

 **Main Street**  
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



**Romans 2:25-29**  
**“The Heart Of The Matter”**

July 31, 2016  
(11<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost)

Pastor Phil Thrailkill  
Main Street UMC  
211 North Main St., Greenwood, SC 29646  
Church Office: 864-229-7551  
Church Website: [www.msumc1.org](http://www.msumc1.org)

**“Following Christ From City Center!”**

**ROMANS 2:25-29 "THE HEART OF THE MATTER"**

Circumcision And Torah: Core Of Jewish Special Identity, Proselytes

**1') 2:25-29 Circumcision And The True Jew.**

Privileges: Circumcision/ God's Law No Guarantees

The Sign Is Not The Covenant // Ex. = Ring & Marriage

**a) v.25 Contrast: Effective v. Ineffective Circumcision: Jews Revert To Gentiles!** Thesis //2:12-16

Gen. 17:9-14, Lev. 12:3, Jub. 15:28, Ex. Rab. 19, Gal. 5:3 (keep law), Covenant Sign

25a 1 **For** circumcision indeed is of value (usefulness) 3:1, Critique Of Outward Alone, Not Keep The Covenant It Symbolizes

2 if you obey (habitually) the law; Same Issue Of Impartiality (2:11), Conditional Value: Observant Life Value Of Circumcision Is Conditional

b 2' but if you break (habitually) the law, Break Relationship With God! // 2:12, 23; Gal. 5:3, 6:13-15, 1 Cor. 7:19

1' your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. *akrobystia*, Sacrament Is Forfeit, Highly Offensive To Jews → Gentile Status Obedience Matters, Lose Your Status Among God's Covenant People

**b) v.26 Inference 1 (Present): Gentile Believers Who Obey The Law Are Faithful Jews.**

2 Cor. 3:1-6, Identity Markers: Book, Circumcision, Festivals, Food Laws

26a Q 1 So, if a man who is uncircumcised (a Gentile) If The Marker Is Present, What About The Reality?

2 'keeps the precepts of the law,' Ezek. 36:2, Dt. 4:14, 30:16, 6:2 LXX // Argument Of 2:14-16, By Nature Religious Commitment Over Ethnic Ethos, Outer Over Inner, 1 Cor. 7:19

b 1' will not his uncircumcision God Is Impartial, Future Judgment, Outsiders Become Insiders

2' be regarded as circumcision? p.v., Answer = Yes, 2:19-20 (blind, foolish), Yes, A Jew In Fact Now Inside God's People, Essential Ethnic Barrier Falls Away

**b') v.27 Inference 2 (Future): At End, Gentile Believers Judge Non-Observant Jews.**

1 Cor. 6:3, Reverse Expectation Of Jews Judging Gentiles

27a A 1 Then those who are by birth uncircumcised (Gentiles) New Covenant, Paul Speaks Of Gentile Christians?

2 but fulfill (continually) the law Reverses Exception Of Jews Judging The World (Wis. 3:8, Mt. 19:28) A Witness For The Prosecution To How Jews Should Have Lived

b 1' will condemn (judge) *you* (a Jew) who have the written law and circumcision (i.e. by birth) D.A., //2:2ff

2' but break (continually) the law. //vv.23a-24, law (5x) // Mt. 11:20-24 (Ninevites Judge Israel), Paul Relativizes The Concept Of Jewishness

**a') vv.28-29 Contrast: Outward v. Inward Circumcision: Judaism Universalized.** New Covenant

? = Who is a real Jew? Literal As Metaphor For Spiritual/Inward

28a -1 **For** he is not a real Jew who is one outwardly (in the open), //v.25a, Echoes Promises Of Jer. 31:31-34, Ezek. 36:26-28

b 2 nor is true circumcision something external and physical. 2 Cor. 3:1-6, Orientation Of Heart & Actions Matters

We Need A New Insides! Circumcision As Expendable Is Pauline

29a +1 But he is a *Jew* who is one inwardly (in secret), Judah = Praise, Heart As Control Center, Sign Spiritualized, 1 Cor. 7:19

2 and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, Phil. 3:3, Jer. 31:31-34, Let New Life Show

2' spiritual (by the Spirit) and not literal. Circumcise Heart (Dt. 10:16-17, 30:6, Lev. 26:41, Ezek. 44:9, Jer. 4:4, 9:25)

b 1' His *praise* is not from men but from God. At End, Issue = Live Before An Audience Of One, Not Before Men Paul Here Introduces The Work Of The Holy Spirit For Inward Change

Jer. 31:31-34, Ezek. 36:26-28, Christians Receive The New Covenant (2 Cor. 3:6, Phil. 3:3, Col. 2:11-12)

Outward Rituals/Ethnic Identity Are Not Enough. God Is Impartial, And All Have Sinned: One Lump/2 Parts

There Is Always An Ongoing Internal Discussion In Every Faith: Who is the true Jew? True Christian? True Muslim?

"An Obedient Heart Always Trumps A Circumcised Foreskin" (M. Bird, *Romans*, 82)

**A Chart On The Contrasts Of Romans 8:28-29**

**Question: Who is the true Jew? And who is the real Christian?**

**Paul's Both/And Answer = The outward sacramental sign plus the inward relational reality go together.**

Classic Jewish Identity Marker <sup>1</sup>	Inward Reality To Match The Outer Mark
Circumcised in the flesh (Visible identity marker)	Circumcised in the heart (Center of the self)
By the written letter (Scriptural law)	By the Holy Spirit (God's action)
Praise is from humans (One of us! A true Jew.)	Praise from God (Primary goal)

<sup>1</sup> Chart adapted from Frank J. Materna, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker 2010), 76. For an introductory article, see "Circumcision," *Baker's Evangelical Dictionary Of Biblical Theology*, www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/circumcision.

The Surface Structure Of IIB2', Romans 2:25-29

<b>1') 2:25-29 CIRCUMCISION AND THE TRUE JEW.</b>	<b><u>Law</u></b>
a. v.25 Contrast: Effective And Ineffective Circumcision: Jews Revert To Gentiles. Thesis: <i>For (gar)</i> , Form: a-b//b'-a' concentric pattern. Inclusion: <b>For, circumcision</b>	2x
b. v.26 Inference 1 (Present): Question Gentile Believers Who Obey Are Regarded As Faithful Jews.	1x
b' v.27 Inference 2 (Future): Answer At The End, Gentiles Witness Against Disobedient Jews.	2x
a' vv.28-29 Contrast: Outward And Inward Circumcision: Judaism Universalized. <i>For (gar)</i> Inclusion: <b>For, circumcision</b>	

A Brief Treatment Of IIB1', Romans 2:25-29.

Romans 2:25-29, 3:1-20 is part of a larger section (IIB. 2:12-3:20) arranged in a four member, step format: 1) vv.12-16 (law), 2) vv.17-24 (Series of 5 + Scripture) // 1' vv.25-29 (circumcision), 2') 3:1-20 (Series of 5 + Scripture). Having addressed an initial marker of Jewish identity– the law which is to be obeyed, Paul now turns to a second marker: circumcision. The thought unit (1' 2:25-29) has a 4:2 concentric form (a. v.25, **b. v.26//b' v.27**, a' vv.28-29) with two references to obedient Gentile believers at the center (b//b') and contrasts between effective vs. ineffective and inward vs. outward circumcision in the frames (a//a'). The question of v.26 is answered in v.27. The terms *law* (5x) and *circumcision* (6x) tie the unit together.

All Jewish males were to be circumcised (Gen. 17:9-14) as a sign of entry into the Abrahamic covenant which implies keeping the law. So, if the God who is impartial expects the law to be obeyed, then what of Jews who don't and Gentiles who do? Paul thesis is that the physical sign has value if the law is obeyed, but if not, Jews reverts to Gentile status (v.25). What a radical, offensive idea! The obverse is that Gentile believers who keeps Torah receive new status as faithful to the covenant (v.26). This present benefit is validated at the end when such Gentiles will be a witness against disobedient Jews (v.27). Paul turns the tables on assumed Jewish status using divine impartiality as a lever (2:11). His case is grounded in the insight (*For*, v.28) that the human being is analyzed in two parts: a visible outside (v.28, synonyms: *outwardly, external and physical*) and a hidden center or heart (v.29, synonyms: *inwardly, spiritual and not literal*).

What matters most are internal realities from which flow external behaviors. A *real* Jew has a circumcised heart (Dt. 10:16, 30:6, Jer. 4:4) that is true to the covenant as an internal, spiritual reality and looks for validation from the God who knows the heart and not men who observe only externals. The deepest center of the self– the heart– must first be changed and brought to obedience by the Spirit. Paul does not negate the outward sign, but rather calls for it to be fulfilled by a deep, inward change only God can bring about, a *circumcision of the heart*.

## THE HEART OF THE MATTER

*“His praise is not from men but from God.”*

A vertical, integrated life is a true testimony to God’s grace.

R O M A N S 2 : 2 9 b

**T**here are many ideas we absorb from the world around us, often without much reflection. They’re in the air we breathe and seem both true and useful, especially when widely shared, common ideas like

*Democracy is the best form of government,  
or Capitalism is the best arrangement for general prosperity,  
or Waste not want not,  
or Baptists are just deep-water Methodists,  
or— in a bit more sophisticated language— Human beings are a  
psychosomatic unity, a simpler form of which is men and women  
are each composed of two parts: a psyche and a soma, a soul and  
a body, a theme that runs through much of R & B music.*

In Genesis chapter two when the Creator made a little clay man and then blew into him the breath of life,<sup>2</sup> there we have the origin of the two parts of a lively human image bearer. Clay from the earth and breath from God; body and soul, the material and the immaterial parts of a person, and they are welded together from natural conception till natural death when we breathe our last and the body begins an immediate process of decay because the life force that caused the heart to beat and the lungs to expand is now gone; the electrical system is cut off, and we wind down. Or, as some say, “Elvis has now left the building.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 2:7.

<sup>3</sup> A hip form of the old *ghost in a machine* model.

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**Romans 2:25-29. . . . . 5**

Bodies cannot live without souls— meaning there are no *zombies*, however many you’ve seen on TV! But souls can continue to exist without bodies, or so we believe, and I think on good scientific, philosophical and biblical evidences.<sup>4</sup>

You each have an awareness you are not only a body but a body and more, a body with an inner capacity for self-reflection and self-talk. You have thoughts and feelings and intuitions and awareness and a will that decides, and these are functions that are integrated in the soul, the force of personality that is undeniably there when a person is alive, and as soon as they die, is gone.<sup>5</sup>

To use a spatial analogy, you have an outside- a body, and an inside- a soul; a material part— a body, and an immaterial or spiritual part— a soul; you have hardware— a body, and you have software— a soul. And when people have near death experiences and look down on their bodies from above and then find themselves rejoined with their bodies after a jolt from the paddles, this is a new kind of evidence for the distinction we are making. For a short time body and soul were separated, and so are distinct from one another. In life they are always together and in death temporarily separated to be— at the end— rejoined in a new resurrection body like that of Jesus. God will save not just a part but the whole of the self with the risen Jesus as our prototype. This is the basic Christian understanding of the human person. You are binary unity, an ensouled body by God’s design and manufacture; you consist of two inter-related parts that mutually influence each other, a *psychosomatic unity*, the Greek *psyche* meaning soul or life and *soma* meaning body, and you know it from experience before you reflect on it or groove it to a Motown tune.

And if you want to speak about the center of the human person instead of

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<sup>4</sup> For a philosophical defense of the soul and its importance in a biblical anthropology, see J.P. Moreland, *The Soul: How We Know It's Real and Why It Matters* (Chicago, ILL: Moody Press, 2014). For a series of essays, see Joel Green, editor, *In Search of the Soul: Perspectives on the Mind-Body Problem*, second edition (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Dallas Willard, “Grey Matter And The Soul,” [www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artID=82](http://www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artID=82).

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**Romans 2:25-29. . . . . 6**

the parts, of the unified self at its deepest level, you speak of *the heart*, not just the blood pump but that vital organ in the center of the chest as a metaphor for the center of the person, that symbolic location from which deep motivations and decisions arise and where thoughts and feelings are two complimentary ways of perception. And when the heart is changed, the whole person is brought into a different alignment and new loyalty; we are literally *re-centered*.

It's why, in the special insider language *Christianese*, we speak of inviting Jesus *into our heart*, for him to come and dwell in the center of the binary, unified self, and from there to extend his influence into all of who we are. He takes up residence and begins to rearrange everything! We call it conversion, and I love reading such stories, especially of the *unlikely*s.<sup>6</sup>

In summary, you are a two-part reality, body and soul, and you have a deep center of motivation and action, the heart. We relate to God with the whole of who we are, and we are meant to be indwelt by the Triune God: knowing the Father– God above us, following the Son– God besides us, being enlivened by the Holy Spirit– God within us. The human person is designed with this level of complexity, as Psalm 139 exclaims, “fearfully and wonderfully made.”<sup>7</sup> The whole of the person is fulfilled only in God, now in part, with the fullness reserved for the life to come in its two parts: first heaven after natural death, then the kingdom of God at the end of the age, as I continually remind you where the Creeds end, not with us in heaven as saved souls but with the upper world coming down in power to transform the entire creation including new resurrection bodies, “I believe” the Apostles’ Creed asserts at its climax, “in the

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<sup>6</sup> For a recent account from an admitted unlikely, see Holly Ordway, *Not God's Type* (Charlotte, NC: Ignatius Press, 2014). Also Rosaria Butterfield, “My Train Wreck Conversion: As a leftist lesbian professor, I despised Christians. Then I somehow became one,” [www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/january-february/my-train-wreck-conversion](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/january-february/my-train-wreck-conversion). Her book *The Secret Thoughts Of An Unlikely Convert* (Pittsburgh, PA: Crown & Covenant, 2014) is worth reading.

<sup>7</sup> v.14.

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**Romans 2:25-29. . . . . 7**

resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.”<sup>8</sup> A new body for a saved soul in a new world. I like the formulation at the end of the Nicene Creed even more, “We look for the resurrection of the flesh, and the life of the world to come.”

Now the reason we’ve taken this short course in Christian anthropology, the doctrine of the human person, is that it helps us understand just what Paul is after in today’s single paragraph from Romans 2. Based on our basic model of a centered self in two parts, body and soul centered in the heart, it may be possible, and is, for the body to bear religious symbols of dedication, in this case the Jewish mark of male circumcision, and for it not to effect the way people actually live, and in that sense be empty and ineffective, a living contradiction.

You know what I’m talking about. It’s possible to have an American flag tattooed on your body and not carry out even the basic duties of citizenship like voting, or to be judge or policeman who engages in crime, or wear a wedding ring as you contemplate the next adultery, or have a baptismal certificate hanging on the wall as you live like the devil, or receive holy communion without seeking Jesus Christ, or be a church member and not show up or give a dime. This fact shows a profound disconnection between the outer and inner self, between what we display and who we are within. It is one of the more obvious symptoms of the moral disease we all share, the short name for which is Sin, and it refers not just to discrete actions but a deep disconnection from God so the self is literally split. I know it. You know it. It is extreme in some and more subtle in others, but it is always there as a threat.

Now to demonstrate just how far the split can go, consider the work of investigative journalist Petra Reski. Her 2013 book, *The Honored Society: A Portrait of Italy's Most Powerful Mafia*, delves into the lives and faith of its members. Faith in God and living like Mafiosi are fairly common in the strange dark world of Southern European mobsters.

Sicilian Marcello Fava, who later left his mafia clan, told an Italian journalist: "Before I had to kill someone, I would cross myself. I’d say: 'Dear God, stand by me! Make sure nothing happens!' But I wasn't the only one who

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<sup>8</sup> On two stage post-mortem existence, see N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2008), one of the most important books I’ve read.

crossed himself beforehand and prayed to God. We all did."

When mafia boss Bernardo Provenzano was arrested, the police found him with five Bibles containing hundreds of his own margin comments and passages underlined. In his home were 91 sacred statues, 73 of them Christ figures, each of which bore the same inscription: *Jesus, I put my trust in you.*

But my favorite is Mafia boss Michele Greco who has four books in his prison cell: two liturgical books, the gospels, and a book titled *Pray, Pray*. When asked at trial for an explanation of his many murders, he replied: "I have an invaluable gift: inner peace."<sup>9</sup> I think Billy Graham has a book by that title!

Now if we think this is just a Catholic phenomenon because they have more rites and rituals and statues and medals and kneelings and crossings than we Protestants, we kid ourselves. I had a dark day not long ago. They are gifts that come only rarely; for that I'm thankful because it takes several days to recover from a day of peeking over the precipice into the pit. But on occasion, God again strips away my naivete. Christians all. Baptized, claiming to know Jesus Christ, in Bible studies, listening to Christian radio, yet involved in real wickedness, in behavior that dishonors God and destroys lives. Not yet the Mafioso level, but the damage is almost as bad, and equally tragic.

In the midst of a single day, really only about four hours, I had three interviews that left me reeling, and I'm not a naive man. I worked in prisons for four years and as a police chaplain for fourteen. I may not have seen it all, but I've seen much and heard it all, including confessions of murder! And in every case that day there was the same disconnection between outside image and inner reality, between the religious symbols they displayed and the heart of the person from which behavior springs, and here Proverbs 4:23 leaps off the page with a warning, "Keep your heart with all vigilance; for from it flow the springs of life." It is from the center that we all live, for good or for evil, and it is why we need a living and powerful Jesus in the control room of the soul.

Now to see and face such deception and darkness and cruelty in another is to know three things: they have a problem, you have a problem, and I have a problem. To see into them is to see into me because, while I may not have the

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<sup>9</sup> PreachingToday.com search under Romans 2:25-29.

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**Romans 2:25-29. . . . . 9**

same bitter fruits, I have the same rotten roots of disconnection. So if it's the utterly ridiculous gap of Catholic mafia types or the less flamboyant lack of integrity among our own Protestant types, the issue is not how wide the gap may grow but that there is a gap in us all which may widen.

All the outward stuff in the world, all the religious symbols and allegiances and rituals and practices, including our beloved Protestant Bibles—necessary and valuable as they are— if they do not pierce to the center of the person to give light and light in the inner sanctuary of the self that we label the heart, are only decorations, things hung on the outside of the self.

All the means of grace God has richly provided can be rendered of no use except to add to our accountability and condemn us unless they go to the core of who we are, unless we regularly swing wide the doors of our hearts to the Lord Jesus and his cleansing and forgiving and healing power.

*Heart religion* is not just a name for something deeply felt; it is not the reduction of the faith to my feelings about the faith; it is, rather, a compelling relationship that claims the center of the self and reorganizes life around a new relationship with power to change the whole of me over time: my thinking, my behavior, what I love and desire, what I adore.<sup>10</sup> It is the worship of God from the center of the self with nothing held back, nothing refused, so it cannot just be a safe, segmented piece of well managed life but its flaming, living, holy center. So if you are keeping something back, beware; the gap will soon widen.

Now for Paul, a circumcised Jewish believer in Jesus as Messiah and Lord and missionary to the uncircumcised Gentiles, the pressing issue was the same gap we've just described, and here the particulars are the scar of male circumcision as a marker of Jewish identity and the call to keep God's law to which it points as a sign. For all Jews since the first, Father Abraham, the

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<sup>10</sup> On Wesleyan heart religion, see Fred Sanders, *Wesley on the Christian Life: The Heart Renewed in Love* (Wheaton, ILL: Crossways, 2013). For John Wesley's sermon on a verse of our text (Rom. 2:29), see his Sermon 17 (still part of our official U.M. Doctrinal Standards!), "The Circumcision of the Heart," [www.umcmission.org/Find-Resources/John-Wesley-Sermons/Sermon-17](http://www.umcmission.org/Find-Resources/John-Wesley-Sermons/Sermon-17).

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cutting away left a scar and marker on every male at the eighth day after birth, since in that day women were included in the covenant through their fathers who bore the mark. It was not enough to have a Jewish genealogy and be born a Jew; the men had to be cut and scarred so that all their life they had a reminder who their God was and how it all started with a childless old pagan named Abraham whom God invited into a messy relationship.

In the ancient near East this was a common practice long before Abraham appeared four thousand years ago. It was commonly associated with coming of age rituals for young men at puberty or, only a bit later, with rituals just before marriage, which in many cultures to this day involve scarring or tattooing or both.<sup>11</sup> And since it's a pre-historic practice, before written history, the closest we can guess its meaning is as an affirmation cut into flesh that generativity does not belong to the male but to God. It is an antidote to male pride! A permanent humbling. And when the Lord our God borrowed the cultural symbol and made it a requirement of Abraham and his promised offspring, it was when he was old and had no children. If he is to have the son of promise, it's because of God. It thus became a sign, an identity marker with a specific story and meaning attached, that the one so scarred or branded belongs to this God and no other and is obliged and committed to the keep the laws and know the character of this peculiar God. And so the ancient Jew and the contemporary Jew and the ancient Christian and the contemporary Christian have the same problem, the gap between the outward sign and the inward reality, whether it be the scar of religious surgery or the waters of holy baptism.

Now Paul is a true radical here because he scrambles the categories. "Yes," he starts off in verse 25, "our Jewish scar has real value, but only if you fulfill the sign by actually obeying God and keep his commands out of love from the heart. But if you make a habit of ignoring God's truths, then *your circumcision become uncircumcision.*" In other words, you quit being a Jew and revert to the pagan pool. You lose your Jewish privilege if you do not keep your Jewish obligations. And this idea would have been highly offensive to his

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<sup>11</sup> On the pre-Jewish history, see Jack M. Sasson, "Circumcision in the Ancient Near East," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 84 (4), Nov. 1966, 473-476; also John Goldingay, "The Significance of Circumcision," *JSOT* 88 (2000), 3-18.

**Romans 2:25-29. . . . . 11**

comrades who believed in a Jewish form of *eternal security*, in the notion of *once circumcised, always circumcised*. They had the ritual but not the reality, and Paul was after the reality that points back to the ritual as a sign and promise.

He then follows the logic a step further and asserts in verses 26 and 27 that if an unscarred Gentile outsider/pagan/unclean heathen *keeps the precepts of the law*, then he is the secret Jew and will stand in contrast and in judgment over those who had the scar but not the love and obedience to go with it. It's not that the sign or sacrament of entry does not matter, but if that to which it points is not present, then it's empty. It says something about you that's not true. It's false advertising. Your body is lying about your soul, and at the heart you are two people, not one. No oneness of heart and life before God. And so at the common boundary of insider Jew and outsider Pagan, Paul's offers the possibility of a great reversal in which Jews are now Gentiles and Gentiles are now the chosen of a God who shows no partiality when it comes to the verdict at the end of life. So who is the true Jew and the true Christian? The one who fulfills the promise, the one who lets the sign point to the reality and who does not hide the deepest self, the heart, from God's transforming activity.

But it is in the last two verses, 28 and 29, that Paul makes his most dangerous move, and dangerous because so easily misread. Paul is not against entry rituals and rites, whether of continued circumcision for ethnic Jews or Christian baptism alone for Gentile converts. He's not for making faith only an inward, mystical thing, though some— most notably the Quakers with their dropping of the sacraments and their emphasis on the inner light, have taken it as such. And interestingly enough, the Salvation Army have done the same thing for a different reasons. Quaker say, "If you have the inward light- because that's the essence— you don't need any outward signs." And the Salvationists say, "Since the heart of Jesus style faith is mercy and good works for the poor," you don't need the outward signs. We will dedicate you under a banner of blood and fire, but no baptism. But the great tradition of the church holds the two together, the outer and the inner, and that is where we Methodists live.

For Paul the outside and the inside go together; the sign and the relationship are two sides of one reality, but since sin pushes us to rely falsely on the outward and to neglect the invisible, he offers a corrective, "But he is a

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**Romans 2:25-29. . . . . 12**

Jew who is one inwardly (in secret), and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Holy Spirit and not literal. His praise is not from men but from God,” and for *the Jew* you may rightly substitute *the Christian* and for *circumcision* our rite of initiation, *baptism*. The principle is the same with both. The promises is there to be realized at the core of who you are and to great effect; you can be changed into a new type of human being. And if the seed grows and matures and produces fruit, we marvel at the grace and beauty of it because nothing is more attractive than a life centered in Jesus, full of his wit and wisdom and magnetic love. And if the seed is just a ceremony and the plant never tended, then we ask, “Why bother? It’s just a fraud,” and we are right.

I close, on this baptismal Sunday, with three brief reflections on *infant baptism*, or as I prefer to say, *the baptism of the children of Christian parents after personal instruction by Pastor Phil*, and here our dialog opponents are those faithful Christians who only baptize after an individual’s personal confession of faith, say the Baptists and some other evangelical denominations that emphasize human autonomy and do not value as highly as we do our continuities with the pre-Reformation churches of the West and East.

First, we both face common issues. What to do with babies? Christians continue to have them! Are they inside or outside the faith? So we baptize them, and they have baby dedications involving instruction and promises, everything but the water and the Triune name. Same issue, different response.

And what about those years just before adolescence when conscience is being formed? A nine year old is told by her parents at Sweet Home Baptist of Hodges that she cannot receive communion when it comes down the pew since she’s not yet a believer, and so she answers the next altar call, says a big Yes to all the Jesus she understands, and is baptized and voted into the family.

Our rough equivalent to the same developmental issue is confirmation, a time of focused instruction leading to a public owning of the promises first made by the parents. And then we both, Methodist baby-baptizers and Baptist children-baptizers, face the life long issue of Christian growth and the constant threat of nominalism, which means *Christian in name only*, having the sign or sacrament, whenever imposed, but not the living growing faith it was mean to

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lead to? And when there is a fresh awakening, they call it *re-dedication*, and we call it *the renewal of baptismal promises*. Thus, though opposed on some issues, we all deal with the same underlying pastoral issues of how is it that persons make both a valid entry and continue to grow in the faith, which was the very same issue Paul as dealing with his words on circumcision and heart religion. If the sacraments and signs of Jewish circumcision and Christian baptism don't lead to the reality of heart level lifelong change, there's been a disconnect, and the fault is not God's. Grace is abundant, but our response is spotty and puny. We prefer slight improvements to radical transformation. Our sins and little faith and low expectations are comfortable pacifiers.

But, after much reading<sup>12</sup> and forty years of reflection, I've come what may be the real issue, and it has nothing to do with how we read the Bible, since we have the same Greek text and the scholars basically agree on what it says, but not always on what it means for today. The issues are rather historical and philosophical. We Methodists, being the country cousins of the Episcopalians, and through them The Church Of England, kept much of our catholic substance in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant Reformation, one being the early church practice of baptizing infants as reflected in our current doctrinal statement that "The Baptism of young children *is to be retained* in the Church." In other words, it's not to be thrown out in the sorting out of things in our new post-Catholic world. The Baptists, however, owing to their origins to a wing of the Reformation that emphasized discontinuity, began a new practice, which was to baptize only those who made a personal confession of faith, and obviously that is not something a child of tender years can do since they have neither the cognitive or linguistic skills. So the issue between us is not what the Bible says, but which wing of Reformation we come from, the question being, How much of what came before shall we keep, and what shall reject? How anti-Catholic shall we be in this time of early Protestant ferment? Only mildly? Or more severely? Shall we keep continuity in a new form, or shall we, in effect, start over from scratch with just an open Bible and idealize the early church?

But it gets even more complicated, because with the Renaissance and

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<sup>12</sup> Most recently Ben Witherington III, *Troubled Waters: Rethinking The Theology Of Baptism* (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2007).

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**Romans 2:25-29. . . . . 14**

Reformation a new understanding of the human person emerged. If you think of a sliding scale with *We* at the one end and *Me* at the other, the slider began to move to the *Me* and *I* end of the scale and further away from the older *We* and *Us* end, in a move we now call *individualism*, which we in America have pursued with a vengeance as nowhere else.<sup>13</sup>

The older traditional answer to the question *What is a person?* involved tribe and lineage and knowing your place in life, including the faith of *my group*. The emerging answer to the same question emphasized autonomy, the individual center of consciousness as decision maker. The statement *It's real because it's our way* began, slowly at first and then more rapidly, to be replaced by the idea of *It's real for me only after I'm convinced and choose it*. Thus an increasing emphasis on the individual's decision for Christ, and only then baptism, which is why the Baptist emphasis on individual decision and local church autonomy resonates with so much of our American culture's modern understanding of the human person. If you read the Bible through the lens of continuity and a communal understanding of the faith, you end up with our position on baptism, and if you read the same texts through the lens of discontinuity and individualism, you end up with theirs, and both are Christian.

And the deeper issue for both of us is still the one Paul raised so clearly. If your goal is true and lively and whole-person Christianity, body and soul, then the outer and the inner, despite all sorts of pressures to pull them apart, must be held together, and when that happens, something beautiful and life-giving is put on display. A human being in the process of being made new in Jesus Christ. That is what the world is waiting to see.

What if it happened here with us? What if the Holy Spirit granted us the offer of a fresh taste of heart religion in which all the means of grace, all the signs and promises, were lit up the light of Jesus Christ. Is that something we would want? What would it mean to seek it together?

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<sup>13</sup> For an introductory article, see "Individualism," [philosophy.wordpress.com/2010/04/05/individualism](http://philosophy.wordpress.com/2010/04/05/individualism). A recent history of the idea is Larry Sidentop, *The Origins of Western Liberalism: Inventing the Individual* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

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