

# CIRCUMCISION OF THE HEART

by Breen Schipke

## Background

Its 57AD, the apostle Paul is in Corinth, nearing the end of his 3rd missionary journey and he is taking the time out to pen his longest and most comprehensive letter to date to the believers in Rome.

Unlike most of Paul's other letters, there did not appear to be any urgent, obvious need that Paul is addressing here, so perhaps he is looking to get in ahead for a change and prevent one from occurring. There appears to be 3 principle reasons for the letter

- To lay the groundwork for his planned trip there
- To seek to further establish their faith and
- To grow the unity between Jew and gentile believers and to head off what he can see may well grow into the same potential seed of discontent that it has in the church before.

As Paul begins to write – or dictate - Chapters 1 and 2 of Romans, it quickly becomes a comprehensive and detailed statement of the reality that all have sinned and he proves this by embarking on a listing of just how sinful natural man is.

After an initial salutation and an offering of thanksgiving and prayer, in verse 18 of Chapter 1 he jumps into the importance of the righteousness that is needed by all of mankind and for the rest of that first chapter he makes it clear that based on the law of God, based on the measure of just who and how God is – none of us can avoid the reality of our condemnation based on how we naturally are and subsequently – how we all would naturally live our unconverted lives.

Then for all of chapter 2 and into chapter 3, Paul starts to narrow down the focus and concentrates on the Jews – showing that they likewise are in no way exempt from this condemnation. And it is within the final 4 verses of chapter 2 that he makes the statement we need to take a closer look at 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.”

So what exactly does this mean the “circumcision of the heart?” And why is Paul discussing this here? We need to understand as Paul is addressing an issue for all of us – not just for a specific group facing a specific issue in time.

## Not a new idea

First up, let's be sure we are not taking a comment at its face value from one instance in the Bible. The concept of the circumcision of the heart is not a new or unique concept of Pauls – it occurs in the Bible as early as Deuteronomy and again later in Jeremiah.

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.”

There is work we are meant to be involved in and it is to aid in our ability to grow more like our God

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.”

So it also something that involves God – through His spirit working with and on us – so we can be more capable of loving.

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.’”

Why do Paul, Moses and Jeremiah use the term circumcision? What is the first message, the first lesson we can derive from the use of this term?

Twice in the book of Acts – chapters 2 and 7 – 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.

But is this all we are to take from this directive to be circumcised of the heart? No.

In Romans, Paul is addressing a well-entrenched perception of the time that to be right with God you needed to be physically circumcised. Physical circumcision for the Jews was a sign of being physically set apart as a people who were collectively chosen of God.

Paul was seeking to ensure this did not become a point of contention between the members of the church in Rome who were a mix of circumcised and uncircumcised – as it already had in the church prior elsewhere.

Spiritual circumcision (the circumcision of the heart) Paul was explaining - signifies a changed heart. A heart worked on by the great surgeon that is our Maker until it is a heart set apart by God for God (Deuteronomy 30:6)

The Jerusalem Council covered in Acts 15 addressed this debate over circumcision and its perceived necessity as a pre-requisite to acceptance by God: and of course Paul was one of the major players in that debate so it is not unreasonable to see his later letter to the Romans as aiming to head off the possibility of all this happening again there.

Luke, the author of Acts, actually uses the term “those of the circumcision” in chapters 10 and 11 as an identifying sign of those who so strongly believed in the necessity of being physically circumcised before you could be said to be justified before God.

But there is the risk of hypocrisy here – the question must be asked: what is the motivation for the act?

Remember the act of circumcision is an outward (physical) sign of being set apart for God – similar to how baptism for instance is also a symbolic act. An outward physical demonstration of our being prepared to bury our past selves and our past lives and be raised again into God’s family through repentance and the receiving of God’s spirit within us.

Matthew 3:7-10

”But when he [John the Baptist] saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, ‘Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?’ [This was their motivation] Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I say to you that God is

able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

Whether or not that tree is circumcised or baptised.

There is a very real warning here for us now: That being circumcised, baptised, keeping the 7th day Sabbath or the Holy Day Feasts or any other number of physical acts or traditions, can be misapplied in exactly the same way – if we make the mistake of believing that by doing so will gain us justification with God.

### **Summary**

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.

To paraphrase Paul:

Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing...., but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter.