

True Circumcision

"... for we are the circumcision who worship by the Spirit of God, and glory in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh ..." (Phil. 3:3). Paul had warned the Philippians to "beware of the concision," a clear, undeniable sarcasm of unbelieving Jews. The Jews practiced circumcision and had, even before the time of Paul's writings. They were entering into a third millennium of it. But Paul calls the Jewish practice a rite of concision, or mutilation. To the Jew, all who came to God must accept circumcision, they did this, glorying in the flesh of those who among the Gentiles accepted the rite. Even among Christians, there were some who sought to bind circumcision and the keeping of the law upon Gentile believers. This provoked the greatest doctrinal dispute among Christians in the early half of the first century. Some never gave up their contentions, drifting away from the atoning sacrifice of Jesus. They did this despite the fact that the apostles had unanimously determined that circumcision was not to be bound upon Gentile believers, as well as the frequent declarations of its non-essentiality by Paul (cf. Acts 15; Gal. 5:4).

Of course, circumcision practiced as a custom or national identity was not wrong. Paul circumcised Timothy before taking him in his company on his second journey (Acts 16:3). He stated that "*circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing; but the keeping of the commandments of God*" (1 Cor. 7:19). He wrote essentially the same to Galatians: "*For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but faith working through love*" and "*neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature*" (Gal. 5:6; 6:15),. As a custom, circumcision was lawful. But some Jewish brethren did not leave it in that realm. With them it was a matter of justification or damnation and when Paul was caught in such a wind of controversy, he steadfastly refused to allow his Gentile co-laborer, Titus, to be circumcised (Gal. 2:3).

Yet, although fleshly circumcision had no spiritual benefit, there was (is) a circumcision which did (does) matter; which was (is) essential. Paul, who had written that "*neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but faith working through love,*" wrote also the following: "*in whom ye were circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands, in the putting off of the body of flesh, in the circumcision of Christ*" and "*For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision 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 flesh, whose praise is not of men but of God*" (Col. 2:11; Rom. 2:28f). There was a circumcision which matters, but it was

spiritual and Paul told the Philippians that Christians are the true circumcision. Notice how Paul describes those who are the true circumcision.

"Who worship by the Spirit." To worship *"by the Spirit"* means one worships as the Spirit directs, not, as some suppose, giving full vent to their own emotions, but as the Spirit reveals. And the Spirit has given sufficient instructions. Jesus spoke of those to the Samaritan woman when He said, *"God is a Spirit and they that worship him must worship him in Spirit and in truth"* (Jn. 4:24).

"And glory in Christ Jesus." Notice that Paul links *"Christ"* with *"Jesus."* Christians glory in Jesus as the long promised and anticipated *"Messiah,"* but whom Jews rejected as Isaiah predicted (Isa. 53:3). John wrote, *"He came unto his own and they that were his own received him not ..."* (Jn. 1:11). True circumcision accepts that Jesus presented sufficient proof of His Messiahship and they confess His claims, with Peter, their faith: *"Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God"* (Mt. 16:16).

"And have no confidence in the flesh" is also characteristic of one who is true circumcision. This statement does not mean that Christians trust no man but rather understands that fleshly descent says nothing of one's standing with God.

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