

Why Did Paul Circumcise Timothy?

Acts 16:1-5

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Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. - Acts 16:3, ESV

Today's brief passage in Acts contains one of the most unexpected episodes in the ministry of the Apostle Paul: the circumcision of Timothy. Paul would later write to the Galatians: "*Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law.*" (Gal. 5:2-3, ESV) Given Paul's strong language in Galatians, we have to wonder why he would want to have Timothy circumcised.

The answer is simple and yet complex, because it's a question of context and purpose. In Acts 16, Paul is bringing Timothy onto his mission team. Part of their mission is to try to reach Jews in the area with the Gospel. Timothy was half-Greek, his father being a Greek. To gain entrance into the Jewish synagogues in Asia Minor and to have an audience for the Gospel, Paul had Timothy circumcised as a matter of cultural accommodation. Paul never told Timothy that he needed to be circumcised in order to be acceptable to God.

The situation in Galatians was very different. Judaizers had worked their way into the church and had brought in a legalistic Gospel. They taught the Galatians that they needed to be circumcised and observe the Jewish ceremonial laws in order to be acceptable to God. In this context, Paul strictly forbid anyone from being circumcised. No one may undertake circumcision as a means of trying to be acceptable to God without being obligated to keep the whole law, which is both impossible and a direct contradiction to the Gospel.

Paul's stance on circumcision helps us understand a whole host of cultural taboo issues. If we can observe a cultural standard in order to open a door and remove a stumbling block for the Gospel, we should do so. In line with this thinking, one of our missionary friends is always careful to wear a head-covering when she is meeting with Muslims to share the Gospel. They appreciate it, and she is wise to do it. But if someone were to come into our church and proclaim that unless women wear a Muslim-style head covering, they are not acceptable to God, I would oppose that teaching vehemently. Removing obstacles and opening doors to the Gospel is great. Adding burdens to God's people as additions to the Gospel is not okay.

In both cases, the priority for Paul was the Gospel, and the Gospel must be the priority for us, too. We put no stumbling block in anyone's way to keep them from hearing the Gospel. We add no burden to believers to take them away from the purity of the Gospel.

Heavenly Father, the Gospel is the power of God for salvation for all who believe. Let us never be ashamed of the Gospel, never place obstacles in the way of the Gospel and never add burdens to the Gospel. Let us treasure Christ and proclaim Him openly for all. In Jesus' name, Amen.