, about receiving a new nature, about being enabled by the Spirit to fulfil the law. Taken in this way, circumcision had value. But if the Jew did not learn the **message** of circumcision, and was without the faith that Abraham had, then he did not have the justification and new birth that circumcision points to. Circumcision could help only if it helped to bring a person to faith and obedience.

This is a common mistake in religions of all sorts. People often think something similar with regard to baptism and the Lord's Supper. But religious symbols have no spiritual power in themselves. They mean nothing if the heart is not right.

<sup>26</sup>*If therefore the uncircumcised person keeps the righteous requirements of the law, will not his uncircumcision be reckoned as circumcision?* A gentile who keeps the law has the spiritual reality but not the symbol. He has 'circumcision' as a spiritual experience, but he does not have circumcision as an operation on the body. Paul goes on: <sup>27</sup>*And will not the person who is uncircumcised by nature yet is keeping the law judge you who (while having the letter of the law and circumcision) are a transgressor of the law?* The gentile Christian is circumcised in heart but not in body. He will be in a better position in judgement than the Jew who is circumcised in his body but not in his heart. Again Paul is arguing in terms of principles, but has the gentile Christians in mind. The rest of Romans will make it clear how the gentile can be one who fulfils the law. Gentile Christians are in Paul's mind in Romans 2:7, 10, 12–15, 26–29. Romans 2:26, 27, which speaks of 'keeping' the law, will be explained later in Romans 8:4 and in Romans 13:8–10. Paul will say that the believer who walks by the Holy Spirit fulfils the righteous requirements of the law. He has a 'circumcision made without hands'<sup>1</sup> because the power of sin has been broken in his life. He is not a Jew by earthly nationality but is reckoned by God to be in the community of Abraham's people.

**2. Truly to be a 'child of Abraham' is a matter of being spiritually re-born**

• The outer circumcision is not the final reality; it is only a symbol pointing to it

• Reminders and stimulators of faith

• True conversion begins within

• True salvation – surgery of the heart not the body

• The letter of the law gives information

• The Holy Spirit gives spiritual experience

2. Truly to be a 'child of Abraham' is a matter of being spiritually reborn. Paul goes on: <sup>28</sup>*For he is not a Jew in a visible manner, nor is the circumcision that he has something in the open, in the flesh . . .* The unconverted Jewish people of Paul's day had been through an 'outer' circumcision, a small operation, but they did not have the inner circumcision of the heart. Yet without the inner circumcision of the heart, there is no salvation at all. The outer circumcision is not the final reality; it is only a symbol pointing to it.

The signs and symbols of biblical faith remind us of certain realities and they stimulate faith. Where there is faith, the blessings of God fall down upon us. But those who are merely circumcised have nothing except an empty symbol. The term 'Jew' is a spiritual term more than it is a physical term. Being one of the true people of God is not an external matter. Nationality is irrelevant, and the external sign of circumcision does not do anything in itself. The same principles apply to many external religious matters: church membership, baptism, the Lord's Supper, belonging to a Bible-reading family and so on. None of these things prove that you are saved. True conversion begins within. It is a matter of an inward work of the Holy Spirit bringing you to faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul goes on: <sup>29</sup> . . . *but this person is a Jew in his hidden life, and circumcision is of the heart, in the Spirit and not in the letter. His praise is not from people but from God.* True salvation is not having a circumcised **body**; it is having a circumcised **heart**. It is a matter of God's cutting into our hearts with the surgical knife of his Word. It is when God cuts away our sinful blindness. The foreskin of the heart is removed. God cuts out of our lives domination by our sinfulness. We die to sin; we are raised in Christ. We are God's new creation.

'The letter' is the written instruction of the Mosaic covenant. It is called 'the letter' because it comes to us in written and documentary form. The letter, the written law of God, gives information. The Holy Spirit gives spiritual experience. The true child of God is one 'whose praise is not from people but from God'. Paul is playing on the word 'Jew' here. It sounds similar to the Hebrew word meaning 'praised'<sup>1</sup>. When God circumcises our hearts we are able to live for the praise of God.

<sup>1</sup> see Genesis 29:35; 49:8



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