

- e. The final context in chapter two continues Paul's argument in 2:17-24. As noted previously, this passage introduces the subject of *circumcision* in relation to the Jew's confidence before God. The issue of circumcision, in turn, provides the platform for Paul's articulation of a crucial implication arising from his contention of Jewish hypocrisy.

Having shown that the Law of Moses provides no benefit to the Jew because he fails in his conformity to it, Paul turned his attention to circumcision. Again, the reason for addressing these two matters with his Jewish readers is that the Law and circumcision were fundamental to the Jews' covenant identity and status. Among all the peoples of the earth, the sons of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had been chosen by God and brought into covenant union with Him. The Israelite theocratic kingdom represented, at the typological level, the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant with its sign of circumcision, and the Mosaic Law served as the covenant framework for its establishment and administration. Therefore, the Jew's circumcision identified him as a legitimate heir of the Abrahamic promise, which promise was realized and ordered through the Law of Moses.

For this reason, it was impossible for the Jew to think of himself apart from the Law and the circumcision of his flesh. Together they supplied to him his personal and national identity; even more, they taught him who he was in relation to God, and so were the basis of his religious standing and confidence. In this way circumcision and the Law were inseparable; indeed, the rite of circumcision was a fundamental obligation of the Law of Moses (Leviticus 12:1-3). *This means that failure to circumcise constituted transgression.* Furthermore, given the cohesive integrity of the Law and its relation to God's promise to Abraham, *transgression of any other aspect of it constituted an affront to one's circumcision.* This intrinsic connection between circumcision, the Abrahamic Covenant, and its fulfillment in the theocratic nation of Israel under the Law of Moses is fundamental to Paul's argument, so that to fail to understand their historical interrelation is to fail to grasp the gravity of his assertions.

The first thing to observe in considering this context is that it continues Paul's *diatribe*; as he turned to the subject of circumcision he was still addressing the imaginary Jewish antagonist introduced in 2:17. The structure of the passage is straightforward, and has three main components:

- The context begins with a fundamental contention by which Paul established the *inseparability* of the Law and circumcision (2:25).
- Next, he presented *two related conclusions* that proceed out of that contention, which conclusions he framed as rhetorical questions (2:26-27).
- He then concluded with a *summary implication*. This implication is of immense importance for at least two reasons. The first is that it establishes the irrelevance of circumcision to the Jew's righteous standing with God.

Just as possessing the Law of Moses means nothing with respect to righteousness, so neither does the circumcision of the flesh. *But much more, Paul's concluding implication points to the redemptive-historical significance of circumcision and how it finds its fulfillment in Christ.* Circumcision, like the Law and Prophets (ref. 3:21ff), had been intended by God to serve a crucial prophetic role in revealing Christ and His gospel.

- 1) By opening this context as he did Paul made it clear to his readers that the Law and circumcision cannot be separated; each implicates the other (2:25). In one sense, this would have been patently obvious to a Jew. For circumcision was the sign of the Abrahamic covenant, and the promises attached to that covenant were fulfilled in Abraham's physical offspring through the vehicle of the Law of Moses. But this covenantal connection does not represent the inseparability of which Paul spoke. Rather, his concern was with the relation between the Law and circumcision in the realm of righteousness. *Specifically, his contention was that conforming to the righteousness of the Law fulfills, and so satisfies, the sign of circumcision.* This connection was not readily evident to the Jews.

It is true that every Israelite understood that circumcision was commanded by the Law of Moses, so that failure to perform it constituted transgression of the Law. The Jews further knew that the Law was the vehicle ordained by God for establishing and informing the reality symbolized by circumcision, namely *consecration* with its conformity to God (Genesis 17:1-11). In other words, circumcision portrayed the spiritual principle of consecration, while the Law "gave it feet" for the nation of Israel. As a result, a Jew could acknowledge that his transgression of any aspect of the Law implicated his covenantal and practical consecration (cf. Exodus 19:1-11; Deuteronomy 7:1-12; etc.), and therefore acted to contradict the very thing signified by the circumcision of his flesh.

But, at the same time, circumcision had an ethnic and covenantal aspect that allowed it to be viewed in distinction from the Law. For God instituted circumcision in His covenant with Abraham hundreds of years before the Law was given at Sinai. Therefore, the Jew viewed his circumcision first and foremost as marking him out as a son of Abraham, and no particular transgression of the Law could change the fact of his ethnic identity. Thus there emerged a common view in Judaism in the centuries preceding Christ's coming that circumcision guaranteed one's deliverance from condemnation. This confidence in ethnic heritage, in spite of specific violations of the Law, is abundantly evident in the gospel accounts (cf. Matthew 3:1-9; Luke 13:22-30; John 8:31-59; etc.).

The Scriptures were clear that circumcision spoke of inward consecration (Leviticus 26:40-41; Deuteronomy 30:1-6; Jeremiah 4:1-4, 9:25-26), but nowhere did it deny the necessity and importance of the physical mark.

And so, in one sense Paul's insistence that transgression of the Law causes one's circumcision to become *uncircumcision* was simply a restatement of what the prophets had repeatedly affirmed. Like them, he was not saying that transgression somehow undoes physical circumcision. Rather, he was arguing from the vantage point of the significance of the sign of circumcision: *violation of the righteous demands of the Law attests to one's actual uncircumcision in the sight of God regardless of the physical mark he bears in his flesh*. Which is to say, transgression of the Law removes from a person all legitimate claim to covenant relationship with God, the very thing circumcision represented to the Old Covenant Jew. At the same time, the passage clearly shows that Paul was saying more than the prophets. For, speaking in the context of *fulfillment* (which they could not), he was insisting that physical circumcision is absolutely irrelevant.

2) Thus Paul's contention in 2:25 led him to two similar conclusions:

- The first is that God regards as circumcised the Gentile who, though physically uncircumcised, meets the righteous requirements of the Law. *For in this way his life bears out the reality symbolized by the mark* (2:26). The careful observer may well argue that Paul's contention is fallacious on its face, for, given that circumcision was *itself* a requirement of the Law, the uncircumcised Gentile could never be said to have kept the Law's requirements. But this argument is answered by recognizing the role circumcision played in relation to the Law. The Law demanded circumcision because it symbolized the consecration and righteous conformity insisted upon by the Law. Therefore, if an uncircumcised person satisfied the righteous demands of the Law, he was actually fulfilling the true significance of circumcision even though he had not undergone the physical rite.
- For the same reason, this "circumcised" man, though he lacks the physical sign in his flesh, will judge the one who, although possessing both physical circumcision and the Law, is a transgressor of the Law (2:27).

In this way Paul was simply building upon his fundamental thesis that divine judgment proceeds upon the basis of objective righteousness (ref. 2:6-11). Thus, the Gentile who does not have the Law, and yet instinctively obeys it, is righteous in contrast to the Jew who, having the Law, transgresses it (2:12-16). So also the benefit of circumcision with respect to righteousness is found not in possession of the sign itself, but in conformity to that which the sign signifies. This is the fundamental truth that underlies Paul's later affirmation to the Romans that Abraham's circumcision was the *seal* of the righteousness that he *already possessed by faith* before he was circumcised (4:1-12).

- 3) Paul's insistence in verses 2:25-27 was that circumcision - which speaks of consecration to God - is fulfilled by conformity to the righteousness of the Law. This is because consecration implies intimate communion, communion with God demands conformity to His righteous character, and the Law of Moses is a comprehensive articulation of that righteousness. It is also crucial to note that, as the sign of circumcision was divinely ordained to give tangible, symbolic expression to the principle of entire consecration, it follows that this consecration is presupposed by the sign. That is, *the sign comes after and presupposes the reality it signifies*. Thus Abraham was given the sign of circumcision to testify to the righteous conformity *that was already his*, and that according to his faith.

This fundamental relationship between the *sign* and the *thing signified* leads out Paul's implication in 2:28-29. As noted earlier, this implication has a crucial redemptive-historical importance, for it shows that, as circumcision presupposed the principle of consecration to God in the context of covenant union, so it served a typological role in pointing to a future reality. In other words, the rite of circumcision stood as an *historical symbol* that bound together the *antecedent covenant principle of consecrated conformity* and its *ordained future fulfillment* which the physical rite only prefigured and anticipated.

This is the nature and structure of all biblical types, and circumcision is no exception. But given this predetermined and substantial link between the type and its fulfilling antitype, *it is evident that the function and relevance of circumcision in its own historical context serves as the basis for understanding its ultimate significance in the upward movement of redemptive history*. The implication is that it is only by discerning the meaning of circumcision in its Old Testament context that its meaning in fulfillment - i.e., the meaning of its antitype - can be discovered.

Again, the reason this is so is that types are *prophetic*; they speak of a greater reality that yet lies in the future. But in order to accomplish their prophetic function types must communicate specific truths to the generation in which they exist, and it is that communication that provides understanding of the future fulfillment. The type and antitype are necessarily and inextricably linked, and it is the meaning of the type in its own context that establishes the meaning of the antitype. For example, when Moses declared himself to be a type of the Prophet to come, the people's discernment of that promised Prophet was determined by the role of Moses among them and the historical context in which the promise was given (cf. Deuteronomy 18:9-22; Acts 3:12-26, 7:17-41; also Hebrews 12:18-24). In the same way, as circumcision spoke in its historical context of consecration and conformity to the divine character, so also it speaks of the same realities in its fulfillment in Christ.

This type/antitype dynamic in relation to circumcision is represented in Paul's argument in terms of four couplets and their contrasting ideas: *outward/inward, flesh/heart, letter/Spirit, and men/God*. The first concept of each couplet (outward, flesh, letter, men) corresponds to the type, and the latter (inward, heart, Spirit, God) to the antitype. In this way Paul marvelously summarized what the physical sign of circumcision signified as a *symbol*, and how it was to find its fulfillment in *substance*.

If it is acknowledged that the outward sign is just that, it must further be conceded that it is not truly circumcision. And if circumcision preeminently marks out the Jew, then it follows that the Jew who bears the sign alone is not truly a Jew. Paul's point is clear: *the physical sign means nothing, and therefore does not serve to identify the Jew as a covenant son in contradistinction to the Gentile*. The true Jew - the true covenant son - is the one who possesses the true circumcision of the heart, regardless of whether he bears the outward mark in his flesh. This was a radical statement on Paul's part, and represents the heart of a paradigm shift that rocked the nation of Israel and challenged the early Church (cf. Acts 15:1-29; Galatians 2:1-10, 5:1-14, 6:11-16; Philippians 3:1-3; etc.). No longer would physical circumcision be the mark of the covenant people of God, as it had for the previous two thousand years. Regarding 2:28-29 Herman Ridderbos observes: "*This last pronouncement...signifies a radicalizing of the concept Jew, and thereby of the definition of the essence of the people of God.*" (Paul, An Outline of His Theology)

Paul could make this radical claim, not because he did not understand the Law and circumcision, but precisely because he *did*. He was not imposing an alien meaning on those things; quite the contrary, having gained the mind of Christ through the indwelling Spirit, he had, for the first time, come to grasp the true significance of circumcision. He had come to understand it first in its historical, promissory context, but much more in its antitypical fulfillment. For from the beginning God had revealed to Israel how they were to view their physical circumcision (Deuteronomy 10:1-16; Leviticus 26:40-42; Jeremiah 4:1-4, 9:25-26). Even more, God had promised that the day would come when He would fulfill the sign according to its true significance and so satisfy the obligation of consecration for all His covenant sons (Deuteronomy 30:1-6; Ezekiel 36:16-30).

That which had been performed in the flesh by the hands of men according to the letter of the Old Covenant only served to anticipate true circumcision - the removal of the "foreskin" of the heart by the Spirit of God in accordance with the demand of the New Covenant. And just as *physical* circumcision had signified consecration with its conformity to the divine character, so the *spiritual* circumcision that fulfilled the physical type would also fulfill in actuality the obligation of true, spiritual consecration and conformity (cf. Philippians 3:1-7; Colossians 2:8-12). This inward circumcision affords no boasting in the flesh according to the praise of men, but it gains the praise of God (Galatians 6:12-18).