

- c. The apostle Paul was present at the Jerusalem Council, and Luke records no dissension on his part respecting James' conclusion. More importantly, Paul and Barnabas were among those who carried the elders' letter of resolution back to the church at Antioch and presented their decision to the saints there (Acts 15:22-31). Apart from any consideration of Paul's writings, these observations are sufficient to show that he agreed with James' and the counsel's conviction that Gentile believers are not obligated to keep either the rite of circumcision or the Law of Moses; their sole obligation is unqualified devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ.

At the same time, without Paul's letters the crucial question of the *disposition* of circumcision and the Mosaic Law under the new order would lack a clear and complete answer in the New Testament. Based only on the ruling of the Jerusalem Counsel, one might fairly conclude that both circumcision and the Law of Moses – as the preeminent identity markers of God's people in the time preceding Christ – have passed away without any connection to the present age of fulfillment.

Paul's writings, however, show that this is not the case; the role of circumcision and law in defining the people of God hasn't been abrogated with the inauguration of the new age. At first glance, this may appear to set Paul at odds with the Jerusalem Counsel and his own concurrence at that time. But, quite the contrary, consistent with the counsel's christocentric perspective, *Paul saw the continuing relevance of circumcision and the Law precisely in terms of Christ's fulfillment and the believer's singular obligation of devotion to Him.*

- 1) Circumcision was the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant, and that covenant introduced the idea of a corporate people for God's own possession. God covenanted to be the God of Abraham and his descendents, and, at the level of the twelve Israelite tribes descended from him, this relationship was administered by means of the Sinai Covenant ("Law of Moses").
- 2) But the Abrahamic Covenant was also prophetic. In the first place, it promised to Abraham the kingdom components of *land, seed, and blessing*: Abraham would become the father of a royal seed coming to fruition in a multitude of nations. That seed, in turn, would dwell with Yahweh in His sanctuary-land and, in the context of the intimate communion between covenant son and Father, the blessing of the true knowledge of God would be mediated to all the earth's families.

In essence, God promised Abraham a kingdom that would realize His ancient oath to bring about the consummate restoration of sacred space.

- 3) As a prophetic instrument, the Abrahamic Covenant had a near-term referent in the Israelite kingdom. That kingdom represented a quasi-recovery of sacred space in Yahweh's "creation" of a new "son" to dwell with Him in the place of His sanctuary – an Edenic land flowing with milk and honey (cf. Exodus 3:6-8, 4:22, 15:16-17; Numbers 13:17-27).

But the ultimate referent of the Abrahamic Covenant transcended the nation of Israel and their earthly kingdom. The marrow of the covenant promise consisted in the particulars of land, seed, and blessing, and all of these were destined to converge in the Lord Jesus Christ.

- Even apart from the New Testament witness (i.e., Galatians 3:16), the Scriptures indicated that the promise of a *seed* looked to a single individual. Israel was Abraham's seed, but the nation's failure to fulfill its Abrahamic identity and calling provided the occasion for God's promise of another Israel (Isaiah 49:1ff).
- So also the promise of a *land* was God's pledge to fulfill His oath to be the God of Abraham's seed – to establish them with Him in the place of His own sanctuary. God promised the land of Canaan to Abraham, but before his descendents had even approached its border they already recognized it to be the divine habitation. Their possession of Canaan meant dwelling in God's presence. Thus the land promise spoke of sacred space – the place of divine-human communion, and that, too, was realized in Christ (John 1:1, 14).
- Finally, the promise of *blessing* was that, through Abraham and his seed, all the families of the earth would obtain the true human blessedness of restored relational intimacy with the Creator-Father. God's promise to Abraham of global blessing *through his seed* was simply the reaffirmation of His pledge in Eden to end the curse of estrangement through a son of Eve, the “mother of all the living.”

- 4) The promise and fulfillment of a “people for God's own possession” – which are bound up in the Abrahamic Covenant – are centered in Jesus Christ. This being the case, it follows that circumcision and the Law of Moses – themselves Abrahamic entities – should also look to find their fulfillment in Christ. Paul's letters affirm this and show how it is so.

The place to begin is with Paul's doctrine of the *new creation*, especially as it focuses on the human race. Paul recognized that the prophetic promise of creational renewal has been realized through Christ's work, but that, in the present age, it extends only to the *spirit* of men. Like the rest of the material creation, the renewal of man's physicality awaits the Parousia (Romans 8:18-25). Nevertheless, if any person is “in Christ,” he is a “new creature”; he has entered into the renewal that Jesus inaugurated in Himself as the Last Adam (2 Corinthians 5:17; cf. 1 Corinthians 15:20ff).

But this renewal of man has a *relational* goal. Man is “image-son,” so that his renewal means the restoration of his communion with his Creator-Father. For man, death is estrangement; life is the fullness and perfection of the divine-human intimacy for which the image-son was created.

So it is that believers are enlivened through faith in Christ by the *indwelling presence* of Christ's Spirit. For man, the new creation is "Christ in you"; life in Christ is the death of alienation and the recovery and perfecting of the spiritual intimacy that is the goal of man's nature.

With respect to both promise and fulfillment, the "people of God" is a relational conception, and it is the renewal secured by Christ's self-offering and made effectual by His Spirit that has brought the promise to its ordained fulfillment. The divine-human intimacy pledged in the Abrahamic Covenant and portrayed in the Israelite kingdom has now been realized in and through the true Man and true Seed of Abraham.

What this means is that now, in the fullness of the times, men become members of the covenant household – that is, *sons of God* – by spiritual union with the Son through His indwelling Spirit. Unlike the former era when covenant membership was entirely **physical** – being a matter of genealogical descent, possession of a physical sign, and outward conformity to a written covenant definition, membership in the covenant community is now a **spiritual** matter, free of physical concerns.

A person is a covenant son by virtue of spiritual union with the true covenant Son: "*If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him*" (Romans 8:9). And if a person doesn't belong to Christ – who is the Seed to whom the Abrahamic promise pertained, then he has no share in Abraham and the promises made to him. Those joined to Christ are sons of Abraham and heirs of the promise, "You shall be My people." They alone comprise the covenant community, the "people of God."

- 5) It is in connection with this reality of the new creation that the continuing significance of circumcision and the Law of Moses is discovered and discerned. The new creation is the substance of the fulfillment that has come in Christ; at the same time, *fulfillment is itself simply the realization of what was promised*. The implication of these things is that the new creation was the heart of Old Testament promise (which indeed it was). And since circumcision and the Law of Moses were central to the developing promise, it also follows that they looked to the new creation. This latter implication is substantiated by Jesus' own insistence that all the Scriptures testified of Him – the Scriptures that give such a prominent place to circumcision and the Mosaic Law. The point is simply this:

As external covenant definition and physical sign, the Law of Moses and circumcision were prophetic and christocentric; they portrayed and anticipated their own fulfillment in a spiritual, new creational counterpart to be realized through the work of Yahweh's messianic Servant."

This is, in fact, exactly what Paul argued throughout his writings.

Circumcision was the sign of God's covenant with Abraham, and the goal of that covenant was to establish a people for God's own possession. This covenant community would be comprised of Abraham's biological and non-biological household *as each member possessed the sign of the covenant*. Thus God demanded that every Israelite be circumcised (Leviticus 12:1-3; cf. Joshua 5:1-9); anyone who lacked the sign, God rejected from membership among His people (Genesis 17:10-14).

The reason is that circumcision spoke of consecration to Yahweh, the God of the covenant. The excising of body tissue symbolized the severing of the person himself from natural attachments and allegiances; circumcision signified that God's people were wholly set apart to Him. Thus it spoke of a spiritual reality, but only as a physical representation of it.

Circumcision did not and could not effect that which it signified, namely the *circumcision of the heart* (cf. Deuteronomy 10:11-16; Jeremiah 4:1-4). What circumcision represented lay beyond the capability of Abraham's household (Jeremiah 9:25-26). Thus the Lord made true circumcision a matter of divine promise; He would fulfill the sign in its spiritual counterpart – the circumcision of the man himself (Deuteronomy 30:1-6).

Paul recognized that the “fullness of the times” hadn't altered the fact of Abraham's covenant household being distinguished by circumcision, but he understood that their circumcision now reflects Yahweh's fulfilled promise: *In the new age, people are sons of Abraham and members of his covenant household by spiritual circumcision done by Christ's Spirit*. And as with the promissory sign, all who lack this fulfilled circumcision are outside the covenant community, being “cut off” from God's people (cf. again Romans 2:28-29, 4:1-12; Colossians 2:8-12).

Now that promise has yielded to fulfillment, “*neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation*.” To all who discern this standard of the new order and determine to walk in accordance with it, Paul proclaimed “*peace and mercy upon them*” (Galatians 6:15-16). Paul not only fiercely opposed Jewish believers who sought to impose circumcision on their Gentile brethren, he equally insisted that Jews who had come to Christ regard their own circumcision as utterly irrelevant. In the presence of the substance, the shadow was to be set aside as obsolete (Colossians 2:16-3:11).

The same principle of inward, spiritual fulfillment applies to the continuing role of the **Law of Moses**. Like circumcision, the Mosaic Law was grounded in the Abrahamic Covenant and it, too, served a prophetic role, anticipating its own fulfillment in relation to the Seed of Abraham (cf. Matthew 5:17-20, 11:13). Few disagree at this point; the matter of contention is the nature, outcome, and implications of this fulfillment.

First of all, it's vital to recognize that the dynamic of promise/fulfillment always involves movement from the lesser to the greater, and particularly from the physical to the spiritual. This principle was demonstrated with circumcision, but it is equally true of every matter of biblical promise, whether issued as direct prophecy or by means of typology. This is not to say that biblical fulfillment in any given instance is devoid of any physical aspect, but only that fulfillment always involves the *spiritualizing* of the corresponding promise. Such is the case with the Law of Moses.

In its historical context, the Mosaic Law was the covenant instrument for administering at the national level the divine-human relationship instituted by the Abrahamic Covenant. The Law didn't bypass or annul the former covenant; it presupposed and served it. The Law facilitated the relationship between God and Abraham's seed, and it did so specifically by defining the *parties* to the relationship as well as the *relationship* itself. The Law formally ratified Israel's status as "son of God" and it defined to the covenant "son" what sonship entails and requires. Most simply, the Sinai Covenant acted to define Israel to Israel, and in that way define also the God of the covenant to the covenant seed.

Because the Law of Moses defined and prescribed Israel's sonship as the Abrahamic seed, its sole concern was *love*. Whatever the specific law, ordinance, or commandment, the issue was the same: Israel was to be wholly devoted to its covenant Father-God. The Jews well understood this (cf. Matthew 22:35-40; Mark 12:28-33), but were unable to satisfy the Law's demand. Israel could not fulfill its identity and calling as the Seed of Abraham, and this inability meant that, if God's promise to Abraham were to be realized, He would need to raise up another Israel. ***By fulfilling Israel's identity and calling, this One would fulfill the Law.***

This is the key to understanding how Jesus "fulfilled" the Law. The common conception is that Jesus meticulously and perfectly kept every command and detail associated with the Law, but this misses the true nature of His fulfillment. Jesus fulfilled the Law by being the One the Law defined and demanded; He fulfilled the Law by being Israel *in truth* – Seed of Abraham, chosen Son, Servant, Disciple and Witness to the Father; He fulfilled the Law by being the Son defined by love.

In Christ, the identity markers of the people of God are brought to their true fulfillment. They are transformed into their spiritual counterparts, and in that way they continue to play a role in the New Covenant household. God's people are still determined by circumcision (Colossians 2:9-12), and they "keep" the Law by being found in the One who is Himself the fulfillment of the Law (Romans 8:1-4), even as they are being transformed into His likeness. Far from being at odds with each other, James and Paul are in perfect accord. The believer's practical devotion to the enthroned Son of David is merely the life of his spiritual union with Him.