

Study of Romans 2:25-29

By Bob Young

[Note: I received a request from a brother in Latin America that I explain the context and text of Romans 2:25-29, specifically whether the text refers to baptism. This article was written in response that request. Note the questions. First, what does Romans 2:25-29 say in its context? Second, is it a reference by Paul to baptism? A related question is, What is the relationship between Jewish circumcision and New Testament baptism, if any?]

In this text Paul uses an economy of words. Many English texts multiply words in an effort to communicate the message. Sometimes extra words are not helpful. The first task is to identify a good translation that communicates the message without adding anything to it. The translations below are my own. The first has commentary added in brackets. The translation is more literal and thus stiffer and less flowing, but hopefully helpful as a beginning point.

25 For [ties the thought to what precedes it] circumcision profits [has value] if you practice the law, but if you are a transgressor of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. 26 If then the uncircumcision [an uncircumcised man] keeps the righteous ordinances [a form of the word righteous, ordinances supplied according to the context] of the law, will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision? 27 And, the uncircumcision by nature [a man uncircumcised in the flesh] that keeps the law will judge you who with the writings [written code, letter] and circumcision are a transgressor of the law. 28 For the one “in the open” is not a Jew, nor the “in the open” circumcision in the flesh, 29 but the “in the secret” is a Jew, and circumcision is of the heart in the Spirit not in writings [according to the written code, by letter], of whom the praise is not from man but from God.

A smoother translation without comments follows.

25 Therefore, circumcision indeed has value if you practice the law, but if you are a law-breaker, your circumcision becomes like uncircumcision. 26 If an uncircumcised man keeps the righteous ordinances of the law, will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision? 27 And the man uncircumcised in the flesh who keeps the law will judge you, a transgressor of the law even though you have the written code and circumcision. 28 Being a Jew is not by outward things, nor by outward circumcision in the flesh, 29 but by inward things, and circumcision of the heart in the Spirit and not according to the written code. Such receive praise from God, not from men.

Circumcision was a sign of the covenant with Abraham, of the promise made to Abraham. It was also part of the covenant God made with Israel, Leviticus 12:3. Thus it was not only based in the promise, but was also part of the law. This is important for Paul's argument in the text. The Jews thought circumcision was a guarantee of God's favor.

The principal point of Paul in verse 25 is that circumcision indeed has value, but is not sufficient by itself. It is also required that one keep the law. Therefore, the case of a person who does not keep the law, that is, a person who is a transgressor of the law, is equal to that of a person not circumcised.

What does Romans 2:25-29 say in its context? To answer this first question, look at the way the argument is developed in the text.

26. This is a continuation of the thought that began in verse 12 and was expanded in verses 14-16. Some Gentiles, without the law, were doing the things required by the law, and therefore they without the law had a law, a law of requirements, and they by their actions demonstrated their commitment to obey the law written in their hearts (not the law of the Jews). The result was that by their consciences they at times experienced accusation and at times had a strong defense before God. At times they succeeded in keeping the law written in their hearts, and at other times not. Because they were not always successful, they were condemned before God.

The point Paul is making in the text of verses 26-29 is built on the teaching in verses 14-16. Some persons (Gentiles), not circumcised, practiced the law (that is, practiced the same things as those included in the law). What is the situation of such people? Based on their desire to keep God's ordinances, their uncircumcision can be counted as circumcision. Thus Paul says they are not automatically excluded on the basis of their uncircumcision. To the extent that they keep a law while the Jews transgress the law, they judge the Jews as lawbreakers, even though the Jews have the law and circumcision. Being a Jew is not outward but inward.

Note that Paul never says that the Gentiles described in the passage have become Jews. The Gentiles are illustration; they are not the main point. The point is the lostness of the Jews who thought circumcision was a sign of God's favor. To make this passage about the Gentiles is to misread the context. Romans 2 is about the Jews and leads directly to Romans 3.

27. Think with me. A person, not circumcised physically, yet obedient to the principles of the law (without the Jewish law, but with a generally parallel law written in the heart, vv. 14-16), such a person condemns or judges the Jew who has the law of God and has circumcision as a sign of that law but does not keep that law.

28-29. What is Paul's conclusion? The circumcision (physical), in itself, is not an evidence of being a Jew. (It was possible to be circumcised and not be a Jew.) The circumcision that is authentic before God is not only external and physical. Therefore, an authentic Jew is not one based only on external factors. The genuine Jew (besides physical circumcision which is assumed in the passage), has experienced an internal change of heart by the Spirit. Therefore, the authentic Jew is defined not only on the basis of written commandments. The true sign of belonging to God is not external but internal (since the external is assumed).

The second question, Is this a reference by Paul to baptism? These verses are sometimes applied to baptism. Is this correct or not? Note the following. First, as a general rule of interpretation or hermeneutics, a text cannot mean today what it did not mean for the first century author and readers. Did the first century readers make the application to baptism? Second, baptism is not mentioned in this text. Third, baptism is not Paul's point in the text. The ultimate purpose of this text is to convince the Jews that their law-breaking and inability to keep the Old Testament law could only be resolved in Christ. What is the point of the example of the Gentiles? There were other people who were committed to keeping God's principles even though they did not have the Jewish law. They were unsuccessful, at times being excused and at other times being accused by their own actions. To the extent that they at times succeeded, they judged those Jews who failed to keep the law. Fourth, the application to baptism is not made by the text here or elsewhere in Romans. Therefore, let us be very careful. Fifth, in the eventual development of Paul's argument in Romans, he will come to baptism (in chapter 6), and when he does, he makes no mention of a connection between baptism and circumcision.

The final question, what is the relationship between circumcision and baptism, if any? As we seek an application for us today, one may think of a situation generally parallel. Today there are persons who are not baptized, they do not value the commandment of God, but they do good things. Is it possible that they are acceptable to God?

Note my last comment under verse 26 above. This passage is about Jews who were law-breakers and were judging others. Paul says that the opposite is the case. The others were judging the Jews. In parallel, the application consistent with the original message of the passage would be focused on Christians. Some others (non-Christians) who seem more serious about spiritual things and live by a higher standard serve as judges against half-hearted Christians who do not keep God's Word. The question that seeks to apply the passage to the status of non-Christians is not relevant (does not come from the text). Paul is not saying that the Gentiles described in the passage are now faithful Jews, and in parallel the text should not be understood to say that non-Christians who are interested in spiritual things and generally follow God's will are now faithful Christians. One cannot draw the conclusion on the basis of this text. That is not the point of the text.

Read verses 25-29 again. Thinking about baptism and the necessity of circumcised hearts for Christians today, what would be the message?

Baptism indeed has value, but for Christians to be baptized and not do God's will is the same as not being baptized. (The application of verses 26-27 today is not clear, that for people who have not received God's word and are not baptized, that if they by nature do the will of God it is as if they were baptized. The point is not clear because the Bible never makes the point; it is only a human interpretation of the text.)

Verse 28 continues the parallel. A Christian is not a person who can show external evidence, the impact and the importance of baptism is not only external and physical. As circumcision was assumed as a part of Judaism, baptism would have to be assumed as a part of being a Christian. To be a true Christian requires an internal change of the heart by the Spirit. The illustration is that in the circumcision of the body there is also a cutting of the heart. Equally baptism is not only an external process but at the same time, there is an internal process, a cutting of the heart, as described in Colossians 2.

Paul's argument in Colossians 2 is that the Jews who had experienced a cutting away of the flesh (physical circumcision) were still lost until in Jesus they experienced another cutting away of the flesh (fleshly desires). Colossians 2 clearly says that the Christian parallel to Old Testament Jewish circumcision in the flesh is a circumcision done by Christ that "cuts away the flesh" spiritually, which was accomplished in baptism and new life with him. The Colossians passage indirectly compares New Testament baptism and the new life to Old Testament circumcision, connecting them with the circumcision done by Christ.

Does Romans 2:25-29 refer to baptism? Based on the study above, the answer is no. Is it possible to make an application of the passage to baptism today? There are parallel principles, but again I warn, let us be very careful because the Bible does not make the connection in this text or in the wider context of Romans. The original application of the text is to the Jews who depended on circumcision as guarantee of God's blessing. Certainly there are Christians who likewise depend on baptism as guarantee of God's blessing and do not live lives worthy of the gospel. Such parallels are attractive, but remember that the application to baptism is the result of human analysis of the text and not of inspiration.