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Are Circumcision and Foreskin *Really* Nothing? Re-Reading 1 Corinthians 7:19 and Galatians 5:6; 6:15*

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INTRODUCTION

On three occasions Paul asserts that neither circumcision nor foreskin is anything, in 1 Cor 7:19, Gal 5:6, and Gal 6:15:¹

ἡ περιτομή οὐδέν ἐστιν
καὶ ἡ ἀκροβυστία οὐδέν ἐστιν
ἀλλὰ τήρησις ἐντολῶν θεοῦ

Circumcision is nothing, and foreskin is nothing but observance of God's commandments. (1 Cor 7:19)

ἐν γὰρ Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ οὔτε
περιτομή τι ἰσχύει οὔτε
ἀκροβυστία ἀλλὰ πίστις δι'
ἀγάπης ἐνεργουμένη

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor foreskin avails anything, but faith working through love. (Gal 5:6)

οὔτε γὰρ περιτομή τί ἐστιν οὔτε
ἀκροβυστία ἀλλὰ καινὴ κτίσις

For neither circumcision is anything, nor foreskin, but a new creation. (Gal 6:15)

* I would like to thank Matthew Thiessen for his many helpful comments on this article. I am also thankful to the participants of the 2021 regional NE/EC SBL meeting, where a version of this article was presented, and the anonymous reviewers who provided insightful comments. Any remaining mistakes are solely my responsibility.

¹ The Greek word ἀκροβυστία literally translates into “foreskin.” This is the word I use throughout the article to render ἀκροβυστία. Unless otherwise noted all translations are my own and based on the Greek text of Novum Testamentum Graece, 28th edition.

This might lead readers of Paul, both the original recipients and the modern-day reader, to conclude that circumcision was an unimportant question for the apostle. This understanding has been prevalent in scholarship on Paul, especially among those who maintain that Paul broke with Judaism (see below). Such a notion, however, can be challenged—both from a reading of the wider Pauline corpus and from the scholarly literature that seeks to place Paul within his native Judaism, not outside of it. No matter one's take on the issue of Paul and what he thought about circumcision, it is clear that Paul made both positive and negative remarks about circumcision (cf. Rom 3:1–2; Gal 5:2). Clearly, Paul's attitude towards the existence or non-existence of the foreskin is not an *adiaphoron* (a Greek term that is best translated as “indifference”). Instead, the questions one must seek to answer are what exactly the apostle did think of circumcision; why he mentions it in both a positive and negative light; and, what effect the different contexts into which he wrote have on his claims *vis-à-vis* circumcision?

This article explores three of the more enigmatic pronouncements Paul made regarding circumcision (and foreskin): 1 Cor 7:19; Gal 5:6; and Gal 6:15. I do not think that these texts alone can give us a full understanding of what Paul thought about circumcision. Still, I argue that by looking at these three passages—and considering the *ekklēsiai* they were sent to, the context of the letters' recipients, and the “but” (ἀλλὰ) clauses that follow the statement on the (non-)value of circumcision—we can gain a fuller understanding of what the apostle thought about circumcision.

1 CORINTHIANS 7:19

In order to gain a fuller understanding of 1 Cor 7:19, let us briefly explore the ethnic identity of the recipients of 1 Cor, since this question

bears significant weight on our understanding of Paul's statement in this verse.²

There are several reasons to believe that the *ekklēsia* at Corinth consisted of both Jews and gentiles, but that many had a gentile background. In 1 Cor 6:11 and 8:7 Paul states that some of the Corinthians to whom he writes were taking part in acts and rituals that he deemed as unrighteous (ἄδικος, 6:9), and in both instances he includes the typically Jewish accusation against gentiles of idol worship.³ Later on in the letter, Paul explicitly states that the Christ followers he is addressing were gentiles who used to worship idols (12:2).⁴ In addition to this, Paul says that some of the Corinthian Christ followers "had been called as foreskins" (7:18), which fits well with a gentile audience. There are, however, also indications that there were Jewish Christ followers present in the

² I agree with Caroline Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in the Letters of Paul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 9, who writes: "There is perhaps no more pivotal issue for determining one's reading of Paul than audience," and that by putting emphasis on the audience of the apostle's letters we can better understand his message. For example, I agree to a large extent with Lloyd Gaston, *Paul and the Torah* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987), 23, who writes with regard to the question of Paul and the Jewish law: "Paul writes to Gentile Christians, dealing with Gentile-Christian problems, foremost among which was the right of Gentiles qua Gentiles, without adopting the Torah of Israel, to full citizenship in the people of God." Thus, without dealing with the question of the ethnicity of the recipients of Paul's letters, we miss a great deal of Paul's message and the rhetorical force of his writings.

³ For Jewish critique of idolatry, see Wis 13–15; Let. Aris. 134–139; Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 2.239–249; Philo, *Spec. Laws* 1.13–31; 2.255–256; *Decalogue* 52–81; Bel 1–40; Ep Jer 2–73; Rom 1:18–32; 1 Cor 12:2; Gal 4:8–10; 1 Thess 1:9; 4:3–7; Sib. Or. 3.19–34, 545–555, 586–590, 604–606. That Paul is accusing only some of the Corinthians of this is clear from his use of τινες, the masculine plural nominative of τις ("someone"). It is not impossible that Jews too are being accused by Paul here, but the accusation fits well with what Paul says about gentiles elsewhere, see especially Rom 1:18–32; 1 Thess 1:9; 4:3–5; Gal 4:8.

⁴ Here, Paul does not use the indefinite pronoun τις but appears to be addressing a wider part of the *ekklēsia*.

ekklēsia. In 1 Cor 7:18 Paul says that if someone was circumcised at the time of his calling, he should not undergo *epispasm* (i.e., have the fore-skin restored).⁵ Joseph Fitzmyer reads the περιτετμημένος (“those having been circumcised”) group as evidence that there were both Jews and gentiles present in the *ekklēsia*, understanding the verb περιτετμημένος and the noun ἀκροβυστία as two contrasting pairs with the former referring to Jews and the latter to gentiles.⁶ Additionally, in 1 Cor 12:13, Paul says that the members of the Christ group were all baptised in one spirit into one body and that all were made to drink of the same spirit. The groups Paul mentions as having been baptised and made to drink of the spirit are Jews and Greeks and slaves and free people, the exact same two groups that he mentioned in 7:18 and 22 (if we understand περιτετμημένος as ethnic Jews). Consequently, there should be little doubt that the *ekklēsia* in Corinth hosted both Jewish and gentile Christ followers.⁷

Reading Paul’s “Circumcision Is Nothing” Statement in Context

We now turn to 1 Cor 7:19 and the question at hand: does Paul intend that his statement in 7:19 be understood in the sense that circumcision

⁵ This group could also include gentiles who were circumcised; even so, there is sufficient indications elsewhere in the letter that Jews were present. On *epispasm*, see Robert G. Hall, “Epispasm and the Dating of Ancient Jewish Writings,” *JSP* 2 (1988): 71–86; Andreas Blaschke, *Beschneidung: Zeugnisse der Bibel und verwandter Texte*, TANZ 28 (Tübingen: Francke Verlag, 1998), 139–144.

⁶ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 32 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 308. Cf. Hans Conzelmann, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther*, KEK 5, 11th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1969), 151. Fitzmyer refers to 1 Mac 1:15 and Josephus’ *Ant.* 12.241, to demonstrate that there was some precedence among Jews to perform epispasm to conform with their gentile surroundings.

⁷ Cf. John S. Kloppenborg, *Christ’s Associations: Connecting and Belonging in the Ancient City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 84–85.

no longer has any value? At first glance, this might seem to be the case since Paul, no doubt, writes “circumcision is nothing” (ἡ περιτομὴ οὐδὲν ἐστίν). Additionally, it seems true that Paul values circumcision as something that is not essential to the recipients of 1 Cor.⁸ But a study of the rhetoric and placement of 7:19 indicates that there are a number of reasons why Paul’s message might be more complicated than it first appears.

First, a reading that suggests that Paul no longer sees any value in circumcision does not appear to be consistent within the larger corpus of Pauline writings and his positive remarks about circumcision. For example, in Rom 3:1–2 Paul writes that there is much value in both being a Jew and circumcision. And when he wants to boast of his Jewish heritage in the letter to the Philippians, at the top of his list of credentials he mentions that he was circumcised on the eighth day (Phil 3:5). Any conclusion on 1 Cor 7:19 must, if we consider Paul to be a coherent thinker, be able to account for these statements.⁹ Second, as Brad Ronell Braxton and many scholars with him recognise, “this de-empha-

⁸ Cf. Karin B. Neutel, “Circumcision Gone Wrong: Paul’s Message as a Case of Ritual Disruption,” *Neot* 50 (2016): 373–396, 382, 384.

⁹ It should not be taken for granted that Paul had developed a coherent approach to the Jewish law and how it should be applied to the members of his *ekklesiāi*, and suggestions of Paul’s inconsistent view of the law can be found in the scholarly literature. Perhaps most notably in this regard is Heikki Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, WUNT 29 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1983). Despite this, I think that we can view Paul’s approach of the Jewish law as coherent but that we must understand each of his references to the law in their respective contexts and recognise the fact that his letters and statements are situational. For a defence of this position, and a critique of some of Räisänen’s views, see Panayotis Coutsoumpos, “Paul’s Attitude towards the Law,” in *Paul: Jew, Greek, and Roman*, ed. Stanley E. Porter, Pauline Studies 5 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 39–50. Frank Thielman, “The Coherence of Paul’s View of the Law: The Evidence of First Corinthians,” *NTS* 38 (1992): 235–253, 236, comments that 1 Cor is a well suited letter for gaining a deeper insight to Paul’s view of the law due to the letters unpolemical tone and the relatively small place the Jewish law has in the apostle’s argument in the letter.

sis of circumcision seems quite radical from the lips of Paul, a former Pharisee, who by his own admission had followed the law blamelessly and had kept the traditions of the fathers with great zeal.”¹⁰ Third, as I will argue later, circumcision was not something Paul thought of as an ineffectual rite. Karin B. Neutel writes:

Even though Paul can describe circumcision as meaningless, whether a person becomes circumcised or not is still not a matter of indifference to Paul. The act is not value-neutral: while there is nothing positive to gain from circumcising, for him there is much to lose in doing so.¹¹

¹⁰ Brad Ronell Braxton, *The Tyranny of Resolution: 1 Corinthians 7:17–24*, SBLDS 181 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 52. Cf. David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 305; Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 346. Some scholars would claim that Paul left “Judaism” behind after the Christ event on the basis of Gal 1:13 (ἠκούσατε γὰρ τὴν ἐμὴν ἀναστροφὴν ποτε ἐν τῷ Ἰουδαϊσμῷ, “for you heard about my previous Jewish conduct”). However, both Matthew V. Novenson, “Paul’s Former Occupation in *Ioudaismos*,” in *Galatians and Christian Theology: Justification, the Gospels, and Ethics in Paul’s Letters*, ed. Mark W. Elliot et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 24–39, and Matthew Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 38–41, have argued that the word Ἰουδαϊσμός should not be understood as “Judaism” but rather as the defence of the Jewish ways in a sectarian manner (Novenson), or as closely linked to and its meaning of promoting gentiles to behave like Jews, i.e., to Judaize (Thiessen). One could also argue that Paul viewed his Jewish life as a loss, based on Phil 3:7–8. But Paul never says his Jewish life is a loss to him, only that in comparison to Christ all things have been relativised and what matters, according to Paul, is the knowledge of Christ Jesus, the Lord. Cf. William S. Campbell, “‘I Rate All Things as Loss:’ Paul’s Puzzling Accounting System. Judaism as Loss or the Re-evaluation of All Things in Christ,” in *Celebrating Paul: Festschrift in Honour of Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, O.P., and Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J.*, ed. Peter Spitaler, CBQMS 48 (Washington: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2011), 39–61, 57–58.

¹¹ Karin B. Neutel, *A Cosmopolitan Ideal: Paul’s Declaration “Neither Jew Nor Greek, Neither Slave Nor Free, Nor Male and Female” in the Context of First-Century Thought*, LNTS 513 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 101. As Neutel makes clear in a later publication (“Circumcision,” 377), it is the circumcision of gentiles who have

This is a more nuanced view than that of Gordon Fee, who argues that, for Paul, circumcision or keeping the foreskin is no longer of any importance since “being a Jew or a Gentile simply means nothing to God ... [for] Christ has made such distinctions obsolete, and thus irrelevant.”¹² Adding to Neutel’s argument is 1 Cor 7:18 where Paul says that the one who was called circumcised (*περιτετυμμένος*) should not undergo epispasm (cf. 1 Macc 1:14–15; *Ant.* 12.241), and if one was called while foreskinned, he should not become circumcised; this suggests that changing one’s status when a member of the Jesus movement is undesirable. If neither circumcision nor foreskin is worth anything, as Fee maintains, we might ask why one ought not undergo epispasm or circumcision. Plainly, if Fee is correct, what a Christ follower does with his foreskin should not matter. Consequently, the understanding of Paul’s statement in 1 Cor 7:19 that he regarded circumcision and foreskin as indifferent can be contested (this will become even clearer when we proceed to the letter to the Galatians).

In what follows, I will argue that there are two driving forces in Paul’s statement that “neither circumcision nor foreskin is anything” in 1 Cor: first, Paul relates it to the salvation gained in the Messiah and, second, he connects it to God’s call for individuals to join the Jesus movement.¹³ According to my first suggestion, the verse is to be under-

joined the Jesus movement as adults Paul discusses, not born Jews. Cf. Mark D. Nanos, “The Question of Conceptualization: Qualifying Paul’s Position on Circumcision in Dialogue with Josephus’ Advisors to King Izates,” in *Paul Within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*, ed. Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 105–152, 121–122. The work of Matthew Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion: Genealogy, Circumcision, and Identity in Ancient Judaism and Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 108, has shown “that there was a constant stream of Jewish thought” that held that gentiles could not become Jewish by circumcision. Hence, Paul’s objection to gentiles’ circumcision was not a novel idea during his time.

¹² Fee, *Corinthians*, 345. Cf. Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle, Paternoster Press, 2000), 551.

¹³ These two interpretations find supports in various secondary literature, see David

stood accordingly: in relation to your salvation, “circumcision is nothing, and foreskin is nothing, but observance of God’s commands.”¹⁴ Read this way, the understanding of Paul’s statement I propose is that neither circumcision nor the lack of circumcision has any relevance with regards to salvation.¹⁵ Put differently, the genealogical background of a person, in this case being Jewish or gentile, is not a deciding factor for salvation in the Messiah (cf. Rom 3:29–30; 4:8–10).¹⁶ Salvation, according to Paul, comes from the gift that is the Messiah and is attainable for all, no matter ethnic and/or cultic background (cf. Rom 6:23; Gal 2:21).¹⁷ Therefore, “in the calling each was called, let him remain,” since it has no bearing on salvation (1 Cor 7:20). This reading is supported by Gal 3:28 where Paul argues that those who have been immersed in the Messiah, regardless of ethnicity, social standing, or sex, are one in Jesus.¹⁸

My second proposal, that the statement relates to each person’s calling to the God of Israel and their incorporation into the Jesus move-

J. Rudolph, *A Jew to the Jews: Jewish Contours of Pauline Flexibility in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23*, 2nd ed. (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 28–30; Braxton, *Tyranny*, 52; Conzelmann, *Brief*, 152.

¹⁴ Conzelmann, *Brief*, 152, states that “οὐδέν ἐστιν ἰσθιγὸν ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐπὶ τῷ ἑαυτοῦ ἑσθιγῶν.”

¹⁵ Cf. Raymond F. Collins, *First Corinthians*, SP 7 (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1999), 283.

¹⁶ Cf. Rudolph, *Jew*, 28. This relates to a third possible foundation for Paul’s statement, one that I do not have space to engage with in this article: the eschatological nearness of Christ’s return. On this, see Peter J. Tomson, “Paul’s Jewish Background in View of His Law Teaching in 1 Cor 7,” in *Paul and the Mosaic Law*, ed. James D. G. Dunn, WUNT 89 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 251–270, 264.

¹⁷ Thiessen, *Gentile Problem*, 9. I use the word “cultic” rather than “religious” since the latter term, even though frequently used in modern scholarship on antiquity, is anachronistic and does not map on to any term used in Hebrew, Greek, or Latin. Cf. Kloppenborg, *Associations*, 10–18.

¹⁸ This is not to say that Paul no longer thinks in terms of Jew and Greek, slave and free, or man and woman, but that these categories are second to being in Christ.

ment, relates to the context in which 1 Cor 7:19 is found in, since calling is a central theme in vv. 17–24. Braxton notes that ...

... to remove the marks of circumcision or to be circumcised as a condition of the call is an invalidation of the call of God. To take such action would suggest that God could not call one as a Gentile or Jew per se ... Also, Paul may be suggesting that change, at least of the sort just mentioned (i.e., changing ethnic identity) is not an inevitable *consequence* of the call.¹⁹

This suggests that there is no specific prerequisite in terms of the state one has to be in in order to be called (e.g., married, unmarried, circumcised, uncircumcised, a slave, a free person, a Jew, a gentile), but that the call goes out to everyone—regardless of social or ethnic background—and that one can (and in some cases should) stay in that state also after joining the Jesus movement.²⁰ In that respect, it does not matter if one was called circumcised or uncircumcised: the call is still valid and one can continue in the circumcised or uncircumcised state one was called in by God.²¹ There is, however, a “but” (quite literally) that should be added to this reading in order to better understand the implications of the first clause of 1 Cor 7:19.

The Meaning of “God’s Commandments”

We now turn to the last clause of the verse. For, as William Campbell notes, it is only with this clause that the first part of the verse becomes comprehensible: “It is not a comparison between A and B, between

¹⁹ Braxton, *Tyranny*, 50–51 (emphasis original).

²⁰ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 305, writes: “Their conversion [i.e., the gentiles] requires a change in lordships, spiritual values, and moral behaviour, but not a change in race, gender, or social caste.” Cf. Thiessen, *Gentile Problem*, 10.

²¹ Cf. William S. Campbell, *Paul and the Creation of Christian Identity*, LNTS 322 (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 91–93. It is often pointed out that Paul wants his Christ following gentiles to remain gentiles after they join the Jesus movement, but as Conzelmann, *Brief*, 152, stresses: “Gerade dieses οὐδέν ἐστιν bedeutet ja, daß der Jude weiterhin Jude bleibt.”

circumcision and uncircumcision, but a comparison of A and B with C [‘but observance of God’s commandments’].”²² The last clause should be understood in such a way that it does not nullify the previous one, but that, in keeping with Campbell’s comparison, to do C is more important than to do A and B.²³ The question is, though, what does “observance of God’s commandments” entail?

One immediate issue, David E. Garland notes, is that Paul never uses this exact phrase elsewhere.²⁴ Furthermore, as Frank Thielman points out: “How can Paul say to his readers in one breath that circumcision is nothing and in the very next tell them to keep the commandments of God?”²⁵ Several suggestions are made in the secondary literature, but few seem to hit the target. One could understand “God’s commandments” as referring to something other than the Mosaic law. For example, Fee, serving as a representative example, simply states: “Almost certainly this refers to the ethical imperatives of the Christian faith.”²⁶ What these ethical imperatives are is left unexplained. Weakening Fee’s argument, Matthew Thiessen points out that Paul’s language indicates that he is referring to the Mosaic law:

Paul’s use of the verb “to keep” (τήρέω) with the noun “commandment” (ἐντολή), a construction that other Jews used to signify faithful observance of the Jewish law (cf. Sir 32:23; T. Dan. 5.1; Josephus, *Ant.* 8.120; Matt 19:17–19; Rev 12:17; 14:12), suggests that Paul signals the abiding relevance of law observance.²⁷

A fruitful way forward in interpreting this elusive statement that E. P. Sanders referred to as “one of the most amazing sentences [Paul] ever wrote” has been provided by both Peter J. Tomson and Thiessen.²⁸ They

²² Campbell, “Loss,” 42.

²³ Rudolph, *Jew*, 30.

²⁴ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 305.

²⁵ Thielman, “Coherence,” 237; cf. Thiessen, *Gentile Problem*, 8.

²⁶ Fee, *Corinthians*, 347.

²⁷ Thiessen, *Gentile Problem*, 9.

²⁸ E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983), 103.

argue that τήρησις ἐντολῶν θεοῦ (“observance of God’s commandments”) instructs each group in the Corinthian *ekklēsia*, i.e., Jewish and gentile Christ followers, to keep the commandments that pertain to their own group.²⁹ Thiessen states:

Paul does not contrast the rite of circumcision to the commandment of God; rather, he claims that being Jewish (circumcision) or being gentile (uncircumcision) does not matter—only keeping the commandments that God requires of each group of people.³⁰

The heart of Paul’s statement in 1 Cor 7:19b, then, is not that *all* members of the *ekklēsia* should observe *all* God’s commandments, but that *all* members should keep the commandments specific to them, an explanation that fits well with the context of 7:17–24.³¹ Thus, the Christ follower, both the circumcised and the foreskinned, can live in the state he (and she) was called in and still keep God’s commandments.³² Therefore, we should not read 1 Cor 7:19 as a tearing down of the ethnic

²⁹ Tomson, “Jewish Background,” 267–268; Thiessen, *Gentile Problem*, 9–10. For a similar view, see Anders Runesson, “Paul’s Rule in All the *Ekklesiāi*,” in *Introduction to Messianic Judaism: Its Ecclesial Context and Biblical Foundations*, ed. David Rudolph and Joel Willitts (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 214–223; Johnson Hodge, *Sons*, 131–132.

³⁰ Thiessen, *Gentile Problem*, 9.

³¹ Cf. Tomson, “Jewish Background,” 268.

³² This also gives insight to the tension created by the fact that Paul, as a Jew, writes that circumcision is nothing; it is nothing to those who are not obliged to get circumcised according to God’s commandments: the gentile Christ follower. With this said, there were, in Paul’s mind, parts of the Mosaic law that did apply to the gentiles who joined the Jesus movement, and, in that sense, Paul did ask them to Judaize by keeping some of God’s commandments as found in the Jewish law. Cf. Paula Fredriksen, “Judaizing the Nations: The Ritual Demands of Paul’s Gospel,” *NTS* 56 (2010): 232–252, 250–252. For a broader understanding of what Judaizing meant in antiquity, see Steve Mason, “Jews, Judeans, Judaizing, Judaism: Problems of Categorization in Ancient History,” *JSJ* 38 (2007): 457–512; Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties*, Hellenistic Culture and Society 31 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 175–197.

boundaries between Jews and gentiles, nor as a claim that circumcision is of no value for Jewish Christ followers, but as a proclamation that in relation to *God's call and salvation through Christ*, “neither circumcision nor foreskin is anything.”³³

GALATIANS 5:6 AND 6:15

The tone in Paul's letter to the Galatians is sharper than in 1 Cor due to the presence in the *ekklēsia* of those who proclaim a message incompatible with Paul's to the Christ followers.³⁴ In addition, Paul now only addresses gentile Christ followers who are uncircumcised (in contrast to 1 Cor 7:18–19). Mark Nanos rightly points out that even if there were Jewish Christ followers in the *ekklēsia*, the letter's *addressees* are Christ following gentiles alone.³⁵ Even though it is evident early on in the letter that Paul perceives a problem *vis-à-vis* the gentile Christ followers and their relationship to the Jewish law, it is first in Gal 5:2 that we understand that circumcision is a key issue.³⁶ That gentile Christ followers were considering this procedure should come as no surprise, for, as Neutel remarks, “gentiles who gave up their gods [when joining the Jesus

³³ Commenting on 1 Cor 7:18, Paula Fredriksen, *Paul: The Pagans' Apostle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 113, states: “[Paul] opposed circumcision *for gentiles*, not for Jews” (emphasis original).

³⁴ Cf. James D. G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 335; Mark D. Nanos, *The Irony of Galatians: Paul's Letter in First-Century Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 75–85. For a discussion of those who proclaimed another message, see John M. G. Barclay, “Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter: Galatians as a Test-Case,” in *The Galatians Debate: Contemporary Issues in Rhetorical and Historical Interpretation*, ed. Mark D. Nanos (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), 367–381, 380–381.

³⁵ Nanos, *Irony*, 75–85.

³⁶ Nils A. Dahl, “Galatians: Genre, Content, and Structure,” in *The Galatians Debate: Contemporary Issues in Rhetorical and Historical Interpretation*, ed. Mark D. Nanos (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), 117–142, 136.

movement] but did not circumcise could be seen to enter an ethnic no man's land."³⁷ Hence, it is not far-fetched to think that the tension of being a gentile in a Jewish messianic group would have made the gentile Christ followers receptive to a message that would make them more Jewish—especially considering the fact that the founder of the Galatian *ekklēsia*, Paul, was a circumcised Jew who had previously preached circumcision (Gal 5:11). But how does Paul view the effects of circumcision on a gentile Christ follower?³⁸

Circumcision Avails Nothing for Gentile Christ Followers

Paul's resistance towards the gentile Christ follower who wants to circumcise is obvious in Gal 5:2–4.³⁹ It is not that Paul seems to think that their potential circumcision would be inoperative, and therefore unnecessary; rather, Paul seems to view it as resulting in a real (negative) change (5:3).⁴⁰ The question is: why will Christ be of “no benefit” to the gentile Christ followers in Galatia if they get circumcised (5:2)?⁴¹ Since gentile Christ followers, according to Paul, are included in the Jesus movement and the Abrahamic blessing through the Messiah (Gal 3:6–9, 14, 27–29), they would be mistaken if they tried to further qualify their participation in the *ekklēsia* by circumcision. Thus,

it seems likely that becoming associated with Abraham through circumcision would for Paul entail a rejection of the Abrahamic lineage that already exists

³⁷ Neutel, *Ideal*, 99.

³⁸ As Campbell, “Loss,” 46, notes: “In whatever form we attempt the reconstruction of the *Sitz im Leben* of this letter the issue of circumcision for gentiles remains central.”

³⁹ Cf. Campbell, “Loss,” 46.

⁴⁰ Neutel, “Circumcision,” 383, notes, “this passage [5:2–4] offers us a rare explanation *why* it would be wrong for gentiles in Christ to become circumcised, although it still leaves many questions unanswered” (emphasis original). See also Rudolph, *Jew*, 74–75.

⁴¹ Especially since Christ seems to be an advantage/profit for Paul who is circumcised (cf. Phil 3:3–16).

through Christ ... Paul's argument about alienation from Christ suggests that for gentiles, the *two forms of kinship cannot coexist*.⁴²

As Wolfgang Reinbold puts it: "Hier gibt es kein Sowohl-Als-auch ... sondern nur ein Entweder-Oder."⁴³ Hence, if the Galatians circumcise, it will result in Christ being of no benefit to them (Gal 5:2), and their separation from Christ (Gal 5:4). In addition, they will be under the hegemony of the Mosaic law, which is not what Paul envisions for the gentile Christ followers in Galatia (Gal 3:23–26).⁴⁴ In the event that the Galatians persist and go ahead with getting circumcised they would be required, Paul says, to keep the whole law. This would be both a "yoke of slavery" (Gal 5:1) and an impossibility since by getting circumcised after the eighth day of life they would disobey the law (Gen 17).⁴⁵ This answers the question of why the Galatians should not undergo circumcision, but it also directs us to the answer why "neither circumcision nor foreskin is/avails anything."

Simply put, it is not possible for the gentile Christ followers to gain what Jews had before Christ through circumcision.⁴⁶ Terence L. Don-

⁴² Neutel, "Circumcision," 383 (my emphasis). Cf. Peter-Ben Smith, "In Search of Real Circumcision: Ritual Failure and Circumcision in Paul," *JSNT* 40 (2017): 73–100.

⁴³ Wolfgang Reinbold, "Gal 3,6–14 und das Problem der Erfüllbarkeit des Gesetzes bei Paulus," *ZNW* 91 (2000): 91–106, 101.

⁴⁴ As Gaston, *Paul*, 22, 110, points out, this is with reference to gentile Christ followers in particular and it says nothing about how Jewish Christ followers should relate to the Mosaic law. Thiessen, *Conversion*, 140–141, finds a similar pattern in the writings of Luke.

⁴⁵ Cf. Thiessen, *Gentile Problem*, 91–92. It is clear from Phil 3:5 (περιτομῆς ὀκταήμερος, "eighth-day circumcision") that Paul knew, and held in high esteem, the law of eighth-day circumcision. This may suggest that it is only on the eighth day that Paul thinks circumcision is in accordance with the Mosaic law. Pace James Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians, Black's New Testament Commentary* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 265, who argues that the problem with circumcision in this case is Jewish ethnocentrism.

⁴⁶ Johnson Hodge, *Sons*, 90–91; Neutel, "Circumcision," 383. 1 Corinthians and Galatians are not the only letters where Paul argues against gentile circumcision. See

aldson calls this pattern a “Christ-Torah antithesis” and it entails that where Christ faith chronologically precedes law obedience, law obedience cannot be added to that faith.⁴⁷ This becomes particularly clear in Gal 5:6 where Paul says that in Christ Jesus “neither circumcision nor foreskin avails anything.” As Lloyd Gaston puts it: “The Gentile counterpart to living in the covenant community of Torah is being ‘in Christ’.”⁴⁸ Consequently, Paul is not trying to conflate gentiles and Jews into one category; rather, as David Rudolph, building on the work of Paula Fredriksen, puts it: “Paul’s anti-circumcision language (directed at Gentiles) in Galatians can be understood as upholding Jew-Gentile distinction rather than collapsing it.”⁴⁹ It is because of this that Paul can state that “neither circumcision *nor* foreskin is/avails anything” to the gentile Christ follower in Galatia. What does avail is being in Christ Jesus. It should be noted, with risk of stating the obvious, that Paul says that neither circumcision nor foreskin is/avails anything. Therefore, not being circumcised is “revalued alongside circumcision so that the focus does not abide on Jewish or even on gentile existence, but on living a transformed life in Christ.”⁵⁰ Let us now turn to just that: the transformed life.

Matthew Thiessen, “Paul’s Argument against Gentile Circumcision in Romans 2:17–29,” *NovT* 56 (2014): 373–391.

⁴⁷ Terence L. Donaldson, *Paul and the Gentiles: Remapping the Apostle’s Convictional World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 169–173.

⁴⁸ Gaston, *Paul*, 32. Cf. Frank J. Matera, *Galatians*, SP 9 (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 188; Karin B. Neutel and Matthew R. Anderson “The First Cut is the Deepest: Masculinity and Circumcision in the First Century,” in *Biblical Masculinities Foregrounded*, ed. Ovidiu Creangă and Peter-Ben Smit (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014), 228–244 (238).

⁴⁹ Rudolph, *Jew*, 30. Cf. Fredriksen, “Judaizing the Nations,” 232–252; Fredriksen, *Paul*, 113–117.

⁵⁰ Campbell, “Loss,” 48.

If Not Circumcision Matters, What Does?

Galatians 5:6 and 6:15 both have their specific *ἀλλὰ* (“but”) clauses. The *ἀλλὰ* clause in 5:6, “but faith working through love” (πίστις δι’ ἀγάπης ἐνεργουμένη), is unique to Galatians since it is the only place where Paul mentions “faith” (πίστις) and “works” (ἐνεργέω) as functioning in harmony.⁵¹ To become a member of the *ekklēsia*, no “works” are necessary, but as guidelines for the behaviour within the *ekklēsia*, “works” do matter (6:2).⁵² Consequently, “faith working through love” is a necessary expression of the *ekklēsia*, circumcision is not.⁵³ “Faith working through love” can, of course, have several meanings; but within Galatians, we see some of what Paul might mean by the phrase. In 2:20 “love” (ἀγάπη) refers to Jesus’s action when he gave himself up for Paul; in 5:13–14, the Galatians are encouraged to become slaves of one another through love because the law is “fulfilled” (πληρώω) in the commandment “love your neighbour” (cf. Lev 19:18); and in 5:22, ἀγάπη is the first fruit of the Spirit. In sum, to show love through faith is to live according to the example of Jesus, by the Spirit, and to fulfil the law (which they are to do through love, not circumcision).⁵⁴

The second *ἀλλὰ* clause (“a new creation,” καινὴ κτίσις, cf. 2 Cor 5:17) emphasises the newness that is in Christ.⁵⁵ The prevalent interpretation seems to be that the “new creation” is in contrast to circumcision

⁵¹ For reasons to translate ἐνεργουμένη (“working”) as middles rather than passive, see Douglas J. Moo, *Galatians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 330.

⁵² Cf. Sanders, *Paul*, 114.

⁵³ Love L. Sechrest, *A Former Jew: Paul and the Dialectics of Race*, LNTS 410 (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 167.

⁵⁴ Here we see the same logic at work as in 1 Cor 7:19 and that for Paul the Jewish law is not something negative but that gentile Christ followers should abide by the precepts of the law that pertain to them.

⁵⁵ I understand κτίσις as “creation,” not “creature,” primarily due to Gal 6:14. Cf. Moo, *Galatians*, 397–398. For a discussion of the arguments of both positions, see Jeff Hubing, *Crucifixion and New Creation: The Strategic Purpose of Galatians 6:11–17*, LNTS 508 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 240–244.

and foreskin. J. Louis Martyn claims that “the world that is passé is not Judaism as such, but rather the world of *all* religious differentiation.”⁵⁶ I think this is a misunderstanding of the text, for, as Fredriksen reminds us,

[Paul] is not referring to Jews in the first instance and to gentiles in the second: he says, rather, that circumcision (in light of Christ) is an irrelevant issue for gentiles, who are, again, both the recipients and the rhetorical focus of the letter.⁵⁷

The new creation has come about through Christ and one can access it via Christ (Gal 2:20). This entails two novel changes in the gentile Christ follower’s life: a spiritual life with the God of Israel and Jesus Christ and a loyalty to the *ekklēsia* and the Jesus movement.⁵⁸ In this new spiritual and physical situation, no one can “boast” (*καυχᾶσθαι*) in the flesh (by being circumcised), rather boasting comes from the cross on which Christ was hanged (Gal 6:14).⁵⁹

So, the “new creation” suggests that gentiles can take part in the blessings that were bestowed on Abraham and earlier limited to ethnic Israel (Gal 3:6–9). What defined Abrahamic lineage and worship of the God of Israel before the Messiah, is now available for gentiles in Jesus (3:29), Paul argues, for “the promise to Abraham of many nations has begun to be realized within the coalition of Christ-believers, God’s new creation.”⁶⁰ As Paul himself puts it in Rom 3:29–30: “Or is he God of the Jews only, not gentiles also? Certainly of gentiles, as well. If so, God is

⁵⁶ J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 33A (New York: Double Day, 1997), 565 (emphasis original).

⁵⁷ Fredriksen, *Paul*, 225, n. 22 (emphasis original).

⁵⁸ Cf. Martinus C. de Boer, *Galatians: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 403.

⁵⁹ Campbell, “Loss,” 47–48.

⁶⁰ Nanos, *Irony*, 152.

one [and] God⁶¹ will justify circumcision out of faithfulness and foreskin through faith.”

CONCLUSION

I have argued that Paul’s statement “neither circumcision nor foreskin is anything” in its three versions (1 Cor 7:19; Gal 5:6; 6:15) does not apply to *everyone* or under *all circumstances*. Rather, in 1 Cor 7:19, Paul says that in relation to the call of the God of Israel and in relation to the salvation gained by Christ, neither circumcision nor keeping the foreskin is anything. In Galatians, Paul makes it clear that in Christ Jesus “neither circumcision nor foreskin is/avails anything” for a gentile Christ follower. What they seek to gain by circumcision, they have already gained in Christ. Therefore, what does matter is “Gods’ commandments,” “faith working through love,” and “a new creation.” These things are highly important to practice and recognise for Paul’s Christ followers, more so than the existence or non-existence of the foreskin.

⁶¹ Since the relative pronoun ὅς is nominative masculine singular and refers to ὁ θεός, I use “God” instead of the relative pronoun “who.”