

**The Power of the Gospel Over the Culture of the Heart:**  
*The theological significance of Romans 2:29 in Romans*

Evangelical Theological Society Regional Meeting

March 26, 2004

Baptist Bible Seminary  
Clarks Summit, PA

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What relationship does the Gospel have with the culture of one's heart?<sup>1</sup> The answer to this question has profound implications for one's understanding of what it means to be a Christian. The purpose of this paper is to show the above relationship by demonstrating the importance of Romans 2:29 in Paul's argument in the epistle of Romans: "*But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.*"

The task of this paper is complicated, for not much has been written on these verses. Timothy Berkley raises the complex nature of addressing Romans 2 by writing that it, "receives only cursory treatment in commentaries, and there are few articles or monographs which deal

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<sup>1</sup> What is meant by "culture of the heart" is the disposition of the human heart.

specifically with these verses.”<sup>2</sup> It is the position of this paper that the “circumcision” Paul mentions in v. 29 is the direct result of Gospel change, which is the change from a Romans 3 disposition to a Romans 8:12-17 disposition; This paper will attempt to demonstrate how Paul builds on Romans 2:29 in chapters 3-16.

The first hurdle that one must climb in deciding what role circumcision has in Romans, is discovering its central theme. Ever since Martin Luther discovered that “the righteous shall live by faith” in Romans, the Protestant Church has agreed with him that “justification by faith” is thematic in Romans. It was Luther whose life and thought was transformed as a result of this great book,

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I have heeded to the context of the words, namely, “In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’” There I began to understand the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which [the] merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, “He who through faith is righteous shall live.” Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. Here a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. Thereupon I ran through the Scriptures from memory....

And I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word “righteousness of God.” Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise.<sup>3</sup>

Few would disagree with Luther, and many have adopted his important insights into Paul’s epistle, but perhaps Luther’s thought on Romans is simply a part of the whole. It is on this point that Douglas Moo’s comments are helpful,

What, then, is the theme of the letter? The gospel. The word “gospel” and the cognate verb “evangelize” are particularly prominent in the introduction (cf. 1:1, 2, 9, 15) and conclusion (15:16, 19) of Romans—its epistolary “frame.” And this is the world that has pride of place in Paul’s statement of the theme of the letter: 1:16-17. “For I am not ashamed of the gospel....” True, Paul goes on to speak of

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<sup>2</sup> Timothy W. Berkley. *From a Broken Covenant To Circumcision of the Heart: Pauline Intertextual Exegesis in Romans 2:17-29*. Atlanta, Georgia: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000. pp. 4-5.

<sup>3</sup> John Piper. *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy*. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books. 2000.) pp. 91-92.

the interplay of salvation, the interplay of the Jew and Gentile, and justification by faith; and each has been advanced as the theme of the letter. But they are all elaborations of the main topic of these verse, the gospel.”<sup>4</sup>

Although the interplay of Jew and Gentile, and justification by faith all play a very important part in the argument of Romans, the Gospel as the theme of Romans seems to capture all of the above into one important whole, but perhaps the word “Gospel” is too simple of a term for today’s Christian.<sup>5</sup> If Romans 1:16-17 captures the theme of Romans, perhaps 2:29 demonstrate the initial and fundamental result of the power of the Gospel in that the Gospel results in the change of the natural disposition of one’s heart.<sup>6</sup>

In Romans 1:18 – 2:11, Paul wants the Gentile to understand that he is guilty and without excuse because of the external evidences that God has provided via nature. In 2:12-3:8 one immediately notices that not only is the Gentile without excuse, but the Jew is guilty before God as well. So the question immediately rises in the reader’s mind as to how Romans 2:29 applies to both Jew and Gentile if it falls within the context of Jewish condemnation for breaking the law?

Verses 17-27 seem to be addressing the issue that Jews who rely on the law but practice not the law do not receive the benefits of the covenant promise, but instead receive the condemnation that comes through breaking the law.<sup>7</sup> Notice vv. 26-28, “So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as

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<sup>4</sup> Douglas Moo. *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, “The Epistle to the Romans.” (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing. 1996), pp. 29-30.

<sup>5</sup> The “Gospel” was what affected the whole life, including full redemption in the next life.

<sup>6</sup> The change of a Romans 3:9-18 heart to a Deuteronomy 30:6 heart (from despise of God to Love of and for God).

<sup>7</sup> “Paul’s exegesis of OT texts lays a foundation for his argument in these verses, and provides justification for his conclusions. Paul relies on references from prophetic texts in Jer. 7:2-11, 9:23-26, and Exek. 36:16-27 to interpret the narrative texts of Deuteronomy 29-30 and Genesis 17. These interpretations form the basis for Paul’s attack upon Jewish assurance of salvation from wrath and his understanding of a spiritual obedience based upon faith which can result in salvation for gentiles as well as Jews. These conclusions are an integral part of the foundation for Paul’s defense of God’s righteousness in dealing with both Jews and Gentiles....” (Timothy W. Berkley. *From a Broken Covenant To Circumcision of the Heart: Pauline Intertextual Exegesis in Romans 2:17-29*. [Atlanta, Georgia: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000.], p.11).

circumcision? Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical.”

John Piper suggests that Paul’s point in 2:12-3:8 is not about external circumcision and physical Jewishness, “but a true grasp of what the Law was really teaching about the heart and about faith and about the obedience that comes from faith. And if that is what really matters, then Gentiles - the uncircumcised - who grasp the real meaning of the Law and have their hearts changed by the Spirit and live out the obedience of faith (see 1:5; 16:26), they will, in reality, be the true Jews.”<sup>8</sup> Schreiner further clarifies that Romans 2:29 profoundly distinguishes “the difference between the old and new covenant. Belonging to the people of God is no longer based on circumcision. All that is necessary is the circumcision of the heart, and such circumcision of the heart enables one to keep the law.”<sup>9</sup> Further, it is agreeable that “heart circumcision” is a phenomena that belongs to the new covenant, the covenant which was inaugurated by Jesus at Calvary,<sup>10</sup> or as Peter Toon writes,

Like the old covenant, the new covenant will create a right relationship between God and his people, center around the law (God’s will), and include all the people of God. However, unlike the old covenant, the new belongs specifically to the last days (“the time is coming”); further, it involves creating new people through special divine action. God will directly implant his will in the hearts of his people through the Holy Spirit’s presence there; and thereby they will come to enjoy a full communion with God, know what he requires of them, and experience the sense of being forgiven of their sins.

From the New Testament we know that this prophecy pointed to Christ’s work on the cross, where the new covenant was inaugurated and also to the Spirit’s work of bringing the effects of Christ’s saving work into human souls. Personal inward regeneration is a part of the benefits of the new covenant.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> John Piper. *Who is the True Jew?*. Desiring God Ministries. Website: [www.desiringGOD.org](http://www.desiringGOD.org).

<sup>9</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner. *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, “Romans.” (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books. 2000.) p. 144.

<sup>10</sup> See Luke 22:20.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Toon, *Born Again: A Biblical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House. 1987), p. 57.

It seems that Paul's argument in 1:18-3:8 is not so much about the distinction between Jew and Gentile, but the common situation that the two groups find themselves in: condemnation (Romans 3:10-18). What is striking with this section of scripture is that the reprobate Gentile and Jew have a disposition that wants nothing to do with God (Rom. 3:10-18) unless a circumcision of the heart is experienced (Romans 2:29). It appears that C.H. Dodd understood that, for Paul, both Jews and gentiles stood condemned before God on the basis of their disposition, for he writes that "[Paul's] main point is not that the pagan, if he does right, will escape the Wrath, but that the Jew, unless he does right, will certainly not escape it.... That being so, they have not a shadow of hope on the ground of their position of national privilege."<sup>12</sup>

James Dunn is helpful in writing that Paul is asserting in Romans 2:28-29,

...what Judaism, what the covenant, what the law and circumcision are all about, a reality which he implicitly claims to have been realized in the eschatological working of the Spirit in the hearts of Gentiles as well as of Jews, a working which had transcended the old division between Jew and Gentile and rendered the old boundary markers between Jew and Gentile redundant. Thus in narrowing his charge against the Jewish interlocutor to the very specific charge focusing on circumcision, at the same time he has narrowed the more vaguely defined category of the righteous Gentile to the Christian Gentile rejoicing in the gift of the eschatological Spirit—the eschatological Jew is Gentile as well as Jew!<sup>13</sup>

Paul's Jewish audience, after reading Romans 2:29, would have immediately recalled Deuteronomy 30:6, Jeremiah 31:33-34 and Ezekiel 36:26-27. Note the language of the following passages and their emphasis on obedience to and love for God.

**Deuteronomy 30:6.** And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.

**Jeremiah 31:33-34.** But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. [34]

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<sup>12</sup> Timothy W. Berkley. *From a Broken Covenant To Circumcision of the Heart: Pauline Intertextual Exegesis in Romans 2:17-29*, (Atlanta, Georgia: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), p. 151.

<sup>13</sup> James D.G. Dunn. *The Word Biblical Commentary*, "Romans 1-8" (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1988) p. 125.

And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."<sup>14</sup>

**Ezekiel 36:26-27.** And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. [27] And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

The circumcision of the heart that Paul mentions in 2:29 (and 4:12) is the same circumcision that is described in Deuteronomy 30:6 and Ezekiel 36:26-27<sup>15</sup>. There may have been some question in the minds of Paul's Gentile readers as to the significance of 2:29, but most would agree that little confusion would be in the minds of Paul's Jewish readers. Whatever the understanding, Paul's point is clear: circumcision of the heart is the mark of the "true Jew" (e.g. the people of God). This circumcision of the heart, understood in light of Ezekiel 36:26-27 and Joel 2:28-29, is a phenomena that occurs under the power of God's Spirit – a connection that Paul understands in 2:29, "...circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter."

The circumcision of the heart phenomena is something Paul refers to multiple times in his letters. What is intriguing is how Paul places these verses within the context of what is expected conduct among the community of faith; note carefully the following verses:

**Romans 4:11.** He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make

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<sup>14</sup> "Jeremiah says: 'Take away the foreskin of your hearts ye men of Judah' (4:4). This prophet also speaks metaphorically, but with a turn towards the ethical, of uncircumcised ears, meaning inability to hear (6:10). He threatens the Israelites with judgment, because, like the Egyptians, Edomites, Ammonites, and Moabites, they are 'circumcised in uncircumcision', i.e. while having the eternal sign, they lack the circumcision of the heart 9:25, 26). The statement implies that, though for others circumcision might be purely external thing, for Israel it ought to be something more. Similarly, Ezekiel represents Jehovah as complaining that the house of Israel have brought into the temple aliens uncircumcised in heart and uncircumcised in flesh (44:7). From law and the prophets the ethical and spiritual interpretation passed over into the New Testament, where we find it with Paul (Rom. 2:25-29; 4:11; Eph. 2:11; Phil. 3:3; Col. 2:11). (Geerhardus Vos. *Biblical Theology*. [Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust. 2000], p. 90.)

<sup>15</sup> Comp. Ezek. 36:26; Joel 2:28-29; 2Cor. 3:1-3

him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well...

**2 Corinthians 3:2-3.** You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. [3] And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

**Philippians 3:3.** For we are the real circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh...

**Colossians 2:11.** In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ...

Paul's usage of new covenant language is not uncommon and given his rich training in the Tanak, Paul had a thorough understanding of the new covenant promises.<sup>16</sup> Paul was convinced that the Gospel involved the circumcision of one's heart.

It is hopeful that the reader sees that Paul's reference to the "circumcision of the heart" in Romans 2:29 is the result of "the power of God" (1:16), for it seems that 2:29, in Paul's mind, is only realized through genuine saving faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>17</sup> But, one must also understand that saving faith is not possible apart from a circumcision of the heart. Palmer Robertson offers the following insight on Romans 2:28-29,

These verses presuppose that circumcision continues to have significance in the new covenant context. It has significance not as an external rite, but as a symbolic representation of the reality of righteousness that comes through faith. In the epoch of the new covenant, the external rite of circumcision is not a requirement for God's people. But the essence symbolized by the rite must have its true manifestation in the heart of the believer.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Comp. 1 Cor. 11:23-26; Jer. 31:31-34; Deut. 30:6.

<sup>17</sup> "He [Abraham] received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised." (Rom. 4:11-12; comp. 10:9-10).

<sup>18</sup> O. Palmer Robertson. *The Christ of the Covenants*. (Philipsburg: NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing CO. 1980), p. 161.

Therefore it would seem that the term “Gospel” is connected with a heart circumcision (see Jeremiah 31:31-34), and if this “circumcision of the heart” is the same circumcision that Moses speaks of in Deuteronomy 30:6, then it makes sense that the circumcision of the heart makes faith in Christ possible.<sup>19</sup> Notice Romans 4, Paul makes it explicitly clear – that Abraham was not justified before God because he was circumcised physically, for he was declared righteous before God while uncircumcised. The physical circumcision that Abraham received was simply a physical mark/reminder of the righteousness he had resultant of his faith in God (4:11). This righteousness is what comes via circumcision of the heart, which makes Abraham “...the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised” (v.12).

It is helpful for the reader to see Deuteronomy 30:6 alongside of Romans 2:29, for in doing so, the point of Romans 4:1-12 seems clearer.

<b>Deuteronomy 30:6</b>	<b>Romans 2:29</b>	<b>Romans 4:11-12</b>
And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.	But a Jew is one inwardly and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.	He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, [12] and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

Perhaps the reason why Paul moves on to describe the heart of man in 3:9-18 is to amplify the need for a circumcision of the heart, for “None is righteous, no, not one; no one

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<sup>19</sup> The ability to respond to the Gospel is faith is part of the Gospel, for circumcision of the heart enables obedience to God and love for God (Deut. 30:6; Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:26-27).

understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.... There is no fear of God before their eyes.” Why does Paul give such a dirty list? Because “both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin...” (3:9b), and therefore it is impossible for one to exercise faith in God when his/her disposition is to want nothing to do with God because of his/her hard heart. Jonathan Edwards sums up the disposition of man well in writing,

The hearts of natural men are exceedingly full of sin. If they had but one sin in their hearts, it would be sufficient to render their condition very dreadful. But they have not only one sin, but all manner of sin. There is every kind of lust. The heart is a mere sink of sin, a fountain of corruption whence issue all manner of filthy streams.... Men have not only every kind of lust, and wicked and perverse dispositions in their hearts, but they have them to a dreadful degree. There is not only pride, but an amazing degree of it—pride whereby a man is disposed to set himself even above the throne of God itself.<sup>20</sup>

No wonder why Paul wrote, “For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.” The Christian was once an enemy of God, and through the circumcision of the heart, his/her heart was taken captive for the purpose of loving and obeying God.<sup>21</sup>

The following is a tracing of 2:29 through all of Romans: 1) Man is condemned because of his wicked disposition (1:18-3:20) before God. 2) Salvation only comes through faith in Jesus Christ which is only possible through first receiving a changed disposition (3:21-5:21). 3) Because man is made alive via circumcision of the heart, he can now grow in grace (6:1-8:39). 4) In Romans 9:1-11:36, one learns that it is God who is responsible for choosing who’s heart gets circumcised, for He alone is sovereign over all things—including salvation. 5) And

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<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Edwards, “Natural Men in a Dreadful Condition,” *The Wrath of Almighty God*, edited by Rev. Don Kistler (Morgan: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1996) 8-9.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. 2 Cor. 2:15-17.

because of a circumcised heart, one can function as a living sacrifice for God in all that he does (12:1-16:27).

Therefore what should one conclude in light of what has been written in this paper?

Circumcision of the heart is the immediate and direct result of Gospel change<sup>22</sup> and only comes through the power of the Spirit of God which enables one to exercise saving faith.<sup>23</sup>

Circumcision of the heart is a fundamental part of the new covenant promise which was inaugurated at the Cross of Christ and results in a supernatural and metamorphic change of the reprobate into a child of God for whom Paul considers to be the true Jew, “for no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God” (Rom. 2:28-29).<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> “If there is to be any salvation for either Jews or Gentiles, then, it must be based not on ethical achievement but on the grace of God. What Jews and Gentiles need alike, in fact, is to have their records blotted out by an act of divine amnesty and to have the assurance of acceptance by God for no merit of their own but by his spontaneous mercy. For this need God has made provision in Christ. Thanks to his redemptive work, men may find themselves ‘in the clear’ before God; Christ is set before them in the gospel as the one who by his self-sacrifice and death has made full reparation for their sins. The benefits of the atonement thus procured may be appropriated by faith –and only by faith. Thus God, without abandoning his personal righteousness, accepts all believers in Jesus as righteous in his sight, regardless of whether they are Jews or Gentiles.” (F.F. Bruce. *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*. [Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans Publishing. 1999], p. 328.)

<sup>23</sup> There seems to be significant implications for *ordo salutis* if heart circumcision enables obedience to God and if saving faith qualifies as obedience to God (comp. Deut. 10:16; 30:1-6).

<sup>24</sup> I believe the following statement in Edwards’ *Freedom of the Will* draws out some of the implications of what has been argued in this paper, which states, “If the beginning of true faith and holiness, and a man’s becoming a true saint at first, don’t depend on the self-determining power of the will, but on the determining efficacious grace of God; it may well be argued, that it is so also with respect to men’s being continued saints, or persevering in faith and holiness. The conversion of a sinner being not owing to a man’s self-determination, but to God’s determination, and eternal election, which is absolute, and depending on the sovereign will of God, and not on the free-will of man; and it being very evident from the Scriptures, that the eternal election which there is of saints to faith and holiness, is also an election of them to eternal salvation; hence their appointment to salvation must be also absolute, and not depending on their contingent, self determining will. From all which it follows, that it is absolutely fixed in God’s decree, that all true saints shall persevere to actual eternal salvation” (Jonathan Edwards, “Freedom of the Will,” *The Works of Jonathan Edwards v. 1*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publications, 1998), P. 88).

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