Q&A

Church of the Eternal God
FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Why did Paul have Timothy Circumcised?

In Acts 16:1, we meet up with Paul during his travels north and west of Jerusalem in modern day Turkey. While here, Paul meets an up-and-coming disciple we know as Timothy. Timothy had a good reputation among the brethren in the area -- in the cities of Lystra and Iconium in particular. Paul was impressed with him as well and invited Timothy to join him on his travels through the region. However, before they commence their travels together, Paul has Timothy circumcised (Acts 16:3). While this might not seem like a significant detail, it is important to examine in context because the implications are significant.

Reading Acts 16:1-3 in context, "Then he came to Derbe and Lystra. And behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a certain Jewish woman who believed, but his father was Greek. He was well spoken of by the brethren who were at Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted to have him go on with him. And he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in that region, for they all knew that his father was Greek."

What makes this a notable event is that circumcision was a serious point of contention at the time. Holding fast to the traditions of their forefathers, some converted Jews had previously insisted that circumcision was a necessary ritual to be performed on the membership of the Church, some Pharisees in particular (Acts 15:5). Clearly, the individuals insisting upon the ritual did not understand the salvation made available to the Gentiles, and all men, through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. In fact, many Jews had such strong feelings about the need for circumcision that they later sought to kill Paul because he had brought Greeks into the temple (Acts 21:28-31). Paul was intimately aware of the real conflict taking place over this issue.

Circumcision was such a divisive issue at the time, even in the church, that the "apostles and elders came together to consider this matter" at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:6). This meeting was largely held to clarify the reasons why circumcision was not necessary for salvation. In attendance at the meeting was Peter, who helped clarify the truth of the matter. "And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: 'Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they'" (Acts 15:7-11). Among other decisions made at the meeting, the fact that circumcision was not necessary for salvation was firmly established and documented.

With the clear doctrine that "in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision, nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love" (Galatians 5:6), why did Paul still have Timothy circumcised? Paul certainly knew and believed that it was not necessary for his salvation--in fact, he taught strongly that it would be wrong to be circumcised if it was done with the concept that it was necessary for salvation. The reason is included in the same statement about the event, stating that it was "because of the Jews who were in that region, for they all knew that his father was a Greek."

The Nelson Study Bible explains:

"Salvation was not the issue here. Instead Timothy became circumcised so that God could use him to reach all people--even the Jews--with the message of the gospel."

The New Bible Commentary: Revised added:

"Paul circumcised him; so that he might be the more useful in the work of the gospel... He fought against any suggestion that Christians should be circumcised in order to complete their salvation; but circumcision in itself, he held, was religiously indifferent [1 Corinthians 7:19; Galatians 5:6; Galatians 6:15]. Timothy had been brought up by his Jewish mother and grandmother to be a Jew religiously in every point but circumcision. Moreover, as his mother was a Jewess, he ranked as a Jew in Jewish eyes..."

Timothy was circumcised because Paul wanted him to be used effectively for the preaching of the gospel. While it is not necessary for salvation, it is not wrong to perform.

As stated earlier, Paul knew all too well that the Jews he came in contact with had difficulty accepting the doctrine of not requiring circumcision. Since Timothy was a Jew, and since Paul wanted Timothy to help preach the Gospel to them, it was an advantage for Timothy to be circumcised. Paul knew that the Jews would give him more respect and accept him if he was. For the sake of building the Church and bringing more people to salvation, Paul acted wisely without compromising the laws of God. In 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 we read about the approach he took, "... and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win the Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law..." Paul chose to adapt to those he came in contact with, without compromising the truth, in order to help bring them to salvation. By circumcising Timothy, he became accepted as a Jew, and avoided unnecessary disputes.

Even though circumcision was not necessary for salvation, Paul did not want Timothy to become a stumbling block to the Jews. As Paul advises, "But beware, lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak." (1 Corinthians 8:9) In this regard, Timothy was successful. The result of this was that "the churches were strengthened in the faith, and increased in number daily" (Acts 16:5). While adapting to the customs of the community was effective in this situation, blind conformity to the incomplete understanding of others for the sake of keeping the peace is not what Paul wanted to do. In fact, he came out very strongly against those who conformed to customs at the expense of the truth.

Paul had a strong contention with Peter who went too far in compromising the truth in order to not offend converted Jews. Peter had not totally overcome his prior habit of removing himself from meals with Gentiles when Jews arrived (compare Galatians 2:11-12). Among the faults with this behavior was the false impression it gave to the converted Gentiles, causing them to believe that they were inferior to converted Jews and rejected by them. Paul was upset with Peter and other converts, who "were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel" (Galatians 2:14). Peter was causing an incorrect doctrine of disassociation between Jews and Gentiles to perpetuate. Paul was very strong in his belief that the truth should not be misrepresented. In an effort to avoid offending others, the truth of the gospel must not be compromised.

The circumcision of Timothy was an action performed to prevent unnecessary conflict. In the same way, it did not cause conflict or confusion. Timothy was a Jew, and therefore it was not inappropriate for him to become circumcised. Paul and Timothy understood that the physical act of circumcision had nothing to do with any spiritual requirement for salvation. In a similar situation, when Paul was going into Jerusalem with Titus, a Greek, he did not have him circumcised, because it would have given the wrong impression -- that Gentiles need to be circumcised in order to obtain salvation (Galatians 2:3). The point of discernment is in knowing when the truth is being compromised.

In practical terms today, we can extend the principle in our own lives by having a willingness to make further sacrifices that may help us build a proper relationship with people around us. If an action is in accordance with, and not in conflict with the laws of God, and it helps to present ourselves in a respectable light to others who are learning about the truth without giving a false impression, it is not wrong to do it. In fact, a

practice is appropriate and good if it does not violate God's laws and helps others come to true salvation.

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