“What Does Circumcision as a ‘Seal’ Mean?”

Hello, I am writing because I recently had a baby boy. My son was born with a heart defect, and required surgery when he was about a week old (that’s a great story you can read about here.) Since he had to have surgery right after birth, we did not have the opportunity to get him circumcised in the hospital due to the risk of infection. Now he is five months old, and I am having a really hard time deciding whether or not to have him circumcised.

I know that circumcision is not required for salvation, but I know that the New Testament mentions it. I have read Romans 4, where circumcision is called a “sign,” and I understand what this means, but the part where it is called a “seal” is confusing to me. My husband is just not convinced that circumcision is necessary, and my reasons for wanting to have it done are mainly cultural. It would be really nice to hear a biblical perspective on the matter. Thanks!

Thanks for your letter. First, let me say “hearty congratulations” on the birth of your son! My wife and I recently had a baby boy as well, so we can certainly share your joy.

Second, you’re right about physical circumcision not being necessary for salvation. Indeed, to claim such a thing would be completely contrary to both the letter and the spirit of the New Testament (see, for example, Romans 3:27-30; 4:9-12; 1 Corinthians 7:18-19; Galatians 2:1-5; 5:6, 11; 6:12-16). Salvation is a gift of God’s grace, which we receive through faith in Christ alone.

Third, as it’s used in Romans 4:11, a “seal” is simply a way of attesting to, or confirming, something. Thus, circumcision

(in this passage) is a “seal” (that is, it attests to, or confirms) the righteousness which Abraham had by faith before he was ever circumcised. Thus, circumcision is essentially a “sign” and a “seal” in the same sense here. The terms are basically synonymous.

Biblically speaking, you are under no obligation whatever to have your son circumcised. Medically speaking, however, there do seem to be certain benefits which may be worth considering with your physician. But that’s a decision for you and your husband.

Shalom in Christ,
Michael Gleghorn

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