

# ACTS 15 AND THE CIRCUMCISION DEBATE

One of the pivotal events in the book of Acts was the ministerial conference in Acts 15 to determine whether or not physical circumcision was required for all adult uncircumcised males in order to be saved and qualify for eternal life in God's kingdom.

This is much misunderstood and falsely interpreted passage of scripture. In rendering a verdict that physical circumcision was no longer required for physically uncircumcised adult males this has been misapplied to say that the Old Testament laws given to Israel are no longer required to be kept.

All one has to do is accept Jesus as one's Saviour and in their heart (whatever that means) and you are guaranteed eternal life from that moment on goes this familiar Protestant argument.

The Jews had a very strong legal tradition and "those of the circumcision" who were pushing for physical circumcision did have a letter of the law case for their position.

The flaw in their argument was applying the sign of one covenant to what they failed to see was a new and separate covenant. This was an easy thing to do as an Old Testament command for the festival, that today is an annual renewal of the new covenant, required males to be circumcised.

They were also pushing something a whole lot more onto the new converts that is easy to miss but was at the heart and core of the response given by the apostles.

There are a number of different questions relating to this circumcision debate that are all relevant to it, though not all of which are touched on directly in Acts 15.

- Did God only intend to save just Israel or ALL nations (the Gentiles)?
- What Old Testament circumcision law were the Pharisees who came into the church using to defend their position?
- Is there a new and different sign for the new covenant that is required of all Christians?
- What about the fairer sex since they were excluded from physical circumcision?
- Was circumcision (or Old Testament statutes) the "yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear" (**Acts 15:10**)?
- Were the Gentiles required to ONLY do the four things focused on in the decree announcing the verdict on physical circumcision and how to be saved and not keep any other laws?

Let's now look at each of these questions individually. Answering each of these pertinent questions will give us a fuller and clearer picture of what was happening regarding the debate on circumcision and what really was being focused on at the Acts 15 conference.

## **Did God Only Intend to Save Just Israel or ALL Nations (The Gentiles)?**

When it comes to doctrinal debates it can be very easy to get bogged down in the nitty gritty of details, meaning of words and technical things where we lose perspective.

A good start to make in any doctrinal discussion is to start with the big picture – the loving character of God and His plan for all mankind.

Did God plan to only save just the nation of Israel or would He expand who He would bring into His church to include the Gentiles?

The answer to that question is obvious – The way that He used Paul to bring Gentiles into the church proved that He did plan to expand who He would call and work with to include the Gentiles from all nations.

Even those pushing physical circumcision recognised that. In **Acts 15:5** we read:

But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them [the Gentiles], and to command them to keep the law of Moses."

What they were trying to do was NOT exclude the Gentiles **but include them ONLY if they went through the ritual of circumcision.**

They may have wanted to keep Gentiles out of the church but they couldn't dispute that God had given His Spirit to Cornelius' household and to other Gentiles as Peter and Paul testified. They may have thought that Gentiles were allowed by God into the church but may have wanted to restrict their number with their insistence on physical circumcision, a physically painful operation when done on adult males.

There was a cultural attitude amongst the Jews that had an impact on the attitude towards the Gentiles.

Religion in ancient times was tribal or territorial. There was a superstitious idea that permeated the ancient world that gods were territorial and had greater power in certain areas and less power in other areas. This idea affected the Israelites. One of several reasons why they often fell into idolatry was that they felt they had to pay homage and appease the gods of the land of Canaan that God had brought them into.

The true God was seen as just the God of the Israelites or the land of Israel only, not other nations who had their own gods. Mixing with the Gentiles had led to the adoption of their gods which saw the Jews taken into captivity. There was then an overreaction to this after the Jews came back from captivity where they went from one side of the ditch to the other.

They created many man-made restrictions to avoid any intermixing with the Gentiles that would tempt them into idolatry. These went overboard to the point that they would not even eat with the Gentiles, something that Paul rebuked Peter over. Peter normally ate with the Gentiles but slipped back into not doing so when certain "right-winged" Jews were in town (**Galatians 2:12**).

This cultural problem in Jewish society affected the early church. Despite what Jesus commanded in the Great Commission, the apostles only preached to the Jews to begin with and it was some time before Gentiles were considered to be reached out to with the Gospel.

After a number of years of such restricted preaching God Himself forced the issue with the vision that He gave to Peter and the calling of Cornelius' household and giving them the Holy Spirit backed up by a similar "speaking in tongues" miracle (**Acts 10**) that occurred on the Day of Pentecost after Christ's ascension.

Let's go back to the beginning to understand a little more about God's plan of salvation in relation to the Gentiles.

What some refer to as the S.P.S. (Specific Purpose Statement) of the Bible is found in **Genesis 1:26-27**:

Then God said, "**Let Us make man in Our image**, according to Our likeness ... So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them."

Just as the animals reproduced after their own kind God created man in the image of God desiring to reproduce Himself through mankind.

In the United Church of God booklet "The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy" we read:

"God then set in motion a major aspect of His plan to offer salvation to mankind. Selecting Abraham was a crucial step in God's long-term plan to turn all nations back to Him. The remainder of the Bible is woven around His plan to reconcile all humanity to Himself...[God promised Abraham to] develop his descendants into a group of influential nations chosen for the purpose of teaching and illustrating His values and way of life to the rest of the world" (p.5).

The purpose of this Abrahamic covenant is outlined three times in the book of Genesis:

**Genesis 12:3**: "And I will bless those that bless you and curse the one who curses you. And in you shall all families of the earth be blessed."

**Genesis 22:18**: "And in your Seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice."

**Genesis 28:14**: "And your seed shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south. **And in you and in your Seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed.**"

The **PURPOSE** of the Abrahamic covenant was to use Israel to bless all nations and lead them as a model nation of His way of life towards the path of salvation and entry into the Kingdom and Family of God!

God was going to use the nation of Israel to bless all the nations of the world. One aspect of how this would be done would be through Jesus Christ, a descendant who was a Seed of Abraham, who's sacrifice would open up salvation and entrance into God's kingdom and family at the resurrection (**Galatians 3:16**).

Circumcision was given as a sign of this covenant to Abraham in **Genesis 17:10-11**.

After Abraham's descendants through his grandson Jacob (Israel) had grown into a nation and God rescued them from their captivity in Egypt He formalised a covenant with them.

In **Exodus 19:5-6** we read:

Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel.

In **Deuteronomy 4:6-8** we also read:

Therefore be careful to observe them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. For what great nation is there that has God so near to it, as the LORD our God is to us, for whatever reason we may call upon Him? And what great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day?"

God wanted a free, obedient and happy people free of the many burdens governments put on people. Other peoples (The Gentiles) would look at them thinking, "How can we be free from the burdens our governments put on us" and from that could spread the idea, "Hey, let's worship Israel's God. Let Israel's God be our king." It was God's intent that the whole world be blessed through the descendants of Jacob.

There have been times when Israel has partially fulfilled that purpose but God knew full well that it could not happen in its fullest sense without "a new heart", without His Holy Spirit to spiritually empower them – something that was prophesied by Israel's prophets to only eventually happen after God's kingdom is brought to this earth after Christ's return.

In **Deuteronomy 31:20-21** God said:

When I have brought them to the land flowing with milk and honey, of which I swore to their fathers, and they have eaten and filled themselves and grown fat, then they will turn to other gods and serve them; **and they will provoke Me and break My covenant.**

"Then it shall be, when many evils and troubles have come upon them, that this song will testify against them as a witness; for it will not be forgotten in the mouths of their descendants, **for I know the inclination of their behavior today, even before I have brought them to the land of which I swore to give them.**

Even with the knowledge of God's laws which He gave Israel through Moses and every other advantage such as the quality heredity of Abraham and the patriarchs, which included many valuable talents, Israel failed and God KNEW in advance that they would FAIL.

**The nation of Israel would be God's guinea pig to prove that even with the knowledge of God's laws and every other advantage that man still needs the Holy Spirit to live by God's way of life.**

Once that lesson has been impressed onto Israel and the rest of the world Israel would have the chance after the return of Jesus Christ in the coming Kingdom of God to live up up to their original purpose of being a blessing to the whole world after being converted and offered the Holy Spirit.

Let's look at some prophecies of Israel fulfilling her purpose as God's model nation and salvation being opened up to the Gentiles as foretold by Israel's prophets in the Old Testament.

**Isaiah 2:2-3** - Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; And all nations shall flow to it.

**Many people [The Gentiles] shall come and say, 'Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths.'** For out of Zion shall go forth the law, And the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

**Isaiah 19:24-25** - In that day Israel will be one of three with Egypt and Assyria—a blessing in the midst of the land, whom the LORD of hosts shall bless, saying, **"Blessed is Egypt My people, and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel My inheritance."**

**Isaiah 49:6** - "Indeed He says, 'It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also give **You as a light to the Gentiles, that You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth.**'"

**Isaiah 61:9** - Their descendants shall be known among the Gentiles, and their offspring among the people. All who see them shall acknowledge them, that they are the posterity whom the LORD has blessed.

**Ezekiel 36:27-28** - I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be My people, and I will be your God.

**Zechariah 8:22-23** - Yes, many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem, and to pray before the LORD. Thus says the LORD of hosts: 'In those days ten men from every language of the nations shall grasp the sleeve of a Jewish man, saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.

**Zechariah 14:16** - And it shall come to pass that everyone who is left of **ALL the nations** which came against Jerusalem shall go up from year to year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Tabernacles.

**Amos 9:11-12** - "On that day I will raise up The tabernacle of David, which has fallen down, And repair its damages; I will raise up its ruins, And rebuild it as in the days of old; that they may possess the remnant of Edom, and **all the Gentiles who are called by My name,**" says the LORD who does this thing.

Peter in **Acts 15:16-17** during the Acts 15 conference quoted this verse above as it was translated in the Septuagint:

"After this I will return and will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up; **so that the rest of mankind [the Gentiles] may seek**

**the Lord, even all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord who does all these things.”**

In the United Church of God booklet “The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy” we read:

The glory of the restored Israel will shine far greater than Israel’s golden age under Solomon or that of any other nation or kingdom the world has ever seen. It will all come about because Christ will be the Head of the nation. Through its Creator Israel will gain ‘fame and praise among all the peoples of the earth’ (**Zephaniah 3:20**). Israel will finally become the example God intended her to be. (p.47)

While it took a while for it to register with the apostles, Jesus Christ made it very plain to them in the Great Commission that the Gospel was to be preached to the Gentiles and Gentiles were to become a part of the church. In **Matthew 28:19-20** Jesus said:

Go therefore and **make disciples of all the nations**, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

The Greek word for nations here is “ethnos” from which we get the word ethnic from. It means race or nation. Disciples were to be made of all races and nations.

Gentiles of all backgrounds converted now in the church and later glorified as spirit beings at the return of Jesus Christ will be amongst the spirit leaders under Jesus Christ during the millennium who will be able to relate to all the physical people of all different backgrounds alive in the millennium who will be offered salvation at that time.

### **Which Law were “Those of the Circumcision” Using To Defend Their Position?**

Now that we have looked at the background of God’s plan for Israel and the Gentiles and some of the cultural attitudes that relate to the circumcision debate let’s look at the nitty-gritty and the technical points of the debate.

So, what Old Testament circumcision law were the Pharisees who came into the church using to defend their position?

There are two circumcision laws in the books of the law (Exodus to Deuteronomy) and there is also the original command given to Abraham that was the sign of the covenant that God made with him.

Let’s look at the original command given by God to Abraham regarding His covenant with him that included circumcision. Over in **Genesis 17** we read the following starting from **verse 5**:

“No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations. **I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you**, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. **Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.**”

**“And God said to Abraham: ‘As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you [Abraham] and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you:**

**“Every male child among you shall be circumcised; and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a SIGN of the covenant between Me and you.**

**““He who is 8 days old among you shall be circumcised, every male child in your generations, he who is born in your house or bought with money from any foreigner who is not your descendant.**

“He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant’ “...

So Abraham took Ishmael his son, all who were born in his house and all who were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham’s house, and circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very same day, as God had said to him.

**Abraham was 99 years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. And Ishmael his son was 13 years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.**

That very same day Abraham was circumcised, and his son Ishmael; and all the men of his house, born in the house or bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him **(Genesis 17:7-14, 23-27).**

This is what is referred to as the Abrahamic covenant. God promised to make Abraham a father of many nations and to give to Abraham and his descendants the land of Canaan, which would later be referred to as the land of Israel or Holy Land, as an everlasting possession.

In verse 10 God says **“This is my covenant** which you shall keep” and then goes on to say every male child is to be circumcised.

In verse 11 it says something slightly different by saying that “it shall be **a sign of the covenant** between me and you”.

Is circumcision the sign of the covenant or the covenant itself? What are we to make of this difference in the way God phrases the instruction to be circumcised.

A covenant is an agreement two parties make where each party agrees to do certain things. Those actions which are agreed to are what we call the terms of the covenant. They are a part of the agreement. Circumcision was one of the terms that Abraham had to keep as his part of the agreement. This is what is meant in verse 10.

In verse 11 circumcision is described as a sign of the covenant. The Hebrew word translated as sign is “oth” which means “signal, flag, beacon, monument, evidence.”

Of those possible meanings the best fitting ones for circumcision are the latter two – monument or evidence.

**Circumcision isn't really a signal, flag or beacon due to its very private nature. It's not meant as a sign that is out there as a show to people. Our relationship with God can be quite private and intimate in a similar way.**

The private nature of circumcision reminds me of the line by comedian Robin Williams who once described ballet as something "where men wear pants so tight you can see what religion they are".

In verse 12 God says that every 8 day old male child shall be circumcised. Did God mean that ONLY when someone was 8 days old they had to be circumcised or was the instruction to Abraham broader than that?

In verse 9 just before he tells Abraham about the covenant's term of circumcision we read: "And God said to Abraham: 'As for you, you shall keep My covenant, **you [Abraham]** and your descendants after you throughout their generations.

Abraham was to be included in those who were to be circumcised. In verses 24 to 27 it says Abraham was 99 years old when he was circumcised, Ishmael was 13 when he was circumcised and all the men in his household were also circumcised.

Circumcision is a delicate and painful operation for boys and adult men. Once the initial batch of men of Abraham's clan were circumcised it was intended that only newborn males would need to be circumcised from then on with a few exceptions, one of which is mentioned in one of the two statutes in the law relating to circumcision.

In verses 13 and 14 we read:

**My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant.** And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.

That verse, on face value or letter of the law alone, seems to indicate that any physical descendant of Abraham is obligated to be circumcised.

**There is nothing here, though, to indicate that it applies to Gentiles as the covenant was about physical Israel possessing the Holy Land NOT the Gentiles who are assigned other lands and physical Israel becoming a blessing to other nations through their obedience.**

Now that we have looked at the original command to Abraham about circumcision let's look at the two statutes in the books of the law that relate to circumcision and see if they apply to Gentiles in the church.

One of those is found in Leviticus 12 where we read:

Speak to the children of Israel, saying: 'If a woman has conceived, and borne a male child, then she shall be unclean seven days; as in the days of her customary impurity she shall be unclean.

**And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised (Leviticus 12:2-3).**



**There is a definite moment in time when this command can be obeyed – it can only be obeyed on the 8th day!**

**Gentiles called into the church have long since passed this window of time when to be circumcised according to this law.**

**This is part of the laws and statutes God gave to Israel and a good case could be made that this law, to be applied ONLY on the 8th day, still applies today.**

**There are physical health benefits from circumcision that argue for this being a statute that has not been repealed and one to be obeyed by christian parents with their newborn.**

Medical science has found that Vitamin K levels spike on the 8th day which helps with clotting which makes this an ideal time for this medical procedure.

Let's look at the other statute that speaks of circumcision. It's found over in Exodus 12:48:

And when a stranger dwells with you and wants to keep the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it; and he shall be as a native of the land. **For no uncircumcised person shall eat it.**

**If a male Gentile wanted to keep the Passover he was required to be circumcised. No uncircumcised male, Israelite or Gentile, could keep the Passover!**

To the church members in the Greek city of Corinth Paul wrote:

Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. **Therefore let us keep the feast**, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

**Paul clearly instructs Gentile christians to keep the feast of Passover and Unleavened Bread and Exodus 12:48 says that no males, including Gentiles, could keep the Passover unless they were circumcised!**

**So here we have the statute that the Jews “of the circumcision” party were using to defend their position that male Gentiles in the church had to be circumcised, at the very least, to keep the Passover.**

In **John 6:53-54** Jesus said:

Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. **Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life**, and I will raise him up at the last day.

At his last Passover meal Jesus also said:

And He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, **“This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me.”** Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, **“This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you” (Luke 22:19-20).**

We see here in these verses that taking the bread and wine at the Passover service is the symbol of annually renewing the new covenant and eating the flesh and drinking the blood of Christ.

### **What is the Sign of the New Covenant?**

Physical circumcision was a term of the Abrahamic covenant for any males descended from Abraham

This covenant was about physical Israel possessing the Holy Land NOT the Gentiles who are assigned other lands and physical Israel becoming a blessing to other nations through their obedience.

This is a DIFFERENT covenant than the new covenant that is offered to Christians. In the old covenant that essentially was an extension of the Abrahamic covenant, God only offered physical blessings if Israel would obey His law.

The NEW covenant offers spiritual blessings – the Holy Spirit to help write God’s laws on our hearts and eternal life!

In **Hebrews 8:6-10** we read:

**But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, by so much He is also the Mediator of a better covenant, which was built upon BETTER PROMISES.**

**For if that first covenant had been without fault, then no place would have been sought for the second. For finding fault with THEM [NOT HIS LAWS],** He said to them, “Behold, days are coming, says the Lord, and I will make an end on the house of Israel and on the house of Judah; **a new covenant** shall be, not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day I took hold of their hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt,” because they did not continue in My covenant, and I did not regard them, says the Lord.

**“For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My Laws into their mind and write them in their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.**

Let’s notice a few other verses that speak of the Holy Spirit and the gift of eternal life as being at the heart of the new covenant:

**John 6:54** – Whoever partakes of My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, **and I will raise him up at the last day.**

**Romans 8:8-11 (ERV)** – Those who are ruled by their sinful selves cannot please God. But you are not ruled by your sinful selves. You are ruled by the Spirit, if that Spirit of God really lives in you. **But whoever does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to Christ.**

Your body will always be dead because of sin. But if Christ is in you, then the Spirit gives you life, because Christ made you right with God. God raised Jesus from death. And if God's Spirit lives in you, he will also give life to your bodies that die. **Yes, God is the one who raised Christ from death, and he will raise you to life through his Spirit living in you.**

**Acts 2:38** – Then Peter said to them, **Repent and be baptized, every one of you**, in the name of Jesus Christ to remission of sins, and **you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.**

**The terms of the Abrahamic (old) covenant were to obey God's law and (if you were male) be circumcised and God promised physical blessings upon Israelites and inheriting the land of Israel.**

**The terms of the new covenant to Christians today (and the House of Israel and Judah at the start of the millennium and all nations thereafter) is to repent (an ongoing condition of obeying God to retain the Holy Spirit) and be baptised.**

**God promises the Holy Spirit to help us overcome sin and eternal life if one still has the Holy Spirit at the time of the resurrection (the last day).**

Circumcision is the sign of the Abrahamic covenant but it is NOT the SIGN of the new covenant. There is a different outward SIGN for the new covenant.

In **Colossians 2:11-12** we read:

NEW KING JAMES VERSION:

**In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism**, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.

CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH VERSION:

**Christ has also taken away your selfish desires, just as circumcision removes flesh from the body.**

And when you were baptized, it was the same as being buried with Christ. Then you were raised to life because you had faith in the power of God, who raised Christ from death.

ENGLISH REVISED VERSION:

**In Christ you had a different kind of circumcision, one that was not done by human hands. That is, you were made free from the power of your sinful self. That is the kind of circumcision Christ does.**

When you were baptized, you were buried with Christ, and you were raised up with him because of your faith in God's power. God's power was shown when he raised Christ from death.

**Christ circumcises our heart and character of our sinful attitudes like circumcision does for the flesh and this He does by the power of the Holy Spirit which He gives to us after we repent and openly declare before witnesses our commitment to Him and being repentant by the symbol of baptism.**

**Baptism becomes that outward sign that we have entered the new covenant with God.**

**Baptism supercedes circumcision as the sign of someone who is a part of God's chosen people.**

Why did God choose physical circumcision as a means of being a sign of the old Abrahamic covenant?

**Colossians 2:11** shows a parallel with the circumcision of the heart of our sinful nature that Christ performs on us through His Holy Spirit. Physical circumcision served as a type of that and we'll look further into that parallel shortly.

Why was a symbol chosen that was just for males and not females?

Ancient Israel was a patriarchal society and with few exceptions inheritance of property was passed down through male heirs. The covenant that God made with Israel was about inheritance of the land.

In our modern egalitarian society baptism is a much more fitting symbol for our individual covenant with God to receive His Spirit and have God's laws written on our hearts.

Circumcision was be done on 8 day old babies. Whether you were circumcised or not had much more to do with the obedience of your parents than your own personal obedience and submission to God.

Baptism is a choice that should be made by the individual who commits themselves to God, not something done by their parents (though this has become the custom of much of mainstream christianity).

**Baptism is also a symbol of one's commitment that can be performed by both male and female unlike Old Testament physical circumcision and this underlines that individual commitment that we all, male and female, need to make with our Creator so He can beget us with His spirit so He can eventually reproduce Himself through us and we can become spirit born children of God at the resurrection (the last day).**

This point of equality with God regardless of whether we are male or female if we have been baptised into Christ is discussed by the Apostle Paul in **Galatians 3:26-29** where he writes:

All of you are God's children because of your faith in Christ Jesus. And when you were baptized, it was as though you had put on Christ in the same way you put on new clothes.

Faith in Christ Jesus is what makes each of you equal with each other, whether you are a Jew or a Greek, a slave or a free person, **a man or a woman. So if you belong to Christ, you are now part of Abraham's family, and you will be given what God has promised (CEV).**

So we have established that physical circumcision is not the sign of the new covenant but has been superceded by baptism but what about that command in Exodus 12:48 regarding no uncircumcised male, Israelite or Gentile, being allowed to keep the Passover?

Is there a precedent for just following the spirit of the law (circumcised hearts) and abandoning the letter of the law (physical circumcision) in relation to this Passover law? Or do we have to keep both the letter and the spirit of the law?

We do have such an example in the New Testament of another letter of the law requirement of Passover that is no longer required to be kept that has been replaced by something else.

**The whole manner in which Passover was to be kept in the New Testament has been changed and different symbols have replaced the old symbols and this gives precedent for a replacement of the physical letter of the law requirement as to who can keep the Passover.**

In the Old Testament the Passover was to be kept by killing a lamb at twilight, roasting it whole (something that would take hours) and then eating that lamb and staying inside all night.

On the night that Jesus kept His last Passover, after they had eaten the meal as per usual, Jesus introduced the new symbols of bread and wine to symbol His broken body and shed blood to remember His death to pass over our sins. He fulfilled the symbolism of the lamb that was killed and from then on we would remember that sacrifice with the new symbols of the bread and wine.

Did these symbols replace the old symbol of the lamb or are they to be kept in addition to eating the lamb?

Let's look at what Paul wrote about the way the New Testament church should keep the Passover. The Corinthians were not keeping it properly and Paul addressed it in **1 Corinthians 11:20-26:**

**When you all come together**, it is not really the Lord's Supper you are eating. I say this because when you eat, each one eats without waiting for the others. Some people don't get enough to eat or drink, while others have too much.

**You can eat and drink in your own homes.** It seems that you think God's church is not important. You embarrass those who are poor. What can I say? Should I praise you? No, I cannot praise you for this.

The teaching I gave you is the same that I received from the Lord: On the night when the Lord Jesus was handed over to be killed [The start of Nisan 14], he took bread and gave thanks for it. Then he divided the bread and said, "This is my body; it is for you. Eat this to remember me."

In the same way, after they ate, Jesus took the cup of wine. He said, "This cup represents the new agreement [covenant] from God, which begins with my blood sacrifice. When you drink this, do it to remember me." This means that every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are telling others about the Lord's death until he comes again (ERV).

Paul here was saying that their coming together for the Passover was for the purpose of taking the bread and the wine. It was NOT about feasting on food. He told them to eat and drink at home.

**It may not be totally clear and direct here but what Paul appears to be saying is that we are not coming together for a feast over a slain and cooked lamb. We should come together but just to keep the symbols of the bread and wine.**

If you are hungry eat and drink at home before you come to the Passover service which now appears to be a commanded assembly (holy convocation) even though Nisan 14 is not a sabbath (the day after, Nisan 15, is).

It is interesting to note that Paul (who didn't meet Christ before His ascension to heaven as far as we know) says that the Passover instructions were something He received not from the apostles who were at Christ's last Passover but something He received from the Lord Himself. He spoke of visions where he was caught up to the third heaven (**2 Corinthians 12**) where Christ may have taught him personally.

Paul also argued for a change of the law as to who should receive the tithes (**Hebrew 7:12**) since the priesthood was changing from the Levitical priesthood back to the Melchizedek priesthood (Jesus Christ). The tithe would now be received by Christ's church rather than the tribe of Levi for this church age.

With the precedent of the symbols of Passover changing and replacing the old with the new symbols of bread and wine there is precedent to change the Passover law as to who was allowed to keep it.

**As the Passover is now an annual reminder of the death of our Saviour who died for our sins and an annual renewal of the new covenant we have made directly with our Heavenly Father and our Saviour, it is only fitting there is a change from the old symbol of physical circumcision to the new symbol of baptism in relation to who can keep the Passover.**

**As a result, God's church today teaches that instead of physical circumcision being the requirement (which would only apply to males) that only those who have committed themselves to God and are baptised are the only ones allowed to keep the Passover.**

### **Circumcision of the Heart**

In this section I will summarise some of the points made by my friend Breen Schipke in an excellent article he wrote called "Circumcision of the Heart" which can also be found on my website at <http://rogerswebsite.com/others/CircumcisionoftheHeart.pdf>.

The spiritual concept of the circumcision of the heart was not something that was conceived by the New Testament church but something that originates in the writings of Moses in the Torah and spoken further of by the prophet Jeremiah. Let's notice the verses in question.

**Deuteronomy 10:12-16** - And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the LORD and His statutes which I command you today for your good? Indeed heaven and the highest heavens belong to the LORD your God, also the earth with all that is in it. The LORD delighted only in your fathers, to love them; and He chose their descendants after them, you above all peoples, as it is this day. **Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer.**

**Deuteronomy 30:4-6** - If any of you are driven out to the farthest parts under heaven, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there He will bring you. Then the LORD your God will bring you to the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it. He will prosper you and multiply you more than your fathers. **And 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, that you may live.**

**Jeremiah 4:3-4** - For thus says the LORD to the men of Judah and Jerusalem: "Break up your fallow ground, and do not sow among thorns. **Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, and take away the foreskins of your hearts,** you men of Judah and inhabitants of

Jerusalem, lest My fury come forth like fire, and burn so that no one can quench it, because of the evil of your doings.”

The Apostle Paul drawing on these verses in the Old Testament wrote the following:

**Romans 2:25–29** - For circumcision is indeed profitable if you keep the law; but if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. Therefore, if an uncircumcised man keeps the righteous requirements of the law, will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision? And will not the physically uncircumcised, if he fulfils the law, judge you who, even with your written code and circumcision, are a transgressor of the law?

**For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that 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 letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.**

Directly quoting from Breen’s article he writes:

Why do Paul, Moses and Jeremiah use the term circumcision? ...

Twice in the book of Acts (**Acts 2:37 and Acts 7:54**) Luke writes of people being cut to the heart – having their hearts circumcised - by hearing the words of truth. First by Peter than by Stephen.

**Ezekiel 36:26** - I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

The phraseology seems too deliberate, too strong to not at least in part see a spiritual comparison with the now proven bodily health benefits from the physical act of male circumcision.

An improved ability to keep the circumcised area clean and free from the possibility of infection and disease seems an obvious spiritual correlation.

The removal of the desensitised covering and the resultant increased sensitivity would seem another.

**The similarity with the removal of a hardened covering over the heart – the result being a heart of flesh rather than of stone – a heart more open to love and sensitivity – would seem to be part of the comparison that the word of God is making by using the term circumcision.**

So what do we take away from this directive that we need to experience a: circumcision of the heart? Two things:

1. We must allow our God to be working on us – and we need to be working alongside Him – as through His spirit, He cuts us to our heart. Removing the heart of stone and replacing it with one of flesh. A circumcised heart open and sensitive to His love, and to the needs of our fellow man and

2. Although God is looking for external acts as evidence of the fruit of His spirit within us, we cannot ever make the mistake of assuming that any such external acts are any kind of free pass for us into the eternity that our God offers.

## Was Circumcision or Old Testament Laws a Yoke of Bondage?

The question of circumcision was only one part of the discussion in Acts 15. It was NOT the primary thrust of “those of the circumcision”.

In **Acts 15:5** it says after saying it was needful for the Gentiles to be circumcised they go on to say “**and to command them to keep the law of Moses**”.

Paul (**Romans 3:31, 6:1-2**) and James (**James 2:14-26**) in their writings spoke of the need to still keep the law of God. There was no argument over the necessity to obey God’s laws.

The point of distinction between what these Pharisees were saying and what the apostles were saying had to do with **the means by which God will save us** – keeping the law **alone** or by faith in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

This is highlighted in James’ comments in the letter that they wrote after a decision was made. He wrote:

Some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, "You must be circumcised **and keep the law**"— **to whom we gave no such commandment (Acts 15:24).**

As noted above Paul and James himself emphasised the need to keep the law. To say that keeping the law was something that “we gave no such commandment” meant as a means of salvation **alone**.

Keeping the law **alone** as a means of salvation was the yoke of bondage that Peter spoke about in this chapter.

Many years ago I organised an extension into the New Testament of the old Bible Story volumes written by Basil Wolverton. An independent Church of God minister from Canada, Keith Hunt stepped up to the plate and did a marvellous job writing the 5 volumes that formed “The New Testament Bible Story” which are available on my website.

In volume 3 (<http://www.rogerswebsite.com/others/NewTestamentBibleStoryVolume3.pdf>) Keith covered the Acts 15 conference. He gave an excellent summary explaining this chapter which I would like to now quote from at length:

Now back to Acts 15:5. But there arose some within the sect of the Pharisees who were believers, members of the church in Jerusalem, they rose up and said, "It was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses."

Now what this was meaning was they taught everyone should obey all the law of Moses as they did under the Old Covenant, with all its rituals, sacrifices, and of course physical circumcision...

Had not God given it to them as a sign and as a covenant? Had not God said that NO person could partake of the Passover meal service UNLESS they were circumcised? Yes, it was so, as under the Old Covenant. So some of the believers of the sect of the Pharisees just could not see salvation without physical circumcision. It was anathema to their minds. To them it was heresy to say physical circumcision was not required to be saved...

Peter stood up and said:



"You know brethren that a good while ago God made it known to us His favor that the Gentiles should hear the Gospel by my voice, and they believed it. And further, God knowing the hearts of people, gave them the Holy Spirit even as he had given to us, and this is a witness for us. He put no difference between us and them in the purification of the heart by faith. Now therefore why do we want to try God by putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor us were able to bear. But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they are saved."

When Peter was talking about a yoke laid upon them, he was talking a lot more than the physical act of circumcision. For that rite could hardly be a yoke that none could bear, as the people of Israel had lived very well under performing physical circumcision, after all its only the removal of some physical skin from an 8 day old baby boy, which thousands still practice to this very day. This was not the burden that none could bear.

**The burden that none could bear, was to try and gain salvation, or the grace of God, by working at all the laws of Moses. It was by trying to earn salvation through law observance, and not through grace by faith. It was trying to live by laws, building up more good righteous deeds than bad ones, more good thoughts than bad thoughts, more good words spoken than bad words spoken. So the good outnumbered the bad and thinking God then was obliged somehow to have to give you salvation.**

**Being saved that way would be you earning it. But salvation was NEVER to be achieved that way. God had always intended that salvation would be by His grace through faith in the sacrifice of His Son, for the sins of the whole world.**

Anyone trying to gain salvation any other way was doomed to failure, would then truly have a yoke upon them which no one could bear. For it was just not possible to live a full lifetime in full harmony with the laws of Moses, with all the laws written in the books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Number, Deuteronomy). And just one sin or infraction of law would mean you were guilty of sin and so under the sentence of death.

It's like you obeying all the traffic laws of your town for years but then you run a red light. All the correct law observance still cannot nullify the time you broke the law, you are still guilty and you are still under the penalty imposed on you for breaking that law. Even if you obey for another ten years all the traffic laws perfectly after that infraction of the one you broke, you still must pay the penalty for the one you broke.

So it is with the laws of God and the way to salvation. But the police chief sent his Son to pay for you the law/s you broke. The fine was paid by the Son. All you have to do is believe this, have faith, accept the Son as your savior from the penalty imposed, be sorry, repent, set your mind to want to continue as a way of life, the will and ways and laws of God, and you can be under His grace, and be saved.

No other way can work. Any other way you may want to set as your way, your theology ideas on how to be saved, that is NOT God's way, can only be a yoke of a burden that none can ever bear.

God had made a way of salvation. The apostles knew it. It had been really revealed to them from the time they spent with Jesus during His earthly ministry. Now, some many years later, comes this idea from some that you must be physically circumcised and still be under ALL the Old Covenant laws of Moses to be saved. Peter was setting the record straight that salvation could never be achieved this way.

Make no mistake, the New Covenant does not "blanket" do away with all laws of Moses. We are told very clearly that the New Covenant will put or write the laws of God into our hearts (see Hebrews 8) and faith does not do away with law but it established it (Rom. 3:31)...

Then James stood up after Barnabas and Paul had finished speaking, and said:

"Men and brethren, listen to me. Peter has declared to you how God at first brought in the Gentiles, to call out from them a people for His name. And to this agrees the very prophets in the Scriptures that we have; as it is written, 'After this I will return, and will build up the tabernacle of David, which has seen corruption and lays in ruin; and I will build again the ruins of it, and set it all in correct order. So the relatively small elect of men may find the way to the Lord, and all the Gentiles also, upon whom I will place my name. I the Lord have done all this' (**Amos 9:11-12**).

"Known unto God are all His works from the beginning of the world. Wherefore my judgment is this. That we do not trouble them, which are from among the Gentile nations who have turned to God. But that we write to them that they abstain from pollutions of idols, from sexual immorality, from animals strangled to death in killing them for food, and from the eating of blood. For Moses has from old times in every city those that teach his word, being always read in the synagogue every Sabbath day" (**Acts 15:6-21**)...

Now verses 20 and 21 have given some great problems to understand. Many have thought the Gentiles only have to follow these four laws, and everything else can go out the window. Rather silly is this reasoning, for surely the Gentiles are not free to kill and murder, or to take God's name in vain, or to bow before idols, while the Jews must obey those laws.

And then notice that some of the four things mentioned are what you might call "physical" laws; i.e. things strangled to death and then eaten, was prohibited to the Jews by God, as one of the food laws under the Old Covenant, for the blood was to be drained, which meant killing the animal in such a way as to allow the blood to drain. This is obviously a physical food law. Yet James says Gentiles were then to obey it. Same can be said for "blood." James is obviously talking about the physical law of not eating blood, which God said the Israelites were not to do...

**James listed four things the Gentiles should be warned specifically about, so not to do or observe, because the Gentiles HAD GREAT TROUBLE WITH THEM! Or to put it another way the Gentile LIFE STYLE WAS FULL OF THOSE FOUR THINGS MENTIONED.**

The various pollutions to idols was numerous, superstitions, lucky-charms, fortune-telling, palm-reading, crystal-ball reading, trying to look to the heavenly stars to see your future, and many many more, was all over the heathen world.

Sexual immorality was everywhere in the pagan world, probably the pinnacle of that sin was in having Temple prostitutes. Often the pagan Temples employed hundreds of women whose occupation was to have sexual relations with the men who came to worship in the Temples. Temple sex for them was part and parcel of their religious faith and practice.

The pagan health practices were often very debased and far from the physical health laws laid down by God to Israel through Moses. Eating and drinking of blood in various ways was common among the Gentiles. Much blood would be consumed by them in strangling animals to death and not draining the blood from them, as well as the literal drinking of cups of blood in their religious rites and ceremonies...

Like many other things, certain physical things, that God does not allow in our lives, can take a hold on us and be very difficult to break, just ask (not really, but as a figure of speech) some Christians who still have a problem in overcoming the smoking habit.

It is also just as obvious if we simply take it for what James said, that James did not believe the four things he mentioned were "done away with" under the New Covenant. Some of them are of the "moral" law and some of them are of the "physical" law of God. But all of them James still expected the Gentiles (as well as the Jews of course) to obey and to live by, living in NOT doing them.

**They were four of the MOST PROMINENT problems for Gentiles to put away from their lives, so James felt it needful to specifically point them out to them. Other things they could find out in due time, for he then went on to say what he said in verse 21.**

**They could find the ways of God, living His way of life, as they attended Sabbath services in Jewish synagogues on the Sabbath, not Sunday you will note, but on the Sabbath, the day that Jews observed in accordance to the fourth commandment of the great ten commandments.**

Moses, or the laws in the first five books of the Bible, were read every Sabbath, and the Gentiles could then "grow in grace and knowledge" as we are told to do under the New Covenant, by hearing what Moses wrote under the guiding hand of God. They could hear Moses every Sabbath day in the synagogues.

James was still upholding what Jesus said for us to do, that is, to live by every word of God (p. 73-78).

### **Summary**

To conclude with here is a summary of the key points in relation to the Acts 15 conference and the debate on circumcision:

- Circumcision was introduced by God as one of the terms of the covenant that God made with Abraham (**Genesis 17:10-14**).
- The covenant that God made with Abraham was about inheritance of the land. Ancient Israel was a patriarchal society and with few exceptions inheritance of property was passed down through male heirs so this explains why God chose a male only symbol for the covenant.
- The PURPOSE of the Abrahamic covenant (**Genesis 12:3, 22:18 and 28:14**) was to use Israel to bless all nations and lead them as a model nation of His way of life towards the path of salvation and entry into the Kingdom and Family of God!
- God has always intended to call the Gentiles into the church and into His family (**Deuteronomy 4:6-8, Isaiah 2:2-3, Isaiah 19:24-25, Isaiah 49:6, Zechariah 8:22-23, Zechariah 14:16, Amos 9:11-12, Matthew 28:19-20**).
- In the laws of the Torah there are two laws relating to circumcision. One of them is in **Leviticus 12:3** where it says to circumcise any male baby when it is 8 days old. There is a definite moment in time when this command can be obeyed – it can only be obeyed on the 8th day! Medical science has found that Vitamin K levels spike on the 8th day which helps with clotting and there are physical health benefits from circumcision.
- The other law in the Torah that speaks of circumcision is found in **Exodus 12:48**. It says that no uncircumcised male, Israelite or Gentile, can keep the Passover! The statute is the one that the Jews "of the circumcision" party would have used to defend their position that male Gentiles in the church had to be circumcised to keep the Passover.
- The terms of the Abrahamic (old) covenant were to obey God's law and (if you were male) be circumcised and God promised physical blessings upon Israelites and inheriting the land of Israel.

- The terms of the new covenant to Christians today (and the House of Israel and Judah at the start of the millennium and all nations thereafter) is to repent (an ongoing condition of obeying God to retain the Holy Spirit) and be baptised (**Acts 2:38**).
- Circumcision is the sign of the Abrahamic covenant but it is not the sign of the new covenant. Baptism is the outward sign that we have entered the new covenant with God. Baptism supercedes circumcision as the sign of someone (both male and female) who is a part of God's chosen people (**Colossians 2:11-12**).
- The whole manner in which Passover was to be kept in the New Testament has been changed and different symbols have replaced the old symbols (**1 Corinthians 11:20-26**) and this gives precedent for a replacement of the physical letter of the law requirement as to who can keep the Passover.
- God's church today teaches that instead of physical circumcision being the requirement (which would only apply to males) that only those who have committed themselves to God and are baptised are the only ones allowed to keep the Passover.
- The spiritual concept of circumcision of the heart was not something that was conceived by the New Testament church but something that originates in the writings of Moses in the Torah (**Deuteronomy 10:12-16 and 30:4-6**) and spoken further of by the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 4:3-4). Paul drew on this when he spoke about true circumcision being of the heart and not just in the flesh (**Romans 2:25-29**).
- Some parallels between physical and spiritual circumcision include an improved ability to keep the circumcised area clean and free from the possibility of infection and disease and increased sensitivity from the removal of the desensitised covering.
- It was not just circumcision that "those of the circumcision" were pushing for. They were pushing the Gentiles to "keep the law of Moses" (**Acts 15:5**). Paul (**Romans 3:31, 6:1-2**) and James (**James 2:14-26**) in their writings spoke of the need to still keep the law of God. There was no argument over the necessity to obey God's laws. The point of distinction between what these Pharisees were saying and what the apostles were saying had to do with the means by which God will save us – keeping the law alone or by faith in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.
- The burden that none could bear, was to try and gain salvation, or the grace of God, by working at all the laws of Moses (**Acts 15:10-11**). Being saved that way would be earning salvation but salvation was NEVER to be achieved that way. God had always intended that salvation would be by His grace through faith in the sacrifice of His Son.
- James listed four things the Gentiles should be warned specifically about, so not to do or observe, because the Gentiles had great trouble with them they abstain from pollutions of idols, from sexual immorality, from animals strangled to death in killing them for food, and from the eating of blood (**Acts 15:20**).
- They were four of the MOST PROMINENT problems for Gentiles to put away from their lives, so James felt it needful to specifically point them out to them. Other things they could find out in due time, for he then went on to say what he said in **Acts 15:21**. They could find the ways of God, living His way of life, as they attended Sabbath services in Jewish synagogues on the Sabbath.