

“Neither Circumcision, Nor Uncircumcision”

“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything nor uncircumcision, but faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6). These words assign a reason for why they were uttered. The conclusion the apostle makes following his warning that were they to accept circumcision they could not be profited by Christ; severed from him. They would be fallen from grace (5:4). It is not through the law we taste of God’s grace in Christ, *“For we through the Spirit by faith wait for the hope of righteousness”* (Gal. 5:5). Because that is true, there is no profit in accepting circumcision.

Circumcision was given to Abraham as a sign - a seal of the covenant between him, his descendants and God. Moses’ failure to circumcise his son(s) made him an adversary of God and to please God he had to circumcise them against the protests of his wife (Ex. 4:24-26). Because Israel had neglected to practice the rite in the wilderness, they were a mass circumcision made of the males before they could enter Canaan (Joshua 5:2-19). That none could be faithful to the law by neglecting the practice of circumcision is beyond dispute.

God’s promise to Abraham to make of him a great nation was fulfilled and his greater promise to bless all nations through his seed was the next promise Israel looked to. Jewish teachers taught of the Christ to come. The nation as a whole anticipated his coming. John was asked if he was the Christ (Jn. 1:19f). John asked Jesus, *“Art thou he that cometh, or look we for another”* (Lk. 7:19)? Philip knew the Messiah was coming, as did Nathaniel (Jn. 1:45f). Even the Samaritan woman knew that the Christ was coming (Jn. 4:25f). That the Messiah (Christ) would come and bless all nations was generally believed, BUT how would that blessing come: through Abraham’s physical descendants or apart from fleshly descent? To the Jew, long accustomed to the superior role his people held in God’s sight, it was unthinkable that the blessing Abraham’s seed should provide to the world would come through any avenue other than through physical descent.

That was not in God’s plans, however. Even before Paul had written these words to the Galatians, even before Jesus had commissioned his disciples to go preach to every creature, even before Jesus taught the Jews of His day they might be seed of Abraham and yet be seed of the Devil (Jn. 8:44); John preached in the wilderness to the multitudes: *“Think not to say within yourselves we have Abraham to our father, for I say unto you that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham”* (Mt. 3:9). Jesus the master teacher, told Nicodemus, *“Ye must be born anew ... that which is born of the flesh; that which is born of the Spirit is spirit”* (Jn. 3:3, 5). When he

preached the controversial "Sermon on the Bread of Life," he said, *"It is the Spirit that quickeneth, the flesh profiteth nothing; the words which I have spoken unto you, they are spirit and life"* (Jn. 6:63). Paul's conclusion in Galatians that *"they that are of faith are sons of Abraham"* and *"If ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, heirs according to promise"* (Gal. 3:7, 29) was based upon the teaching John and Jesus.

So *"neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision"* (Gal. 5:6). Paul did not say that circumcision had never availed for it had. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:16, *"Wherefore we henceforth know no man after the flesh: even though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now we know him so no more."* Paul did not mean he was personally acquainted with Jesus before the light on the Damascus road; he was not. But it was necessary that the Christ be the physical seed of Abraham that God's promise to Abraham be fulfilled: *"In thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed."* He wrote the Corinthians, *"... if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: the old things are passed away: behold they are become new."* (2 Cor. 5:17). Later in the Galatian letter he wrote: *"For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature"* (Gal. 6:15). Paul's teaching was contrary to the die-hard Jew, but wholly consistent with the teaching of the Messiah's whom God promised to send as the seed of Abraham.

The pride of the Jew suffered a great blow at this teaching. Their feelings of being better than other people were evident and it lay in the fact of God's favor upon them because the promise He made to Abraham, their father. The fact that this no longer mattered to God was totally unacceptable to most of them. They wanted a Messiah, but on their own terms.

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