

# Study 24: Circumcision

## ***Introduction***

In chapter 16:1- 3, Luke provides us with an example of how Paul dealt with circumcision. We will spend the whole of this study in these three verses.

Circumcision had become a divisionary issue in the early church by this time. Nearly every book of the New Testament deals with the issue. The Jerusalem conference presented a united position that circumcision was not required by christians, but immediately Paul turned around and circumcised Timothy.

## ***Body of the Study***

**What do we know about Timothy?**

**Why was circumcision regarded as important?**

**The beginning of circumcision**

**What happened to circumcision in the wilderness?**

**How did Paul regard circumcision?**

**Did the apostles abolish circumcision?**

**Why did Paul refuse to circumcise Titus, but then circumcise Timothy?**

## **Homework:**

*Read the notes as a review of the study.*

- *What are some of the other issues that this study on circumcision help us to understand in the practices of the early christians?*
- *Read Acts chapter 16 in preparation for next week's study*

# Notes for study 24: Circumcision

## Introduction

In chapter 16:1-3, Luke provides us with an example of how Paul dealt with circumcision. We will spend the whole of this study in these three verses.

Circumcision had become a divisive issue in the church. The outcome of the Jerusalem conference was a united position that circumcision was not required by christians. No sooner had Paul begun his second journey, than he circumcised Timothy. We want to explore in this study, WHY?

## Body of the Study

### What do we know about Timothy?

Timothy is first mentioned in 16:1. Lystra was most likely Timothy's home, and it was most likely during Paul's visit recorded in 14:20 that Timothy became a christian. He would have been a young man of around 18 to 20 years old at the time of his conversion (AD 47). In AD 65 Paul wrote to Timothy "...Let no man despise your youth..." (1 Tim 4:12), which would have placed him at less than 40 years old (ie still regarded as "youthful") in AD 65. This makes him at no more than around 21 years old in AD 47, and probably younger.

There are several possibilities for Timothy's conversion:

1. Timothy was converted during the first missionary journey. This is evidenced by the way in which Paul regarded him as "...my own son in the faith..." (1 Cor 4:17; 1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2). Paul wrote to Timothy that he "...had known from the beginning the persecutions that he suffered at Antioch, Iconium and Lystra..." (2 Tim 3:10-11). The most probable time and place for Timothy's conversion is therefore at Lystra on the first journey.
2. Timothy could have come to Syrian Antioch and been converted whilst Paul and Barnabas were there.
3. It is possible that he was converted by someone other than Paul, and his expression of "...my own son in the faith..." is merely one of affection because of their subsequent close relationship.

The former position is the most tenable. In this case, Timothy must have been converted before Paul was stoned, because he left the city immediately afterwards. It was likely that Paul had been in Lystra for several weeks prior to his stoning. We also note that Timothy had a good reputation amongst the brethren by the time of the second journey (16:2), which shows that he must have already been a christian for some time by that time.

Timothy's mother was a christian, and was Jewish. Acts 16:1 tells us that his mother was already a christian at the time of the second journey. It would seem most likely that she was converted with Timothy at the time of the first trip at Lystra. Both his mother and his grandmother had absolute and genuine faith in God. This would suggest that not only his mother became a christian, but also his grandmother. It is possible that her faith was in God because of her Jewish religion. However, if she failed to respond to the gospel, then it is hardly likely that Paul would address her in this way – on the contrary, it would be more like the address to the Jews in Rom 10. Further, the context of Paul's exhortation is clearly towards their faith in Christ, rather than their Jewish faith.

Whilst Timothy's mother and grandmother were Jewish, his father was a Greek. This was unusual, as the Jews were forbidden from marrying Gentiles (Ezra 9:12).

Timothy had a very strong reputation "...he was well spoken of..." (16:2). This reputation was not just from the brethren at Lystra, but also by those at Iconium. Timothy must have

travelled, and mixed with the brethren at Iconium, and they to Lystra for such a reputation to have developed. He must have been *outstanding (stood out)* in the congregation, since Paul wanted him to go with them on the missionary journey. He was not a person who just happened to become a christian because he was walking through the market place while Paul was preaching, since Paul writes "...as a child you have known the Holy Scriptures..." (2 Tim 3:15).

### ***Why was circumcision regarded as important?***

The Jewish (boy) children were taken on the eighth day of their lives, and had their foreskin removed. This was a sign of "*being a Jew*". For most of this study, we will notice that "circumcision" = "being a Jew"; and "uncircumcision" = "being a Gentile".

In this study, we will place in juxtaposition two actions of Paul – his circumcision of Timothy on this occasion, and his steadfast refusal to circumcise Titus (Gal 3:2), and we will work through the implications of these two positions. We will also compare two statements made by Paul "...circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing..." (1 Cor 8:19); and "...if you are circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you..." (Gal 5:2).

Paul circumcised Timothy himself, "...because of the Jews who were there..." (16:2). As we begin this study, the usual understanding is that Paul did this because it was an expedient, and helped him reach out to the Jews, "...becoming all things to all men..." (1 Cor 9:22). Whilst this may be true, we need to have a proper understanding of why Paul did what he did.

### ***The beginning of circumcision***

Circumcision began with God's covenant with Abraham. It was an everlasting covenant – one that lasted as long as both parties to it continued, or until God removed it.

Then God said to Abraham, "As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come.<sup>10</sup> This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised.<sup>11</sup> You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you.<sup>12</sup> For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner--those who are not your offspring.<sup>13</sup> Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant.<sup>14</sup> Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant." (Gen 17:9-14 NIV)

So, unless God (through the prophets or through the apostles) removed the covenant, it will last as long as the Jews last. The covenant expressed through circumcision did not come from the Law of Moses. It existed through Abraham, not through Moses, and therefore existed 430 years before the Law (Gal 3:17).

Jesus expressed this in Jn 7:

"...Yet, because Moses gave you circumcision (though actually it did not come from Moses, but from the patriarchs), you circumcise a child on the Sabbath..." (Jn 7:22 NIV)

Therefore circumcision did not begin with the Law, and therefore did not end with the Law.

Circumcision was not a sign (confirmation) of the faith of the Jews, since the child who was 8 days old had no faith to confirm. Rather it was an initiation as a Jew, and was necessary to keep Jewish status, since those who were not circumcised were to be "*cut off for not keeping God's covenant*".

Circumcision was to be done not only by Abraham, but by all of his descendants – including Ishmael and his descendants – so it was not just for the Jews, but also for the Arabs.

### **What happened to circumcision in the wilderness?**

After the children of Israel left Egypt, 600,000 male Jews over 20 years old died in the wilderness. The same number were also born on the wilderness, since the number who left Egypt was the same as the number who entered the promised land<sup>1</sup>.

During the 40 years in the wilderness these people were not circumcised, as there was no possibility of them intermingling with the other nations around them. However as soon as they entered the Promised Land, Joshua took the men and circumcised them (Josh 5:2-12).

[During one class, we had a really interesting discussion on this, suggesting an alternate reason for circumcision in the wilderness. The children of Israel who left Egypt had abandoned God, and that is why they were rejected and died in the wilderness. The new numbers who grew up needed to be “set apart” before they could enter into the land – and effectively into a relationship with God. They had not been “set apart”, and hence the reason for instigating the act of circumcision before entering the land.]

### **How did Paul regard circumcision?**

Paul’s position regarding circumcision has already been noted in our study of chapter 15 – that circumcision was absolutely not necessary for a person to become a christian, and such was the consolidated position of all of the apostles. This was the explicit outcome of the Jerusalem conference (Acts 15:24), and was demonstrated by the fact that Titus was not required to be circumcised when he went to the conference with Paul and Barnabas (Gal 2:3).

Paul says that what is important is our faith in Christ, not whether or not we have been circumcised (Gal 5:6). Further, that we should not try to reverse the position – not physically, but rather the Jew – Gentile position: “...Is anyone called being a Jew? Let him remain a Jew! Is anyone called being a Gentile? Let him not become a Jew!...” (my paraphrase of 1 Cor 7:18)

This then, leads us to the heart of the matter. ***Circumcision is related to the issue of nationality, not to the issue of religion.*** The separation of the Jewish religion from the Jewish nation is difficult when we look at it from the Jews point of view. However Paul notes in the Galatian letter that righteousness came to Abraham based on his faith, and not because of keeping the Jewish religion (Law of Moses) (Gal 3:6-18). From the perspective of a Gentile christian, the Jewish religion (Law of Moses) has now ceased, yet the Jewish nation continues. It should be added that the Jews continue to practice the Jewish Religion, even although it is of none effect having been nailed to the cross of Christ (Col 2:14).

### **Did the apostles abolish circumcision?**

The very short and simple answer is demonstrated in Paul’s circumcision of Timothy. Paul neither taught nor practiced that circumcision has ceased. When Paul came back to Jerusalem with Luke after the third journey, James addressed them concerning many of the rumours about what Paul had been doing and teaching (Acts 21:17-25). The rumours were that Paul had been teaching the Jews in the Gentile world not to be circumcised. These allegations were clearly found not to be true.

James re-iterated the letter that was written at the Jerusalem conference (confirming that nothing had changed). But notice what James says (emphasis mine):

**As for the Gentile believers,** we have written to them our decision that they should abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. (Acts 21:25 NIV)

This really leads us to the heart of the circumcision matter – it was for the Jews, but not required by the Gentiles.

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<sup>1</sup> Compare Num 1:45-46 & Num 26:51, 63-65.

The main controversy over circumcision was not the Jewish abandonment of it, but rather their seeking to have it bound on the Gentiles. Had the apostles decreed that circumcision had been abolished, then it would have been the end of all the controversy. Once again, it demonstrates that circumcision was not abandoned by the apostles.

### **Why did Paul refuse to circumcise Titus, but then circumcise Timothy?**

The case of Titus is clear. He was a Gentile, and was not required to be circumcised for any reason – especially the reason of binding Jewish customs upon a Gentile as a necessary requirement for being a christian!

However the case of Timothy is different. Whilst Timothy's mother was a Jew(ess), his father was a Greek. He was therefore a half-blood Jew. There are four possibilities here:

1. If Timothy's father and mother were both Jews, then he would have been circumcised on the eighth day according to the covenant with *Abraham* (Note – not because of the Law of Moses, as we have already seen).
2. If Timothy's father had been a Jew and his mother a Gentile, then his father would have carried out the circumcision as required.
3. If both of Timothy's parents had been Greeks, then Paul would have rejected the requirement for circumcision exactly as he did in the case of Titus.
4. However, the case with Timothy is that his mother was a Jew, but his father was a Greek. It was customary for Jewish mothers not to have the child circumcised without the consent of the father – and in this case, that consent must have been withheld.

Timothy's circumcision was not obligatory – since he was only partly of Jewish descent. However Paul carried it out “*because of the Jews*”.

The case of the expediency with Timothy applied only to half-blood Jews. The Gentiles were not subject to circumcision at all, and the full-blood Jews were fully subject to it and would have carried it out on the eighth day. Further, the expediency only applied to half-blood Jews *who had a Gentile father and a Jewish mother*, since if it was to be carried out at all, it would otherwise have been done by the father on the eighth day.

The fact that Paul carried it out when it was not mandatory for half-blood Jews reveals the fullness of the nature of circumcision:

**It had absolutely nothing to do with Timothy's religion, and had everything to do with his Nationality.**

As Timothy was to work with Paul amongst both Jews and Gentiles, his Nationality would be questioned by the Jewish leaders. It was therefore expedient that Timothy was in fact a Jew rather than a half-blood who was neither Jew nor Greek.

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