

18.06.06 Coromandel Baptist 10:00 a.m.

The Great Circumcision

Bible Readings = Romans 2:17-29; Galatians 6:11-18

Introduction:

- (1) As we draw this series on Galatians to a close, we come to Paul's final comments in which the personal concern he has for his readers and his central convictions are both evident.
- (2) At the heart of his apostolic care for the Galatian congregations is the apostolic gospel (Gal. 6:14)
- (3) However it is necessary that we understand these comments in the light of the immediate issue presenting to the Galatian congregations, and this will cause us to re-visit the matter of circumcision.
- (4) We need the Spirit to open up the gospel to us in this discussion, since the gulf between the time, cultural and religious conditions that we face is vast. In principle, however, the discussion about circumcision takes us to the centre of the life we live under the New Covenant.

This week we will be talking about the great act of circumcision that God has accomplished for us in Christ, cutting us off from the world and uniting us to himself that we might be his people.

1. Revising the Context

(1) All the way along, we have had to bear in mind the context of the letter: certain men having come down from the Jerusalem church, teaching the Galatian converts that they must hold to the Old Testament laws (particularly regarding the 'boundary markers' of circumcision, food laws and Sabbath) in order to be 'real' converts.

- Theirs was not a straight *denial* of the work of the Cross, but an *annulling* of it. They annulled the work of God's grace by adding to the finished work of God in the Cross. Cf. Gal. 2:21

(2) The main focus of attention is the matter of circumcision, and a glance down the last two chapters of Galatians shows how Paul is focussing the weight of his argument upon the matter as he comes to the end of the letter (e.g. Gal. 5:2, 3, 6, 11; 6:12, 13, 15).

(3) Given the Old Testament importance of circumcision, Paul makes some astounding statements

- E.g. Gen. 17:9-14; Ex. 4:24-26; 12:43ff; Josh. 5:1-10 cf. Gal. 5:6; 6:15 (compare with Rom. 2:28f.; 1 Cor. 7:18).
- It seems, then, on first glance, that the Judaisers had a powerful argument and that Scripture was on their side against Paul.

2. The Meaning of Circumcision

(1) What did circumcision mean?

- It was a *gift* of God to Abraham, as a *sign* of the covenant he had made with him. The actual giving of the covenant preceded the sign. He received the promise of God, believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness, *while yet uncircumcised*. The sign did not add to that promise, nor did it secure it, but it was a sign that it had been given.

- Therefore circumcision acted as a sign to Abraham and through him to his decedents, and thus to the whole of Israel, that they were the *people of promise*. Their whole of their life was meant to be lived by faith in the promises of God.
- These promises were not just those given to Abraham, but these in turn looked back to the great promise of the Seed who would come (Gen. 3:15). No accident, therefore that it was *circumcision*, (as opposed to a tattoo, or nick in the ear or removal or piercing in the nose, for example), as it involved the very organ of generation through which, by means of union with the woman, the Seed would come from her womb.
- And, moreover, it was to be *given to children* (males, eight days old). The whole nation stood in this covenant relation to God, from the least to the greatest, and the sign was received passively (i.e. not because they had attained anything, as in other cultures where circumcision was practiced as a right of passage having attained manhood, and entering into one's inheritance and identity; or sometimes as a fertility rite). The nature of circumcision in Israel emphasised that the covenant relation to God was a *gift*.
- Thus circumcision became *the* maker of national identity. It set Israel off from the other nations, and marked out those who were full proselytes to Judaism. Marked Israel off as God's chosen people, cut off from the nations, devoted to him as his own chosen possession.
- It was also applied to foreigners and resident aliens who had joined themselves to Israel i.e. in its scope it was *inclusive* of the nations, in keeping with the promise to Abraham.

(2) Circumcision, then, was the sign of Israel's covenant relation to God, attesting to the nation that it lived under the promise of God, marking them off from the other nations as God's special possession. To this covenant nation he gave the Law, the prophets, the worship, the presence of his glory, etc.

- So how can Paul make the statements he does?

3. Circumcision, Promise and Fulfilment

(1) Other Old Testament background indicates that the matter of circumcision was never a question of mere physical importance

- Deut. 10:16 cf. Jer. 4:4; 6:10; 9:25-26

(2) Deut. 30:6 is a key passage, not simply for what it promises, but for the location in the unfolding pattern of Deuteronomy

- Recommend Martin Bleby's talk at Winter School 2006 'Beyond the Broken Covenant'
- See the importance of Deut. 30:6 in relation to the covenant blessings and curses being enacted to the last letter of their intent.

(3) So, far from ignoring the passages on circumcision, Paul has in fact paid close attention to them. There would be a time when the Old Covenant would come to an end, and that God would circumcise the hearts of his people, and that the promises to Abraham (of which physical circumcision was a sign) would be fulfilled, and that in this the nations would be brought in. But this would have to come through a great act of spiritual circumcision, in which we were entirely passive and which created a New Covenant community.

- Colossians 2:11ff.; 3:11 cf. Gal. 6:15, 16. The new Israel of God = the new creation of the covenant people.
- Jesus, cut off from the land of the living, as all the Flesh attached to him on the Cross, knife of God's judgment fell, separated from God and man, cast out so that he has become a bridegroom of blood to us. He bore the hard heartedness, the uncircumcised flesh of our sin, and thence brought us to God the Father...as his precious possession, holy, beloved, cleansed and purified. Gal. 6:14.
- That new community neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love. It is the new creation of God (Gal. 6:15) the Israel of God (6:16), consisting of Jews and Gentiles in one new body (as in Eph. 2:11-22)
- New Covenant community stands eternally by the promise of God.
 - We must emphasise the absolutely sure and unshakeable nature of this New Covenant (Hebrews) and compare with the old covenant which they broke. In Christ's great act of circumcision (on the Cross) all the promises and gifts are sealed and secured forever. The New Covenant could no more be broken than Christ could be crucified, buried and raised a second time.
 - This is the security in which we stand as the Israel of God, so that in Christ all the promises of God are Yes and Amen (2 Cor. 1:20).