

Concluding their journey into the province of Galatia, Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch where they spend the next three years, teaching the message of Christ in synagogues, in churches, and in the public square.

We learn from Paul's experience of teaching, is that it is very easy to get side-tracked when presenting the gospel message. When a church is side-tracked by issues other than the worship of God and the proclamation of His Son Jesus the Christ as our Saviour, battle lines are drawn in the church, and the church (people) suffers.

In Galatia, Paul and Barnabas taught about the Christ who is the *transition*, who delivers us from living life trying to obey the WHOLE law, into a life lived by simple faith, to believe the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross opens the door to a relationship with God for all eternity.

Paul's experience in Galatia teaches us that distractions comes usually arise from of a group of power hungry religious leaders; in Galatia, the battle lines in the church were drawn on the matter of circumcision: should non-Jews (gentiles) who become Christ-followers, be circumcised?

Societies have different rituals, whose origin and meaning is lost in the mists of time. The salute and the handshake are two prime examples. When did these start and what did each mean? We will undoubtedly have as many responses as there are cultures in this world.

As we read the first account of circumcision given to Abraham by God, there is an absence of detail of procedure, how it should be done. It is understood that circumcision was practiced before God told Abraham, *every male among you shall be circumcised*<sup>1</sup>. Abraham lived around 2000-1900BC, a time when archeological records from Egypt and Mesopotamia reveal that medical science and practice were far more advanced than we give credit to iron-age and bronze-age civilisations. Which explains why God did not explain to Abraham, **how** circumcision should be done, but focussed on its importance.

This is what God said to Abraham (read Genesis 17:1-14).

Perhaps it might be better for us this morning to take time out and understand the importance of this, before

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 17:10

we re-join Paul in his journeys, because circumcision divided almost every new church in his day.

There are three words the covenant of circumcision, we should try to understand to help us make sense of our own faith, and how our faith in Christ today, is shaped by this covenant: **COVENANT, WITNESS/SIGN**, and **MAN**.

1. Last year we studied four covenants in the Bible: with Adam, with Noah, with Abraham, with Moses, and the covenant between Christ and His Church. A covenant is a contractual obligation which starts with one party describing Himself (e.g. *I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt*), then promises to do something which is in keeping with His character, inviting the other party to **accept** the terms of the covenant, and obey it - live by the agreed terms. Keeping the covenant has its rewards, and breaking the covenant has its consequences (which we view as punishment). In each covenant, God is saying, *If you live by the terms of the covenant, then you are under my protection and I will act in every which way, to keep you safe. If you choose not to live by the terms and conditions of*

*my covenant, then I am sorry, you have placed yourself outside of my protection and there is nothing I can do to help you. You take what comes.*

Covenant best describes our relationship with God. God initiates a covenant, because He knows He will keep His side of the agreement, because He can - He is God. If we accept God as the person He is and describes Himself to be, we can trust Him to keep His side of the agreement; we can therefore, trust Him to keep His promise, His Word.

The question is: will we keep our side of the covenant?

2. The second word we must understand in its context is the word **sign**. God said to Abraham, *circumcision ... shall be a **sign** of the covenant between me and you<sup>2</sup>.*

When an agreement is signed between two parties, it is customary to have witnesses who authenticate, validate, confirm the agreement. e.g. marriage certificate: *solemnly witnessed by*; legal agreements: *in witness whereof ...*

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 17:11

In recent years we have lost the significance of the role of a witness to an agreement or covenant, which is to **remind** the parties who signed the agreement, of what they covenanted to do, **remind** them of their commitment to the terms of the agreement. The role of the witness to the marriage covenant, one each on the bride's side and the groom's, is to remind them when needed, and when appropriate, of the commitment they made to each other.

One one occasion, I heard a judge in family court, ask the couple, *Are you now saying you do not wish to live by the terms of your marriage contract?* It is a difficult question to answer, especially if things have happened resulting in differences that cannot, perhaps even should not, be reconciled.

Between God and Abraham, the covenant of circumcision was established as a **sign:**

- of God's blessing and endorsement, set apart as a witness of His character in the world.

- to remind us of God's promise, *I will never leave you, nor forsake (abandon) you*<sup>3</sup>

Circumcision represented an outward, visible sign (witness), of an inner (heart and mind) willing acceptance of God's covenant, and to reciprocate by obeying the laws of the covenant.

Where have we heard this language before? **BAPTISM!** Some say Baptism is not necessary to be a follower of Christ; this would be the equivalent of a Jew claiming that circumcision was unnecessary to be a Jew. You cannot claim to be under the covenant (protection) of Christ, unless you are willing to take on the role and responsibility of being a witness to that covenant.

The sign/witness of our covenant relationship with Christ, is baptism<sup>4</sup>, which is made visible through our regular our participation in the Lord's Supper<sup>5</sup>.

3. The third word we should understand better is the word **MAN**. We do not have enough time to explore

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<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 31:6

<sup>4</sup> Colossians 2:11-12

<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:25

this word in detail. Let's start with language. The English and Romance languages derive the word 'male' and 'masculine' from the Latin root meaning heavy or the strong one. The Hebrew word for male (*zachar*), has the same root letters as, 'to remember'.

In Jewish society, the male has the obligation of remembering and reminding (witness/sign), of transmitting the tradition. Most social ritual in Hebrew society places on the male (man), the responsibility to remember and to remind.

I hope this gives you a very brief appreciation of the problem faced by the early church: how do we relate with people who come into faith and fellowship after us? Do we impose our cultural practices on them? Which ones? But the most important question is **WHY?**

The question was so serious, so important and so divisive a major conference was held in Jerusalem in 49AD to which Paul and Barnabas had to go. At this conference, the Apostle James gave the final word that circumcision was not necessary to receive Christ's gift of salvation, and be in fellowship with other Christ-followers.

This part of the Church's early history is a constant reminder and a caution to us:

- to recognise how easily we can slip into divisive discussions and make every effort to avoid this.
- to hold as sacred, the Church's primary purpose, which is to worship God and proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Everything we do, must be the result of our worship and proclamation, and everything we do, must point to God's glory and the Lordship of Christ. To God be the glory, at all times.
- we live in a covenant relationship with God, through His Son our Christ. The Creator and Master of the Universe is true to His word. The question to us is, *do we keep our promises, our commitments, our obligations to Him, who is God?*

**AMEN**