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A1431 – August 3, 2014 – Romans 2:25-294
The Jew And Circumcision

Last time we worked with Romans 2:17-24, the section where Paul turns to the Jew. Here his goal is to show that the Jew is condemned. This was likely a shock for many Jews. Most believed that Jews were not condemned for two basic reasons. First, because of the Law and second, because of circumcision. Last time we dealt with the first reason, the Law, and how Paul showed that while the Jew had the Law he was inconsistent with the Law and therefore his inconsistency condemned him. We said, first of all, in verse 17, that the Jew was a physical descendant of Jacob on his father's side. And yet, as we will see today, those who are physical descendants in this manner only are not really *true* Jews. That is why Paul says in verse 17, "But if you bear the name "Jew," meaning, if you are called or referred to as a "Jew." Yet they are not *really* Jews because as we will see in verses 28-29 they are circumcised in the flesh only and not in the heart and therefore they are Jews according to the flesh only. What this means is that while the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant were made available to all Jews they are only to be enjoyed ultimately by those Jews who had a faith like Abraham, at which point in time their hearts were circumcised. For Jews who did not have a faith like Abraham and only had their flesh circumcised, they are not going to enjoy the ultimate benefits of the Abrahamic Covenant, they are only called Jews. Now the name Jew we said etymologically means "praised of God." And the true Jew is praised of God; he is a believer and he seeks the praise of God. But the one who is Jew in name only is not praised of God; he is an unbeliever and he seeks the praise of men. You see these two types of Jews in the gospel account where the Pharisee and the publican go to the temple to pray and the Pharisee is standing in a very prominent place making a big scene and telling God all the wonderful things he has done for God over and against the publican who is standing at a distance and beating his breast and crying out to God that he is a sinner. You see right there the difference between the Jew

in name only and the true Jew. There were always these two types of Jews. In this section Paul is addressing that first type of Jew, the Pharisaic type who Paul says in verses 17ff had the Law. In verse 17 the Law is that which the Jew found security in and in verse 18 the Law as that which he was instructed out of at the synagogue from childhood and in verse 20 the Law gave him the rough sketch of all knowledge and truth and yet in verse 21 Paul begins to ask some very probing questions about those who found security in the Law. Did the Jew who taught the Law teach himself? He had not. At some point he had broken the Law, showing inconsistency. He may not have, as verse 21 mentions, stolen or as verse 22 mentions, committed adultery or robbed temples, but at some point of the Law he was guilty. How then could he take refuge in the Law? The Law could not save him; it condemned him. Even Gentiles were capable of seeing his inconsistency. The Jew taught one thing and did another. And, of course, we can all see the lesson quite plainly. Do we who teach Christianity, do we not teach ourselves? That could be a frantic thought. But, of course, we are not depending on it as a security blanket. Jesus Christ is our sole dependence. We trust in Him. But the Jew, he trusted in the Law.

Now the Jew who was taking refuge in the Law just had that refuge exposed and so now what is he to do? Flee and take refuge somewhere else. Since he could no longer take refuge in the Law he would try to take refuge in his circumcision. The Jew is like all of us, when shown to be a sinner he immediately starts to defend himself and then when that defense is blown and he is cornered he attempts to flee to another refuge and he is slipping and sliding all over the place trying to justify himself until finally he is just arguing with you. The Jew is not unlike each and every one of us. When we are exposed we try to argue and justify ourselves and flee to another refuge when we run out of justifications. So what is happening here is the Jew's refuge in the Law has been exposed and he is fleeing to the refuge of his circumcision. Well, I am circumcised and therefore I am not condemned. The Jews at the time had a belief that Abraham stood at the gates of Hades in order to ensure that no circumcised man was ever cast into Hades. It is that common but erroneous belief that is what Paul is arguing against in verses 25-29. In a word he is saying that Abraham is not standing at the gates of Hades in order to keep out those who are circumcised. Oh no, indeed there will be those who are circumcised in Hades; you cannot take refuge there. Paul is cutting off every possible escape route of the Jew.

Paul begins in verse 25, **For indeed circumcision is of value if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision.** Paul admits that **circumcision was of value if you kept the Law.** However, did anyone keep **the Law**? He just concluded in vv 17-24 that no one kept the Law. So it would have value if someone did keep the Law but no one ever did. Therefore it had no value. That is to say what the end of verse 25 says, that **your circumcision has become uncircumcision.**

Now before we get too far into these verses what was the original purpose of circumcision? There are three points to the doctrine of circumcision. What I want to show with these four points is that circumcision was a ritual of obedience that was a sign of the Abrahamic Covenant. All the covenants had a sign. With the Noachic covenant the sign was the rainbow and with the Abrahamic covenant the sign was circumcision. Why was circumcision the sign? What I would argue is that circumcision was not arbitrarily chosen to be the sign. The first thing about circumcision is that it revealed that the fallen flesh is present from birth. This is revealed in that it was administered in Israel to infants rather than to adolescents as in pagan cultures. When I visited Turkey it was interesting to discover that Islam circumcised their boys but they did it when they were between the ages of 8-13. Paganism always circumcises later in life. But in Israel circumcision is always at birth. That's a major difference. What's the meaning of the difference? What's it reflecting in thought? When administered at birth it is an indication that from the very beginning we have a sin problem that needs to be corrected surgically. We don't get a sin problem when we commit our first conscious sin or when we reach an age of accountability, we are born with a sin problem. What did David say in Ps 51? In sin my mother conceived me. That's the first big thing about circumcision as it related to the Abrahamic covenant. It was indicative that the Israelite had a sin problem from the very beginning of life. Second, circumcision indicated that the sin problem needed to be surgically corrected. Circumcision was a physical surgery that manipulated a part of the body. Why did God have them do that? Why do you have surgery on any part of your body? Because something's wrong with it. So this was teaching a lesson. The physical surgery was showing the need for spiritual surgery of the heart. I'm sure that many Jewish boys grew up wondering why they were circumcised and the Canaanite boys weren't; and if they asked their father

they would tell them that it pointed to the need to have their sin problem surgically corrected. Third, and most importantly, circumcision of the heart was conditioned on faith like Abraham. The phrase circumcised in heart is clearly used in the OT, Deut 30:6, “the LORD your God will circumcise your heart...so that you may live.” Jer 4:4, “circumcise yourselves to the LORD And remove the foreskins of your heart.” The physical was just a means of communicating the spiritual need. The physical circumcision was not an end in itself. It was a ritual. What had happened by the NT times? The physical had become an end in itself. The ritual was thought to be sufficient. They even invented the idea that Abraham stood at the gates of Hades and checked people’s drawers! They had lost the spiritual import. In many ways it’s like water baptism today. Water baptism is a ritual. It doesn’t accomplish a thing spiritually. What it does is point to something spiritual. It teaches a spiritual truth about our co-crucifixion, co-burial and co-resurrection with Christ. But what have so many in the Church done? They’ve done just what the Jews did with circumcision, they made it an end in itself; as if it were actually accomplishing something spiritually. It doesn’t do a thing. Are you taking refuge in baptism? I hope not; that’s as futile as the Jew taking refuge in circumcision. They are both ritual signs that point to spiritual truths.

But that was all lost and that’s why Paul is logically refuting the Jew who depended upon circumcision. If he didn’t keep all the Law and keep it perfectly, it had no value; their circumcision had become uncircumcision. Meaning what? That it had not reached its intended goal. Which was what? To alert them to their need for spiritual surgery of the heart, circumcision of heart, that was the issue all along!

Verse 26, **So if the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?** Paul’s simply using logic here. Paul was a master logician. We see him use a number of logical arguments well-known to logicians then and now; modus ponens, modus tollens, etc...Paul was a very educated man, a sharp thinker; the Church could use more logical thinkers today. The Scriptures aren’t opposed to logic; the Scriptures are to be organized by the use of logic. In other words, logic is under the authority of Scripture, it’s not equal to Scripture, it’s under Scripture. And since we are made in God’s image we have logic and are designed to organize the Scriptural truths according to logic. So we don’t spurn logic as Christians; if we do we have to spurn

Scripture because Paul uses logic. Here's some fine logic in verse 26. Take a look at it, who do you think is being referred to as **the uncircumcised man**? That's the Gentile. What's his argument? **If the Gentile man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?** Now could the Gentile man **keep the requirements of the Law**? No, he could not, so you see this is just hypothetical. But if he could then logically would **not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?** Yes, it would, hypothetically speaking. Of course no Gentile could keep the requirements of the Law so no uncircumcised Gentile was regarded as circumcised. We know that. But hypothetically, if he did then the fact remains that though uncircumcised he would be regarded as circumcised. And what is Paul's point? That circumcision in itself is nothing! What really mattered was the Law. Unless you perfectly kept the Law your circumcision was meaningless. So the physical ritual of circumcision was not an end in itself; it pointed to the need for spiritual circumcision of the heart.

Verse 27, **And he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter of the Law and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law?** In other words, what's Paul doing here? Using more logic. Who is the one **who is physically uncircumcised?** The Gentile. Who is the one who has the **letter of the Law and circumcision?** The Jew. So again, **if the Gentile keeps the Law...** which none of them ever did, but hypothetically speaking, if he did then **will he not judge** the Jew? Logically, yes. Logically what was unthinkable to a Jew would be true, a Gentile would stand in judgment over a Jew.

Now that's quite a condemnation. Paul is leaving no room for escape. He's cornering the Jew again because the Jew was trying to take refuge in the Law and now he's trying to take refuge in circumcision but Paul won't let him. Paul is cornering him again because Paul knew that men have to be shown that they are without a defense before God. And Paul knew men and how they slip and slide from one argument to another. And you should learn a lesson from this about how to talk to people. They are always trying to slip and slide from one justification of themselves to another and you should shut down all their justifications; just one after another you show them all to be illegitimate until you've got them cornered. And then they will start arguing with you and they will be erratic and that's when you know you've cornered

them and they are like a wild animal that is afraid and if that happens then at least you know you've communicated. They understand that they are condemned and that is a good thing, even if they don't admit they are condemned, that is a good thing because they have realized it and that is necessary for seeking true refuge in Jesus Christ.

So Paul has cornered the one who is called "Jew" and who is taking refuge in the Law and then in circumcision. Verse 28, **For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh.** In other words, what is this saying? That the one who is called a "Jew," who is a Jew in name only is not really a **Jew**. You were considered a Jew if you were circumcised and came under the Law. But Paul is saying that a true Jew is not one who follows the **outward** form of the Law or is circumcised **in the outward flesh**. Being a true Jew isn't based on following the letter of the Law, it was the spirit of the Law that really mattered; and it isn't based on circumcision of the flesh, it was the circumcision of the heart that mattered. So what Paul is doing in verses 28-29 is defining who is a true Jew. And who is the true Jew? Verse 29 **But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter, and his praise is not from men, but from God.** The true Jew is not a Jew in name only, as those who had the external marks of being a Jew, but the one who had the internal marks of the Spirit, a circumcised heart, and one who sought the true meaning of the name Jew, which is praise, **not from men, but from God**. The contrast then in verses 28-29 is between the unbelieving Jew and the believing Jew. Only the believing Jew is the true Jew. Yet the irony of verses 28-29 is that if a Jew today believes in Jesus Christ, his fellow Jews will consider him to no longer be a Jew. That's looking at a Jew from the religious standpoint. But in reality the believing Jew is the true Jew and the unbelieving Jews are Jew in name only.

Now I've given you the true exegesis of these verses but I want to alert you to the fact that verse 28-29 are one of five passages that Replacement theologians use to say that the Church has replaced Israel. And this is an important issue so let's define a few things before looking briefly at the five passages and what Scripture truly teaches.

First, we are Dispensational in theology. Dispensational theology is the view that Israel is the covenant people of God and that Christ came to fulfill the

covenant with Israel but they rejected Him and so the kingdom is postponed and in the meantime Christ is building His Church. When His Church is completed then Israel will receive Him and the kingdom will come. So we hold that Israel and the Church are distinct groups in the plan of God and we arrive at this understanding of Scripture from a consistent straightforward interpretation of Scripture.

Second, by way of contrast there is Replacement Theology (aka supercessionism). Replacement theology is the view that Israel, by their rejection of Jesus as the Messiah, forfeited their promises under the covenant plan of God and these promises are now being fulfilled to the Church in a spiritual fashion. So the Land is now heaven, the seed is Christ and His salvation, the worldwide blessing is being carried out by the Church's proclamation of the Great Commission. Since the covenants have been fulfilled to the Church then there is no future for ancient Israel in her land. The modern state of Israel is nothing more than a political state created by humans. This is replacement theology.

The essential concept of Replacement Theology is the "one people of God" concept as derived from the theologically contrived covenants of works and grace (and sometimes redemption). By theologically contrived I mean these covenants are not found in the Bible. The covenant of works is said to have been made with Adam at Creation. It is purported to have said that if Adam obeyed God then he would earn His salvation. This is mere conjecture. Never is this stated. Since Adam failed to obey then it is said that God made a covenant of grace wherein He promised Adam and all His elect progeny salvation. This group of saved people are termed "the one people of God." There can be no distinction between Israel and the Church. They are equivalent terms that describe the one people of God. Again, this breakdown of distinctions into arbitrary categories of elect and non-elect is mere conjecture. This unfortunate idea also has a number of strange repercussions where the Scripture has to be distorted in order to force fit the Bible into the mold of their pre-conceived theology. First, it has to override the plain language of the biblical covenants reducing them all too mere outworkings of the covenant of grace. The Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, et al are mere outworkings of the one covenant of grace. Second, because the Abrahamic covenant is grace and the Mosaic is law then salvation is by grace and law. This means for them that the true believer who has experienced God's grace

will obey God's law. Thus, assurance that one is really saved is based on whether they obey God's law sufficiently enough to assure their hearts. Third, since there is only one people of God then Christ only died for the elect. They maintain that if Christ died for someone then they will be saved; in essence, that the atonement applies itself automatically independent of faith. Therefore they reason that Christ could not have died for the whole world. If Christ died for the whole world then this logically, in their mind, would lead to universalism. By this they betray the need to downplay the role of faith. For them faith is a gift of God that is given in response to regeneration. So a fourth thing they maintain is that regeneration precedes faith. Somehow you are saved before you have faith. Finally, while this isn't all, it is important to point out that they embrace a dual hermeneutic; literal much of the time, when it suits their theology, and allegorical the rest of the time, when the plain sense does not fit their theology. This shifting in method is dangerous because it enthrones the interpreter giving him ultimate power over the word of God rather than the other way around.

Now let's expand how they defend that there is but one people of God, that is, that the OT people of God was Israel and in the NT this people of God is the Church and therefore these are one and the same people. With that idea already in place from the covenant of grace they have to find passages that refer to Gentile believers as Jews. They have five passages they attempt to use. The first passage is Romans 2:28-29. Replacement theologian Ridderbos says we find here "a radicalizing of the concept Jew, and thereby of the definition of the essence of the people of God."ⁱ That is, the essence of the people of God is the Jew, that is, anyone who is circumcised in heart. All ethnical distinctions are erased. The only thing that matters is circumcision of heart. If one has a circumcised heart then one is a Jew, that is, a member of the one people of God. This understanding and use of Rom 2:28-29 is faulty. First, the context is set by Romans 2:17, "If you bear the name Jew." Paul is not saying that Gentiles can become Jews. Paul is saying that a Jew in name only can become a true Jew only by having a circumcised heart. Arnold Fruchtenbaum says, "These verses [vv. 25–29] must be kept in their context, which is that Paul is dealing with Jews and making a distinction between Jews who believe and Jews who do not believe. He is not teaching that every Gentile Christian is a spiritual Jew."ⁱⁱ Second, this understanding is confirmed by the fact that Paul is contrasting the external Jews with internal Jews. One who is only an external Jew is marked by external

circumcision. But one who is an internal Jew is marked by internal circumcision. Paul does not deny that those who have external circumcision only still bear the name Jew. He merely says that that is all they are. Fruchtenbaum agrees, "...he [Paul] is teaching that every Jew is not a full Jew. A completed Jew is one who has had both circumcisions, the circumcision of the flesh, which is outward in obedience to the Abrahamic covenant, and an inward circumcision of the heart as an act of obedience to the new covenant." So Romans 2:28-29 is a contrast between those who are Jew in name only and those who are true Jews. Jews in name only have circumcision that is outward in the flesh only but the true Jew is also circumcised in the heart, by the S(s)pirit. Paul's point is to remove a Jew's confidence in his circumcision. Many Jews thought that theirs was the Law and circumcision and that these external forms were all that was necessary for them to be saved; Paul shows that these were not really that important, what was important was the internal condition of the heart.

The second passage is Romans 9:6. In Romans 9:6 Paul says, "They are not all Israel who are descended from Israel..." The argument of Replacement theologians is that Paul is saying that Gentiles can be descended from Israel. This again is a faulty understanding. Paul is making the same distinction here that he made in 2:28-29; distinguishing an Israelite in name only and an Israelite indeed. First, in Romans 9:3 Paul identifies himself as a Jew "according to the flesh" and admits that those who are according to the flesh are Israelites though they are not true or complete Israelites. He says, "For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites." It is not that they are not Israelites according to the flesh, meaning physical descendants of one of the twelve tribes of Israel, they are, and as such they had many advantages, but they were not true Israelites. As verse 6 shows, "For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel." Second, Paul's point is to trace the true benefactors of the covenant promises. Just because one was a physical descendant of Israel did not mean they would automatically enjoy the fulfillment of the covenant promises. As he says in verse 7, it was through Isaac that his descendants were named. The line of benefaction in the covenant promises was the believing Israelite. Thus, within Israel there was always a believing remnant and an unbelieving non-remnant. This is the distinction Paul is making in 9:6. Paul in no way

supports the view of Replacement theologians that Gentiles can become Israel.

The third passage is Gal 6:16. This is the favorite proof text of Replacement Theologians that the Church is Israel. The verse says, “And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.” Their interpretation hinges absolutely on the equating of the group referred to as “those” and “them” with the group referred to as “the Israel of God.” This equation is faulty for a number of reasons. First, to equate the two groups Paul would have to be using the third and rare usage of *kai* as ascensive and giving an explanation for who the “those” and “them” are referring to. In other words, it would have to be translated “even” rather than “and.” This usage is extremely rare and unwarranted in this context. It is much better to translate it normally as “and” and therefore see two groups in mind; i.e. those who walk by this rule, referring to Gentile believers who do not submit to circumcision and the Israel of God, referring to Jewish believers who do not make anything of circumcision. Second, in the context of Galatians Paul has been very critical of Jews who regard circumcision as necessary. Thus it makes sense at the close of the letter for Paul to single out the Israel of God who had stood against their fellow Jews. He would not want them to feel condemned along with Jews who did not follow this rule so he makes a special remark. All in all it is better to recognize in the context that “the Israel of God” is the believing Jewish remnant who were not regarding circumcision as anything.

The fourth passage is Matt 21:43. This too is a favorite text of Replacement Theologians arguing that the Church has replaced Israel. The verse says, “Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people, producing the fruit of it.” The argument is that the kingdom of God was being taken away from Israel and given to the Church. Thus God is done with Israel and the Church has replaced Israel. This interpretation is problematic. First, the Greek word translated people is “ethnos.” This word may be translated as “nation” or “generation.” In other words, Matthew could be saying that the kingdom of God was being taken away from that nation of Israel at that time or he could be saying that the kingdom of God was being taken away from that generation of Israel at that time. The end result is the same in either case, the kingdom of God was being taken away from Israel at that time but it would be given to a future Israel

who produces the fruit of it. John and Jesus both called the nation to bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance. The generation of Israel that does will receive the kingdom. The Church is in no sense the Kingdom. The Kingdom is defined by the Abrahamic and Davidic Covenant as that time when Jesus the Messiah establishes His kingdom on earth ruling from the throne of David in the city of Jerusalem.

The fifth passage is 1 Pet 2:9. The verse reads, “But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A ROYAL PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR GOD’S OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were not A PEOPLE, but now you are THE PEOPLE OF GOD; you had NOT RECEIVED MERCY, but now you have RECEIVED MERCY.” The argument is that Peter’s quotation of this OT passage that referred to Israel of the Church proves that the Church is Israel. This is ridiculous. The fact that Peter quoted the OT and made an application to the Church does not mean that one group is the other group. What it means is that the truths that applied to Israel are similar to the truths that apply to the Church. As they were a chosen race; so the Church is chosen individuals; as they were a royal priesthood to the nations; so the Church is now a priesthood; as they were God’s possessions, so the Church is God’s possession. The truths are similar for both Israel and the Church. The language can be lifted from the OT and used in the NT of the Church because it is rich enough to apply. Those are the only five passages ever cited by Replacement Theologians. Of the 68 uses of “Israel” in the NT the only two are debated, Gal 6:16 and Romans 9:6. All the others are undisputable references to the nation Israel. The two that are disputed are far more likely references to the believing element within Israel rather than a dramatic shift to Gentiles or the Church. Of the 195 uses of “Jew” in the NT the only one debated is Romans 2:28-29. All the others are undisputable references to the physical Jew. The one debate is far more likely a reference to the believing Jew among the Jews rather than a wild shift from its normal usage to Gentiles. It is not sound to begin as Replacement Theology does with a false concept of the one people of God developed from the contrived covenants of works and grace and then try to interpret passages in such a way to fit into that mold. It is much better to allow each passage to speak on its own terms. When we do this we find that there are three groups of people; Gentiles in Gen 1-11; Jews and Gentiles in Gen 12-Acts 1; Jews, Gentiles and the Church of God in Acts 2-the present. 1 Cor 10:32 attests to

these three groups; “Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God.”

In conclusion return to Rom 2:25-29. In verse 25 Paul turns to the Jew who has fled from his dependence upon Law for security and taken refuge in his circumcision. Circumcision was a physical ritual that served as a sign for the Abrahamic Covenant. Its purpose was to reveal the spiritual need for corrective surgery done on the heart. If a Jew there was depending on his circumcision and did not keep the Law perfectly then the physical circumcision would not save him. In verse 26 Paul shows by hypothetical logic that if a Gentile kept the Law then it would be as if he was circumcised. Of course, no Gentile ever did, that’s not the point. The point is that circumcision is nothing! Verse 27 continues Paul’s hypothetical logical assault. If an uncircumcised Gentile kept the Law would he not judge the Jew who had the Law and circumcision? Logically he would. Of course no Gentile ever did but Paul’s point stands, the important thing is not circumcision or the Law but the heart. As Paul shows in verses 28-29, the true Jew is not one who has the external marks of circumcision but the one who has the internal marks of circumcision by the Spirit of his heart. What makes a Jew a true Jew is being properly oriented to God internally. This occurs by circumcision of the heart through faith in Jesus as the Messiah. So a Jew who did not have faith in Jesus as the Messiah was a Jew in name only.

ⁱ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 175.

ⁱⁱ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Ro 2:28.

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