

Philippians 3:3 in the Navajo Bible

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Háálá ąąh náhinilgish doo bee Diyin God bich'í' nidahwiidláa da, nidi Níłch'i Diyinii bee bich'í' nidahwiidlá, áádóó Christ Jesus baa nihił dahózhóogo baa dahwii'niih. Ts'ísee k'ehgo ádaat'éii doo baa dadzínúidlí da[.] (Philippians 3:3)¹

For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh- (Philippians 3:3)²

Introduction

This is only the second verse in the New Testament where I've found a real problem with the Navajo translation. Sometimes there have been things to comment on or issues to clarify, but here there appears to be a real problem.

The Problem With the Translation

What the Navajo translation says in the first clause of this verse is all very true. Christians do not worship God by means of circumcision. And this is something that Paul could very well have written. The problem is that he didn't. What he did write was, "For we are the circumcision" (*esmen gar hē peritomē*). What he meant by this is that Christians are the ones who have the benefits Jews normally associate with circumcision. They don't have those benefits; we do. It is not just that a word is wrong. The whole thought Paul was trying to convey in the first clause of vs. 3 has been set aside and replaced with something else. The Navajo says, "We do not"; the English and the Greek both say, "We are." These are widely different ideas. They don't correspond at all.

I have no suggestion as to what words the translators should have used, but with whatever words, the thought needs to be that Christians are the ones who have a special covenant relationship with God, i.e., that what circumcision was designed to accomplish for the Jew, faith brings to completion for the Christian.

Paul states repeatedly that those who call themselves "the circumcision" really aren't, while those who glory in Christ Jesus really are. Thus, Christians form a spiritual Israel and literal Jews are not Jews in the fullest sense, unless they believe in Jesus, because the fullest sense of what it means to be a Jew includes a spiritual component. Unbelieving Jews no longer have this spiritual link to God because by rejecting Christ they have refused it.

¹ Navajo Bible quotations are from *Diyin God Bizaad. The Holy Bible in Navajo*. Revised edition. New York: American Bible Society, 2000.

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The Problem of Circumcision

Some context

Let's pick up some context before going on. Below I quote not just vs. 3, but vss. 2-7. Notice two words in particular. These words are "circumcision" and "law." Paul often uses them together. To help draw out the relationship between them in the quotations that follow I'll highlight the one and underline the other.

Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh. ³ For it is we who are the **circumcision**, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh— ⁴ though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ **circumcised** on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. ⁷ But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. (Philippians 3:2-7)

Paul obviously feels strongly about what he's saying. He feels that the circumcision group have the potential to harm the church and to draw people away from Christ. In vs. 3 he makes the point that circumcision should be something spiritual. Physical circumcision does not bring us any closer to God than we would have been without it. It is only an imitation of what Christ gives us in reality by faith. This position represents a theme that Paul returns to many times in his writings.

Actually there are two themes here that Paul returns to on different occasions. These often appear together, as in Philippians 3:2-7 (above). First, there is the closeness of the relationship between law and circumcision. Second, there is the concept that Christians are spiritual Jews and that, as a body, Christians form a spiritual Israel. Below we talk about both of these themes, but let's start with the one about law in relation to circumcision.

Law and circumcision

My examples come in groups, because in order to find them I searched for cases where the words "law" and "circumcision" occur within five verses of each other. We wouldn't be able to notice this sort of relationship if we were looking only at single verses.

Group 1: Acts 15.

Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be **circumcised** and required to obey the law of Moses." (Acts 15:5)

Group 2: Acts 21.

When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul: "You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law. They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to **circumcise** their children or live according to our customs. (Acts 21:20-21)

Group 3: Romans 2.

You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?

Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been **circumcised**.

²⁶ If those who are not **circumcised** keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were **circumcised**?

²⁷ The one who is not **circumcised** physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and **circumcision**, are a lawbreaker.

²⁸ A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is **circumcision** merely outward and physical.

²⁹ No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and **circumcision** is **circumcision** of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God.

What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in **circumcision**? (Romans 2:23-3:1)

Group 4: Romans 3.

Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith.

For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.

³⁰ since there is only one God, who will justify the **circumcised** by faith and the **uncircumcised** through that same faith. (Romans 3:27-28)

Group 5: Romans 4.

Under what **circumstances** was it credited? Was it after he was **circumcised**, or before? It was not after, but before!

¹¹ And he received the sign of **circumcision**, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still **uncircumcised**. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been **circumcised**, in order that righteousness might be credited to them.

¹² And he is also the father of the **circumcised** who not only are **circumcised** but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was **circumcised**.

¹³ It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. ¹⁴ For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless, ¹⁵ because law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression. (Romans 4:10-15)

Group 6a: Galatians 5.

Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be **circumcised**, Christ will be of no value to you at all.

³ Again I declare to every man who lets himself be **circumcised** that he is obligated to obey the whole law.

⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither **circumcision** nor **uncircumcision** has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. (Galatians 5:2-3, 6)

Group 6b: Galatians 5.

¹¹ Brothers, if I am still preaching **circumcision**, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished.

¹⁴ The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Galatians 5:11, 14)

Group 7: Galatians 6.

Those who want to make a good impression outwardly are trying to compel you to be **circumcised**. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ.

¹³ Not even those who are **circumcised** obey the law, yet they want you to be **circumcised** that they may boast about your flesh.

¹⁵ Neither **circumcision** nor **uncircumcision** means anything; what counts is a new creation. (Galatians 6:12-13, 15)

Group 8: Philippians 3.

For it is we who are the **circumcision**, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh—

⁵ **circumcised** on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; (Philippians 3:3, 5)

In each of these eight verse groups the context for the word "law" is provided by some form of the word "circumcision" ("circumcise," "circumcised," "uncircumcised," "uncircumcision," and so on). This is a theme not only in Paul's letters, but also in the book of Acts. Over the past two thousand years or so the word "circumcision" has gradually dropped out of the debate and we have replaced it with the word "Sabbath," but that was not what those who wrote these passages had in mind. When they said "law," they meant circumcision.

Spiritual Israel

The second theme that I mentioned above has to do with the spiritual nature of what it means to be a Jew and the connection that this has with being a Christian. What circumcision once gave the Jews in a figure, Christian today have by faith. This teaching, like the first, is not popular, but it is soundly biblical.

Those in covenant relationship with God today are not those who reject His Son, but those who have the faith of Abraham. So what does a person with the faith of Abraham think about Jesus? Well, what did Abraham himself think about Jesus? Jesus tells us in John 8. "Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56). How did he see it? Living almost 2000 years before Christ, how could he possibly have seen it? Only by faith. The idea that Abraham's faith and ours is somehow comparable comes through in a number of passages. I discuss six of these below. We begin with Romans 2:28-29.

Passage 1: Romans 2.

A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical.
²⁹ No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God. (Romans 2:28-29)

In vs. 28 Paul shows what being a Jew does not mean and what circumcision is not. Being a Jew does not mean just having the right ancestry – the right genes. It does not mean just descending biologically from Abraham. Let me repeat, this is what being a Jew does *not* mean. Similarly, circumcision is not "merely outward and physical." What Evangelicals prefer to talk about is not a spiritual Israel, but a literal one. They like to discuss 1947 and the formation of modern Israel as a newly independent political state. They describe the Israeli victory over Arab enemies in 1947 as a miracle performed on behalf of God's chosen people. And yet by all accounts the people it was performed for are only Jews outwardly, and their circumcision is "merely outward and physical."

If this is true, are modern Israeli Jews "real" Jews in the sense of Romans 2:28? No, actually they aren't! Or at least that's what Paul says in the passage quoted. So if literal Jews aren't real Jews in this context, who is? He tells us that in the next verse.

No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God (vs. 29).

A person who is a Jew inwardly is a Christian, because Christians exercise faith just as Abraham did. When Paul speaks of circumcision of the heart, what he has in mind is Christian faith – a genuine reaching out to God from the heart (see also Jeremiah 4:4; 9:25). In this context, "real" Jews are spiritual Jews, and spiritual Israel is the church.

Passage 2: Romans 3.

Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, ³⁰ since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. (Romans 3:29-30)

The point being made in Romans 3:29-30 is that, if you're circumcised you need faith in order to be justified before God, and if you're not circumcised you need faith in order to be justified before God. See table 1.

Table 1
 Romans 3:29-30

Circumcised	Faith	Justified
Not circumcised	Faith	Justified



So what is it that brings justification? Faith. Being circumcised, or not, is irrelevant to this process. The only thing that counts is faith. No one who lacks faith has any special standing with God.

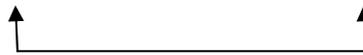
Passage 3: Romans 4.

Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness. ¹⁰ Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! ¹¹ And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. ¹² And he is also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised. (Romans 4:9-12)

Here Paul says that Abraham is our father if we are circumcised and have faith, or if we are not circumcised and have faith. See table 2 (below).

Table 2
Romans 4:9-12

Circumcised	Faith	Abraham our father
Not circumcised	Faith	Abraham our father



So according to Paul in Romans 4:9-12, what set of qualifications must we have for Abraham to be considered our father and for us to be considered his sons and daughters? Is it circumcision, or faith? Look at the table again. Read back through the passage. Circumcision does nothing for us either way. Faith, on the other hand, means everything to us. If we have faith, we are Abraham's children and he is our spiritual father. We are in covenant relationship with God.

Passage 4: Ephesians 2.

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body by the hands of men)- ¹² remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵ by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. (Ephesians 2:11-16)

Why were Gentiles formerly excluded from citizenship in Israel? Because they had not been circumcised. And what changed all that? The death and resurrection of Christ. Now think about this for a moment. If what the Gentiles lacked was circumcision, and if what supplied the lack was Christ's death on the cross, what part of this corresponds to circumcision? It is the faith we exercise in claiming His death as an atonement for our sins. Paul is not here expressing a shallow thought. At issue is what it means to have a relationship with God. We have that relationship by faith and so faith gives Christians now what circumcision gave Jews long ago.

There is a fine point to make here and some will miss it, but it comes to the heart of what I'm trying to get across in this paper. In Ephesians 2 Paul says that Gentiles need not become Jews physically in order to have a relationship with God spiritually. On the contrary, Christians are the real Jews precisely because they are spiritual. "God is spirit" (John 4:24) and so to have a relationship with Him at all, it must be on a spiritual level. Spiritual Israel is that body of people who have come into covenant relationship with God by believing in His Son. According to Paul, these are the real Jews – not those whose circumcision is "merely outward or physical."

Passage 5: Philippians 3.

For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh- (Philippians 3:3)

This is the passage we started with. When Paul says "we" in this verse, he is talking about those "who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh." What flesh does he have in mind at the end of the verse? The part removed in circumcision.

Passage 6: Colossians 2.

In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, ¹² having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. (Colossians 2:11-12)

Here Paul repeats his earlier point about the relationship of circumcision and faith, and he adds one further element – baptism. Baptism is interesting here for two reasons. First, it signifies putting off, not just one small bit of flesh, but the entire body. So there is the contrast between part and whole. Christian baptism signifies a complete death, burial, and resurrection. When done right, it also signifies that one is making a personal commitment to Christ. This is why baptism in the New Testament always took place when the person receiving baptism was old enough to respond intelligently to God. Baptizing infants brings us back closer to an Old Testament model, where circumcision took place before the person undergoing it could have any way of knowing what was happening. Faith, on the other hand, is not a ceremony and to be meaningful it must be knowledgeable. People being baptized should be old enough to know what they're doing.

Passage 7: Colossians 3.

Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. (Colossians 3:11)

A Jew, a Greek; circumcised, uncircumcised; barbarian, Scythian; Anglo, Navajo – all are one in Christ. According to Paul, all who truly and intelligently believe in Christ are sons or daughters of Abraham and heirs of the same promises God gave to Abraham long ago.

The Problem With Infant Baptism

This is already a long paper, but let me summarize briefly what circumcision meant in ancient Israel and relate it to our situation today. The purpose of circumcision was to show that a person belongs to God. This symbolic act showed that God was making a claim on the person's life. It required a minor surgical procedure, which was performed one week after birth, so no one being circumcised was able to offer any personal response as he entered the covenant relationship that circumcision signified. But in any case, God was claiming the child as His own.

For Christians it's not a matter of Christ claiming someone at birth. He already asserted His claim on all mankind long ago at the cross. On the cross Christ bought us back. We are rightfully His whether we accept the fact and are saved or reject it and are lost. So the issue is not one of asserting a claim, but of responding to one. The corresponding ceremony for Christians is not the removal of a bit of flesh from an infant's body, but the burial of the whole person in water and the subsequent resurrection of the whole person to an entirely new life. Because of the nature of the symbolism, the entire body should be lowered beneath the surface of the water. Sprinkling is not enough. At baptism the newly reborn Christian – if he or she is old enough to understand what's going on – shows all present that s/he is publicly accepting Christ and responding by faith to both the claim He makes and the One who makes it.

Conclusion

When a person is not old enough to understand the significance of baptism, or if for any other reason the person has no sense of spiritual realities, the ceremony should not be performed. If it has already been performed meaninglessly, it should be repeated. Baptism is either a deeply meaningful expression of personal faith or it is devoid of significance. If Christians perform meaningless ceremonies, how is that different from Jews performing meaningless ceremonies? In this event neither ceremony is either better or worse than the other. Both are on the same level. If we want to avoid the mistakes of others, let us enter into baptism intelligently, at an age when we can understand its deep meaning.

The other point to mention is that when we come into relationship with God on a spiritual level (which is the only way anyone will ever come into relationship with Him), we become part of spiritual Israel. After the cross, God's special covenant people are not those who descend from Abraham physically, but those who have the faith of Abraham spiritually. This is why Paul says, "it is we who are the circumcision," in Philippians 3:3 (above). At the present time God's special people are those who accept God's special Person, i.e., Christ. And the faith that makes us one with Christ also makes us one with each other. Jews, Gentiles; Anglos, Navajos – there is no difference before God if we believe in His Son.