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## CIRCUMCISION

When Abraham was ninety-nine years old, God appeared to him and made a covenant with him. God said that if Abraham would walk before Him and be perfect (upright) (Genesis 17:1-2), He would make Abraham “the father of many nations” (Genesis 17:4).

God made circumcision the “token of the covenant” that He made with Abraham (Genesis 17:11). Henceforth, every male born into Abraham’s family was to be circumcised when he was eight days old (Genesis 17:12). This included Abraham’s slaves and any foreigners that might be living among them.

That very same day, Abraham circumcised his son Ishmael and every male in his household (Genesis 17:23), and he himself was circumcised (Genesis 17:24). After Isaac was born, Abraham also circumcised him, on the eighth day (Genesis 21:4).

The practice of circumcision has continued in Abraham’s family and has become a symbol of their identity.

### THE TRAGIC INCIDENT WITH DINAH

An incident occurred in the days of Jacob that illustrates how closely Abraham’s descendants held to the custom of circumcision. Jacob’s daughter Dinah went out by herself to visit with local women. Before Dinah returned, she was violated by a man named Shechem, who was the son of the ruler of the Hivite people.

Shechem fell in love with Dinah and asked his father, Hamor, to arrange for Dinah to become his wife. So Hamor went to the sons of Jacob and asked if Dinah might become Shechem’s wife. Hamor also suggested that the two families could be on friendly terms with each other and intermarry with each other. The sons of Jacob, however, were bent on revenge. They had a malicious plan in mind and they said to Hamor,

“We can't do such a thing;  
we can't give our sister to a man  
who is not circumcised.  
That would be a disgrace to us.”

Genesis 34:14 NIV

The sons of Jacob promised Hamor, however, that if all the males among the Hivites would be circumcised, they could give Dinah as a wife for Hamor's son and the two families would become one people. This seemed like a good idea to Hamor and to the Hivites, who had a covetous eye on Jacob's flocks. So every male in the city of the Hivites was circumcised, but before the Hivite men had healed from their circumcision, the sons of Jacob attacked them and killed every one of them. The sons of Jacob then looted the city of the Hivites, taking their women, children, and wealth as plunder.

Jacob was horrified when he heard what his sons had done. He chastised them, saying, "You have brought trouble on me by making me a stench to the Canaanites and Perizzites, the people living in this land. We are few in number, and if they join forces against me and attack me, I and my household will be destroyed" (Genesis 34:30). This sad incident is a blotch on the history of Abraham's descendants, but it shows that the descendants of Abraham were still practicing circumcision at that time.

#### THE CIRCUMCISION OF MOSES' SON

For some unknown reason Moses neglected to circumcise one of his sons. Moses' failure to circumcise his son triggered an incident that took place as Moses was returning to Egypt with his wife, Zipporah, and their two sons.

God met Moses at a certain place and was about to kill him. To save Moses' life, Zipporah took a flint knife and circumcised the boy and touched Moses' feet. Then she said to Moses, "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me" (Exodus 4:25). Although this incident may be difficult to understand, we can, at least, deduce from it that circumcision was still important in Moses' day.

Moses laid down the prescription that all men who partook of the Passover meal should be circumcised, whether they were foreign or native born (Exodus 12:48-49). Otherwise, very little is said concerning circumcision among the laws that Moses gave.

After Joshua had led the descendants of Abraham across the Jordan River and into Canaan, they rested at a place that came to be called Gilgal. It was there that Joshua had all the men circumcised that were born in the wilderness and had not been circumcised (Joshua 5:2-9).

## CIRCUMCISION OF THE HEART IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Moses, being a spiritual-minded man, realized that people should have a commitment to God that went beyond mere circumcision of the flesh. He said to the Israelites,

“Circumcise your hearts, therefore,  
and do not be stiff-necked any longer.”

Deuteronomy 10:16 NIV

Moses later defined what circumcision of the heart meant. He said,

“The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts  
and the hearts of your descendants,  
so that you may love him  
with all your heart and with all your soul,  
and live.”

Deuteronomy 30:6 NIV

This shows that it was already recognized in Old Testament times that physical circumcision was not sufficient to bring God’s blessings upon people. What God desired (and desires) is real commitment. The prophet Jeremiah took up this refrain and added:

“Circumcise yourselves to the LORD,  
circumcise your hearts,  
you men of Judah and people of Jerusalem,  
or my wrath will break out  
and burn like fire  
because of the evil you have done—  
burn with no one to quench it.”

Jeremiah 4:4 NIV

These statements from the Old Testament are forerunners of what the New Testament says regarding circumcision.

## JESUS AND CIRCUMCISION

Jesus had surprisingly little to say about fleshly circumcision, even though He himself was circumcised as a baby (Luke 2:21). There is only

one recorded statement of Jesus concerning circumcision. His statement came as He pointed out that if the eighth day falls on a Sabbath, anyone who circumcises a baby on that day breaks the Sabbath (John 7:22-23). Jesus made this point as a rebuttal to those who criticized Him for healing on the Sabbath.

Jesus' failure to emphasize circumcision (and other aspects of Judaism) did not go unnoticed by his critics. Jesus maintained, however, that He did not come to destroy the Law or the Prophets, "but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17). Jesus knew in which direction the teaching of the Law and the Prophets pointed, and He brought the teaching forward toward its goal.

### SHOULD GENTILES BE CIRCUMCISED?

Not long after Jesus' death, the gospel began to be preached to Gentiles, and a question arose about whether or not Gentiles should be circumcised? Some early Christians, who were of Abraham's lineage, felt that Gentiles should be circumcised; others felt it was not necessary. This issue came to a head among the believers in Christ at Antioch in Syria, where a number of Gentiles had become "Christians" (Acts 11:26).

So the Christians in Antioch decided to send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem in order to confer with the apostles and elders about circumcision. At the conference, the apostle Peter assured the assembled brethren that God had truly "accepted" the Gentiles. Peter said that God had shown His acceptance "by giving the Holy Spirit to them" (Acts 15:8). Peter also reminded the brethren that God had given the Holy Spirit to Gentiles at Cornelius' house (Acts 10:44,46) just as He had previously to believers of Abraham's lineage on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem (Acts 2:2-4).

After several of the brethren at the conference in Jerusalem had spoken, it became apparent that it was not necessary for Gentiles to be circumcised. So they composed a letter to the Gentile churches to that effect.

When the Gentile believers at Antioch and other places heard that circumcision was not necessary they were glad (Acts 15:31).

### CIRCUMCISION IS NOTHING

In his letter to the church in Corinth, the apostle Paul said that each person “should retain the place in life” the Lord had “assigned” to him and to which “God has called him” (1 Corinthians 7:17). He said,

“Was a man already circumcised  
when he was called?  
He should not become uncircumcised.  
Was a man uncircumcised when he was called?  
He should not be circumcised”

1 Corinthians 7:18 NIV

The apostle Paul also said,

“Circumcision is nothing  
and uncircumcision is nothing.  
Keeping God’s commands is what counts.”

1 Corinthians 7:19 NIV

### CIRCUMCISION HAS BEEN SUPERCEDED

The apostle Paul was very specific about the fact that circumcision had been superceded. In his letter to the churches of Galatia, he made it very plain that all had changed since Jesus had come into the world. He said,

“Mark my words!  
I, Paul, tell you  
that if you let yourselves be circumcised,  
Christ will be of no value to you at all.”

Galatians 5:2 NIV

The apostle Paul continued his remarks about circumcision by pointing out that every man who lets himself be circumcised is “obligated to obey the whole law.” His words:

“Again I declare to every man  
who lets himself be circumcised  
that he is obligated to obey the whole law.

Galatians 5:3 NIV

So if Gentiles are circumcised as a religious act, after they have started serving Christ, that would mean that they are entering into an obligation to obey the whole Law of Moses. There would be serious consequences for anyone who did this, as the apostle Paul said:

“You who are trying to be justified by law  
have been alienated from Christ;  
you have fallen away from grace.

Galatians 5:4 NIV

Since no one can be saved without God’s grace, to fall away from grace is a serious matter. The history of the descendants of Abraham demonstrates that no one can be good enough to be saved on the basis of his works. This goes for Abraham, or for Moses, or for any other of the great men and women of old. Even though they were, to a degree, good and holy, they all sinned and fell “short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

To ask whether or not a person should be circumcised misses the main issue. The main issue is the circumcision of the heart. The apostle Paul said,

“Neither circumcision  
nor uncircumcision means anything;  
what counts is a new creation.”

Galatians 6:15 NIV

## THE CIRCUMCISION OF THE HEART IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Those who follow Jesus have a type of circumcision. It is a circumcision that is “not done with hands of men,” but by the power of Christ. This circumcision takes place in baptism. We know this is true, because the apostle Paul said,

“In him you were also circumcised,  
in the putting off of the sinful nature,  
not with a circumcision done by the hands of men  
but with the circumcision done by Christ,  
having been buried with him in baptism  
and raised with him  
through your faith in the power of God,  
who raised him from the dead.  
When you were dead in your

sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature,  
God made you alive with Christ.  
He forgave us all our sins.”

Colossians 2:11-13 NIV

Notice that the apostle Paul did not say that baptism was given to replace circumcision. What he said was that the circumcision that is done by Christ is done “in baptism.”

### ABRAHAM IS THE FATHER OF BELIEVERS

Just as the circumcision of the flesh showed one’s affiliation with the physical family of Abraham, so the circumcision that takes place in baptism shows one’s affiliation with the spiritual family of Abraham. Abraham is just as much a father to those who believe in his son Jesus as he is to his own physical descendants. The apostle Paul said,

“So then, he is the father of all who believe  
but have not been circumcised,  
in order that righteousness might be credited to them.  
And he is also the father of the circumcised  
who not only are circumcised  
but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith  
that our father Abraham had  
before he was circumcised.”

Romans 4:11(b)-12 NIV

### WE ARE THE CIRCUMCISION

The apostle Paul made a further statement that may sound preposterous to those who do not believe in Jesus. Paul claimed that believers in Jesus are the true “circumcision.” He said,

“For it is we who are the circumcision,  
we who worship by the Spirit of God,  
who glory in Christ Jesus,  
and who put no confidence in the flesh--”

Philippians 3:3 NIV

## THOUGHT QUESTIONS:

1. What do you think about what Jacob's sons did to the Hivites? (Genesis chapter 34).
2. Why do you suppose Moses neglected to circumcise his son? (Exodus 4:24-26).
3. Why do you suppose God wanted no uncircumcised men to partake of the Passover meal? (Exodus 12:48-49).
4. How would you describe "circumcision of the heart?"
5. Why do you think Jesus had so little to say about circumcision?
6. Would it be wrong for a Christian man of Gentile background to get circumcised for religious reasons? Why?
7. What do you think about circumcising baby boys for health reasons (but not for religious reasons)?
8. Please, explain how circumcision of the heart takes place in baptism.