

# Just A Flesh Wound? Reassessing Paul's Supposed Indifference Toward Circumcision and Foreskin in 1 Cor 7:19, Gal 5:6, and 6:15\*

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## Abstract

Three times in his epistles (1 Cor 7:19; Gal 5:6; 6:15), Paul appears to state that circumcision and foreskin are nothing, and then compares them to something else. In 1 Cor 7:19, Paul negates circumcision and foreskin and puts them in contrast to keeping the commandments of God. In Gal 5:6, Paul states that circumcision and foreskin do not have power, but *pistis* that is made effective through love does. Lastly, in Gal 6:15, Paul states that neither circumcision nor foreskin, but new creation—full stop. These three verses have led the majority of interpreters to conclude that Paul believes that circumcision and foreskin have become irrelevant or *adiaphora*, and thus he collapses the distinction between Jews and gentiles. This paper argues that by conflating these three verses and removing them from their epistolary contexts, the bulk of interpreters have fundamentally misunderstood what Paul is communicating. This article argues that Paul negates circumcision and foreskin on rhetorical grounds, not because they are truly nothing or indifferent things for him, but to draw the reader's attention to the concept with which they are being compared. In this revisionist reading, it becomes clear that circumcision and foreskin—and what they represent—still occupy a valuable space in Paul's *Weltanschauung*.

## Keywords

Paul, circumcision, foreskin, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, indifference, *adiaphora*

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## 1. Introduction

In one of the most memorable scenes in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, King Arthur encounters the Black Knight. After a few short moments of dueling, the King lops off the Black Knight's arms and legs. In an attempt to downplay the seriousness of his injuries, the Black Knight exclaims, "'Tis but a scratch!" and "It's just a flesh wound!" and continues to fight the King. The incredulity of the Black Knight is what makes this scene so iconic and hilarious. It is obvious to everyone but him that his missing limbs are much more than "a scratch" and a mere "flesh wound." Similarly, when Paul states that circumcision and foreskin are nothing three times in his epistles (1 Cor 7:19; Gal 5:6; 6:15), we too should be taken aback by the shocking nature of these statements, as they do not seem to cohere with Paul's reality. How could a circumcised on the eighth-day Jew in the first century make such a claim? Has circumcision become a mere flesh wound for Paul? It is conceivable that a Jew exclaiming that circumcision was just an inconsequential flesh wound could have been treated like an apostate in the eyes of many of his coreligionists.<sup>1</sup> In the same vein, how can Paul say that foreskin—the troublesome bit of flesh that typified gentile otherness—is also now as insignificant as a mere scratch?<sup>2</sup> Looking at the Jewish and Greco-Roman literature of his day, no one else seems to approach circumcision and foreskin with such a level of apparent indifference.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> There are not cut and dry standards that render an individual as an apostate; rather, apostasy is relative based on the perspective of the one who is declaring an individual to be an apostate. On this, see John M. G. Barclay, "Paul Among Diaspora Jews: Anomaly or Apostate?" *JSNT* 60 (1995): 89–120, at 111–112. Cf. Acts 21:21.

<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere in Paul's writings he too states the circumcision and foreskin are not matters of indifference. For the Jew, circumcision indeed has value (Rom 3:1–2) and for the non-Jew, circumcision has damning consequences (Gal 5:2–4). Foreskin—whether literal or metaphorical—is always portrayed negatively in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Gen 34:14; 1 Sam 17:26; Jer 9:26; Ezek 28:10; 44:7–9).

<sup>3</sup> E.g., 1 Macc 1:15; Jub. 15:25–26; Philo, *Migr. Abr.* 89–93; Petronius, *Poems* 24; Juvenal, *Sat.* 14.97–106; Celsus, *On Medicine* 7.25.1. A possible exception to this perspective that some may point to is Ananias in Josephus' account of the circumcision of Izates of Adiabene (*Ant.* 20.2.3–4). Ananias states that Izates does not need to adopt circumcision to embrace Jewish customs, but he does note that God will forgive Izates for failing to undergo the procedure. This seems to indicate that Ananias thought circumcision was necessary, but for political expedience it could be omitted, and God would be merciful. Ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman views of circumcision and foreskin are at opposite ends of the spectrum. Generally speaking, in the Jewish world circumcision was at the center of the covenant with Abraham and was therefore a major component of Jewish male identity.

In each of these occurrences—1 Cor 7:19; Gal 5:6, and 6:15—Paul then puts circumcision and foreskin in contrast to something else; keeping the commandments of God, faithfulness working through love, and new creation. In 1 Cor 7:19, he writes, “Circumcision is nothing, and foreskin is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God.”<sup>4</sup> In Gal 5:6, he states, “For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision has power, nor foreskin, but faithfulness working through love.” Lastly, in Gal 6:15, he writes, “For neither circumcision is anything, nor foreskin, but new creation.” The fact that these passages all share a similar theme—that is, the seeming negation of circumcision and foreskin paired with a contrastive *ἀλλά*—has led many interpreters to conflate these passages into a flattened Pauline maxim in which circumcision and foreskin are declared by Paul to be irrelevant, meaningless, or *adiaphora*.<sup>5</sup> In other words, in the minds of many,

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Foreskin, on the other hand, was viewed negatively and as something in need of removal. In the Greco-Roman world, foreskin was valorized and circumcision—or a deficient foreskin—was viewed as a mutilation or deformity. For a brief overview of how foreskin and circumcision were viewed in the broadly conceived Greco-Roman world, see Frederick M. Hodges, “The Ideal Prepuce in Ancient Greece and Rome: Male Genital Aesthetics and Their Relation to Lipodermos, Circumcision, Foreskin Restoration, and the *Kynodesmē*,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 75 (2001): 375–405; Thomas R. Blanton IV, “The Expressive Prepuce: Philo’s Defense of Judaic Circumcision in Greek and Roman Contexts,” *SPhiloA* 31 (2019): 127–161. Notably, outside of the Jewish people there were other Near Eastern nations that practiced some form of circumcision (e.g., Egyptians).

<sup>4</sup> All biblical translations in this article are my own.

<sup>5</sup> For a brief discussion of “neither circumcision, nor foreskin” as a Pauline maxim in the context of ancient rhetoric and *adiaphora*, see Rollin A. Ramsaran, “Paul and Maxims,” in *Paul in the Greco-Roman World: A Handbook*, ed. J. Paul Sampley (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2003), 429–456, esp. 437–448. For a tempered approach to Paul and *adiaphora*, see Will Deming, “Paul and Indifferent Things,” in Sampley, *Paul in the Greco-Roman World*, 384–403. Discussions of *adiaphora* in Paul have tended to flatten these circumcision and foreskin texts into a single maxim—a practice I argue against below. While some recent applications of *adiaphora* in the study of Paul (e.g., Ramsaran and Deming, noted above) have been careful to note the various types of indifferent things present in Stoic thought—namely, preferred and unpreferred indifferent things—the broad, generic application of *adiaphora* that is common in scholarship has framed circumcision and foreskin as being irrelevant or insignificant without due consideration for the positive and negative spaces they occupy in Paul’s *Weltanschauung*. Notably, Paul never comments negatively on the circumcision of Jews, but he always speaks negatively concerning the adoption of circumcision by gentiles (a possible exception to this would be Phil 3:2–3, but there I believe Paul’s opponents are Judaizing gentiles, and the “circumcision” in Phil 3:3 refers to Paul and Timothy, the Jewish authors of the letter). In fact, Paul highlights the value that

circumcision has become “just a flesh wound” for Paul. This paper pushes back against this prevalent stream of interpretation, opting for a more contextual approach to these texts in which the various nuances of each occurrence are appreciated.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Circumcision and Foreskin in Paul’s Thought

Before I comment on the passages that are the subject of this article, it is worth discussing the place of circumcision and foreskin in Paul’s thought due the important role these categories play in his *Weltanschauung*. As Nina Livesey has demonstrated, Paul uses circumcision and foreskin in his letters in various ways to make specific points. He employs them metonymically, metaphorically, and as actual references to the state of the male member.<sup>7</sup> Most important for understanding Paul’s use of these terms is how he can neatly divide the entirety of humanity into those who are circumcised and those who are foreskinned; literally translated, Paul simply refers to all human males as either circumcisions or foreskins (Rom 3:30; 4:9–12; Gal 2:7).<sup>8</sup> This follows Paul’s bifurcation of all humanity into the categories of Jews and gentiles/the nations (Rom 3:29; 9:24; 1 Cor 1:23; Gal 2:14–15; cf. Rom 1:16; 2:9–10; 3:9; 10:12; 1 Cor 1:22, 24; 10:32; 12:13; Gal 3:28). It is important to recognize that for Paul, the division between the

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circumcision does have for the Jew in Rom 3:1–2, whereas its adoption only has damning consequences for gentiles (e.g., Gal 5:2–4). By relegating circumcision and foreskin to the realm of indifferent things, scholars downplay the continuing place they have in Paul’s understanding of Jews and gentiles and their relationship to the god of Israel. Even when one is careful enough to employ the sub-categories of preferred and unpreferred indifferent things when discussing circumcision and foreskin, these important distinctions are obscured. Given that Paul’s understanding of circumcision and foreskin are intimately tied to his bifurcated understanding of humanity, scholars should avoid universal applications of *adiaphora* language when looking at circumcision and foreskin in Paul’s letters.

<sup>6</sup> On the importance of contextualized readings of Paul’s rhetoric, Mark Nanos writes, “Paul’s rhetoric is rhetorical. When it is isolated from its argumentative context for non-Jews within the first century, from Jewish communal and conceptual concerns, and made into universal-whatever-the-context-truths for every person, for all times, interpretations run a high risk of missing entirely what the historical Paul and his Judaism represented to his audiences, the good news along with the bad” (“Paul and Judaism: Why not Paul’s Judaism,” in *Reading Paul within Judaism* [Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017], 3–59, at 44). See also, Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 72–73.

<sup>7</sup> Nina E. Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol* (WUNT 2/295; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 120–122. See also, Joel Marcus, “The Circumcision and the Uncircumcision in Rome,” *NTS* 35 (1989): 67–81, at 73–76.

<sup>8</sup> Note the androcentric nature of Paul’s division of humanity.

circumcision and the foreskin is a natural one. In Gal 2:15, Paul states that he and Peter are Jews by nature (ἡμεῖς φύσει Ἰουδαῖοι), and not sinners born from gentiles (οὐκ ἐξ ἐθνῶν ἁμαρτωλοί). Correspondingly, in Rom 2:27, Paul speaks of those who are “the foreskin from nature” (ἡ ἐκ φύσεως ἀκροβυστία), which is an unusual thing to say. To modern readers, saying that someone is “the foreskin from nature” or “was born foreskinned” is simply an empirical truth that applies to all infant males—barring some kind of physical anomaly or divine intrauterine circumcision. For Paul, however, this natural state of being foreskinned only applies to gentiles; Jews are Jews by nature and are thus naturally circumcised.<sup>9</sup> For Paul, a foreskinned Jew is essentially an oxymoron.<sup>10</sup> This natural distinction between Jews and gentiles is one of the reasons why Paul argues so vehemently against the adoption of circumcision amongst the gentiles in his assemblies. If the gentile men in his assemblies began to adopt circumcision, they would be acting against their nature.<sup>11</sup> While there are currently debates about whether or not Paul actually thought a gentile could become a Jew through proselyte circumcision,<sup>12</sup> the important thing to note for our present purposes is the fact that Paul’s prohibition against gentile adoption of circumcision—and his prohibition against the circumcised undergoing epispasm in 1 Cor 7:18—*preserves* difference rather than *removes* it.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See Pamela Eisenbaum, “Is Paul the Father of Misogyny and Antisemitism?” *CrossCurrents* 50 (2000): 506–524, at 517. Paula Fredriksen (*Paul: The Pagans’ Apostle* [New Haven: Yale, 2017], 124) notes that in Gal 2:15 Paul’s statement implies that gentiles are sinful by nature. In the same way, Rom 2:27 implies that Jews are from nature circumcised. I am indebted to Logan Williams for directing me to this fragment from Euripides that also attests this idea: ἡ φύσις ἐκάστω τοῦ γένους ἐστὶν πατρίς; The nature of the race belonging to each [man] is [his] fatherland (*Dramatic Fragments* 1113; the authenticity of the fragment, however, is debated).

<sup>10</sup> Depending on how one understands the place of Acts in Pauline studies, perhaps this conception of the nature of Jews and gentiles could shed light on why Paul had Timothy circumcised (Acts 16:3).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. 1 Cor 11:14.

<sup>12</sup> See Matthew Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion: Genealogy, Circumcision, and Identity in Ancient Judaism and Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); idem, *Paul and the Gentile Problem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> J. Brian Tucker, *Remain in Your Calling* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 75–80; Lionel J. Windsor, *Paul and the Vocation of Israel* (BZNW 205; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), 46–47; Karin B. Neutel, *A Cosmopolitan Ideal* (LNTS 513; London: T&T Clark, 2015), 100.

### 3. The Prevailing Interpretation

As briefly noted in the introduction, the prevailing interpretive trend when dealing with these texts is to flatten them into a single maxim in which circumcision and foreskin become truly nothing for Paul. David Horrell offers a somewhat representative view of these three texts: “Paul is clear that the identity distinction between Jewish and Gentile Christians, the circumcised and the uncircumcised, is now ‘nothing’ (οὐδέν), since both are part of God’s new creation in Christ (1 Cor 7:19; Gal 5:6; 6:15).”<sup>14</sup> In the same vein, Michael Bird offers this reading: “Participation in this new creation means that the distinctions inherent in the old order, even those mandated “under the law,” cease to have any intrinsic and ongoing validity. Hence [Paul’s] statements [in Gal 5:6, 6:15, and 1 Cor 7:19].”<sup>15</sup> So too, Martinus C. de Boer comments that “[Paul’s] claim that circumcision is a matter of indifference just like uncircumcision (5:6; 6:15; cf. 1 Cor 7:19)...relativizes its importance completely.”<sup>16</sup> Additionally, J. Louis Martyn also conflates these three verses in an attempt to highlight his understanding of the apocalyptic undoing of religious pairs like circumcision and foreskin.<sup>17</sup> On his reading, circumcision and foreskin as religious categories are done away with in

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<sup>14</sup> David G. Horrell, “‘No Longer Jew or Greek’: Paul’s Corporate Christology and the Construction of Christian Community,” in *Christology, Controversy and Community: New Testament Essays in Honour of David R. Catchpole*, ed. David G. Horrell and Christopher M. Tuckett (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 321–344, at 343, see also 337–338.

<sup>15</sup> Michael F. Bird, *An Anomalous Jew: Paul among Jews, Greeks, and Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 6. Later on in this volume, Bird offers a further interpretation of these texts: “Paul’s denial of the value of circumcision and uncircumcision in favor of the value of “new creation” in Gal 6:15 is paralleled by (1) the earlier comment in Gal 5:6, where Paul also denied the important of circumcision and uncircumcision, since what truly matters is ‘faith becoming effective through love,’ which is soon after expressed in terms of Lev 19:18 about love of neighbor in Gal 5:14; and (2) elsewhere, in 1 Cor 7:19, Paul makes a similar denial to that of Gal 6:15 about the insignificance of circumcision and uncircumcision relative to the paramount imperative of ‘obeying the commandments of God.’ In other words, Paul is saying that circumcision and uncircumcision are insignificant in the new creation, and yet the new creation requires love, which fulfills the law and keeps God’s commandments. Thus, new creation and law-as-love command are not only compatible but prescribed by Paul” (161).

<sup>16</sup> Martinus C. de Boer, *Galatians: A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 323.

<sup>17</sup> J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 33A; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 472–474, 518–519.

the new cosmos. While more examples of this general line of interpretation could be supplied, the point has been sufficiently made.<sup>18</sup>

E. P. Sanders has offered a slightly more nuanced interpretation of these three texts, but his conclusions are similar to those proposed above. Sanders notes that in 1 Cor 7:19, circumcision and foreskin are simply matters of indifference, but in the context of Galatians, circumcision is no longer a matter of indifference.<sup>19</sup> In the preceding verses (5:2–5), the acceptance of circumcision leads to a Galatian being cut off from Christ and represents a falling away from grace. Due to this, Sanders rightly notes that Paul’s position in Galatians is not one of indifference. So this question arises for Sanders: “[I]s circumcision a matter of indifference or is it wrong for gentile converts?”<sup>20</sup> Sanders’ solution to this question is that Paul’s original stance is represented in 1 Cor 7:17–19; circumcision does not matter, but it is better to not change. When, however, circumcision was presented as being necessary for salvation, Paul came to the conclusion that circumcision was entirely wrong. He then offers this brief synopsis of what Paul means in Gal 5:6 and 6:15: “In truth, circumcision does not matter, it only matters because you are being compelled and I am being attacked.”<sup>21</sup>

It is worth noting that many—but not all—interpreters focus on the apparent devaluation of circumcision without giving due consideration to the presence of foreskin in these texts. This tendency can be attributed to the long history of interpretation of Paul in which circumcision, Jewish identity, and the

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<sup>18</sup> E.g., Friedrich Wilhelm Horn, “Der Verzicht auf die Beschneidung im frühen Christentum,” *NTS* 42 (1996): 479–505, at 485; Andreas Blaschke, *Beschneidung: Zeugnisse der Bibel und verwandter Texte* (TANZ 28; Tübingen: Francke, 1998), 386–387; John Anthony Dunne, *Persecution and Participation in Galatians* (WUNT 2/454; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 48 n.17.

<sup>19</sup> E. P. Sanders, *Paul: The Apostle’s Life, Letters, and Thought* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 495–496.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 496.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 496. Similarly, Terence L. Donaldson comments that Paul treats circumcision as an *adiaphoron*—citing 1 Cor 7:19, Gal 5:6, 6:15—but only when it was *not* being imposed on gentiles as a condition of salvation (*Paul and the Gentiles: Remapping the Apostle’s Convictional World* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997], 280). This position is similar to the one proposed by Neutel: “Even though Paul can describe circumcision as meaningless, whether a person becomes circumcised or not is still not a matter of indifference. The act is not value-neutral: while there is nothing positive to gain from circumcising, for him there is much to lose in doing so” (*A Cosmopolitan Ideal*, 101). See also, Craig S. Keener, *Galatians* (NCBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 286.

law are either redefined or abrogated by Paul. Additionally, the common translation of ἀκροβυστία as “uncircumcision” rather than “foreskin” also aids in overlooking this aspect of these texts.<sup>22</sup> By translating ἀκροβυστία as “uncircumcision,” the interpreter places the focus on the lack of circumcision—the chief identifying mark of a Jew—rather than the presence of foreskin—a fleshy problem that separated non-Jews from Jews.<sup>23</sup> By emphasizing the lack of circumcision as some kind of value-free, natural state, many have privileged non-Jewish identity over a Jewish one. This can be seen in some ways in James Dunn’s appraisal of Gal 5:6 and 6:15. Throughout his essay, “Neither Circumcision nor uncircumcision, but...,” Dunn consistently points out that for Paul there is an antithesis between circumcision and Christ, and circumcision and the cross, but he only briefly mentions how foreskin fits into the equation.<sup>24</sup> For Dunn, these “neither...nor...” statements only include foreskin as the counterpart to circumcision in order to demonstrate that all ethnic difference is done away with in Christ.<sup>25</sup>

#### 4. Translation and Contextual Issues

A key issue that arises when looking at these texts side by side is the different forms they take. While each of these verses includes the pair of circumcision and foreskin and a contrastive ἀλλά, they all vary in form and in content. In 1 Cor 7:19, Paul’s statement takes on its simplest form. Circumcision and foreskin are both individually declared to be nothing, and then he makes the declaration, “but keeping the commandments of God.” In Gal 5:6, the sentence begins with the conjunction γάρ and the prepositional phrase, “in Christ Jesus” (ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ), which connects this verse to what precedes it and limits the scope to the sphere of being in Christ Jesus. Notably, the verb used here is not a simple negation as in 1

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<sup>22</sup> On the (mis)translation of ἀκροβυστία in Pauline scholarship, see Karin B. Neutel, “Restoring Abraham’s Foreskin: The Significance of ἀκροβυστία for Paul’s Argument about Circumcision in Romans 4:9–12,” in this issue: *JMJS* 8 (2021): 53–74.

<sup>23</sup> This is from the perspective of an ancient Jew. We know of other ancient civilizations that practiced some form of circumcision, but they do not seem to be reckoned as being truly or properly circumcised by some of their Jewish contemporaries (e.g., Jer 9:25–26).

<sup>24</sup> James D. G. Dunn, “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision, but...,” in his *The New Perspective on Paul*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 313–337.

<sup>25</sup> On the problematic universalistic assumptions present in Dunn’s discussion of circumcision and Jewish identity, see John M. G. Barclay, “Paul, the Gift, and the Battle Over Gentile Circumcision: Revisiting the Logic of Galatians,” *ABR* 58 (2010): 36–56, at 45–46. See also, Anders Runesson, “Particularistic Judaism and Universalistic Christianity? Some Critical Remarks on Terminology and Theology,” *ST* 53 (1999): 55–75.



Cor 7:19 and Gal 6:15—though even both of those negations take on different forms—but in Gal 5:6 Paul uses *ισχύει* to demonstrate the lack of power that circumcision and foreskin have. He then contrasts this with “faith working through love” (*πίστις δι’ ἀγάπης ἐνεργουμένη*). Lastly, in Gal 6:15, Paul uses the conjunction *γάρ*, which links this statement to what proceeds it, negates circumcision and foreskin, and then contrasts this negation with the simple declaration, “but new creation” (*καινή κτίσις*). It is worth noting that the textual transmission of Gal 6:15 attempts to harmonize it to Gal 5:6. In a number of manuscripts, the prepositional phrase *ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ* is inserted into 6:15 to match the form of 5:6.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, some manuscripts also attempt to harmonize these verses by inserting *ισχύει* into 6:15.<sup>27</sup>

<b>1 Cor 7:19:</b> ἡ περιτομή οὐδέν ἐστιν καὶ ἡ ἀκροβυστία οὐδέν ἐστιν, ἀλλὰ τήρησις ἐντολῶν θεοῦ.	Circumcision is nothing and foreskin is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God.
<b>Gal 5:6:</b> ἐν γὰρ Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ οὔτε περιτομή τι ἰσχύει οὔτε ἀκροβυστία ἀλλὰ πίστις δι’ ἀγάπης ἐνεργουμένη.	For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision has any power, nor foreskin, but faithfulness working through love.
<b>Gal 6:15:</b> οὔτε γὰρ περιτομή τί ἐστιν οὔτε ἀκροβυστία ἀλλὰ καινή κτίσις.	For neither circumcision is anything, nor foreskin, but new creation.

Given the various contexts these verses come from, the different forms they take, and the different elements at the end of each verse, it seems unwise to flatten these into a single Pauline maxim before understanding them in their epistolary contexts.<sup>28</sup> I will now offer readings of these three texts in order to show how “neither circumcision, nor foreskin” is functioning in each instance.

<sup>26</sup> *ἐν γὰρ Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ οὔτε* is the variant reading in Ɑ A C D F G K L P ℞ lat and others.

<sup>27</sup> *ισχύει* appears in Ɑ<sup>2</sup> D<sup>2</sup> K L P ℞ lat and others.

<sup>28</sup> This is correctly noted by James D. G. Dunn, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (BNTC; London: A & C Black, 1995), 342. He notes the differing contexts and vocabulary in each instance and argues against those who believe this was an existing maxim—either a Pauline one, or a “Jewish-Christian” one.

### 5. 1 Corinthians 7:19

In 1 Cor 7:17–20, Paul lays out what he says is a universal rule for all of his assemblies.

Nevertheless,<sup>29</sup> as the Lord assigned to each one, as God has called each one, in this way he should walk. And thus I make this rule<sup>30</sup> in all the assemblies. Was anyone circumcised when called? Let him not undergo epispasm. Was anyone called in foreskin? Let him not undergo circumcision. Circumcision is nothing and foreskin is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God. Each in the calling in which he was called, in this remain.

Briefly stated, this rule outlines the relevance of existing social identities in Paul's assemblies. The central point around which Paul's rule revolves is the imperative to walk (*περιπατεῖτω*) according to their calling in life—that is—they should live their lives in accordance with their social location at the time of their call to follow Christ.<sup>31</sup> Paul specifically spells this out in reference to one's status as circumcised or foreskinned, or slave or free in the following verses. As a handful of recent interpreters have noted, it is beneficial to read Paul's employment of circumcision and foreskin here as functioning metonymically.<sup>32</sup> That is, when Paul is referring to circumcision and foreskin in this section—though he is making direct reference to the status of one's penis—this stands in the place of Jewish or non-Jewish identity. When Paul states that the circumcised should not seek epispasm and the foreskin should not seek circumcision, he is exhorting Jews and non-Jews to remain as such. They are not to remake their foreskins nor remove them.

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<sup>29</sup> Here, *Εἰ μὴ* likely refers back to the exception Paul makes in 7:15. Cf. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 334.

<sup>30</sup> The vast majority of manuscripts contain *διατάσσομαι*, which is likely the original reading, but a few (D\* F G latt) replace it with *διδάσκω*. This variant can be accounted for by looking to 4:17, where Paul writes, *ἐν πάσῃ ἐκκλησίᾳ διδάσκω*. Given the similar language found in 7:17, it is likely that some scribes accidentally replaced *διατάσσομαι* with *διδάσκω* due to their familiarity with 4:17 or in order to make the two texts have terminological agreement.

<sup>31</sup> Paul typically uses *περιπατέω* to refer to the conduct of individuals in his assemblies (1 Thess 2:12; Gal 5:16; 1 Cor 3:3; 2 Cor 10:2–3; 12:18; Rom 6:4; 8:4; 13:13; 14:15).

<sup>32</sup> Paul also employs these terms metonymically elsewhere: Rom 2:26–27; 3:30; 4:9; 15:8; Gal 2:7–9; Phil 3:3. On the metonymic use of circumcision and foreskin in Paul, see James D. G. Dunn, "Who Did Paul Think He Was? A Study of Jewish-Christian Identity," *NTS* 45 (1999): 174–193, at 189–190; Marcus, "Circumcision and Uncircumcision," 77–79; Livesey, *Malleable Symbol*, 77–122; Thiessen, *Gentile Problem*, 9.

After commanding that they maintain the status quo,<sup>33</sup> Paul gives his reasoning for this: “Circumcision is nothing and foreskin is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God” (1 Cor 7:19). As many interpreters have pointed out, this statement is somewhat nonsensical. Since circumcision was one of the chief commandments for Jews (Gen 17, Lev 12:3, Jub. 15), how can Paul say that what matters is keeping the commandments of God, while saying that circumcision is nothing? A common exegetical trend is to claim that through Paul’s negation of circumcision and foreskin, he redefines what the commandments of God are. For example, N. T. Wright notes that this verse should be taken as a deliberate use of irony by Paul: “Paul knew as well as anyone that circumcision was itself one of the ‘commandments’, and here he was saying that it was irrelevant!”<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Daniel Boyarin comments that Paul views circumcision and foreskin as *adiaphora* and that literal observance of the law has become irrelevant, which constitutes a dismissal of Judaism—and presumably the law—in its entirety.<sup>35</sup> So too Barrett, Sanders, and Schreiner all modify the contents of the commandments of God in order to make sense of this verse.<sup>36</sup> These perspectives all rely on a reading of this text in which circumcision and foreskin are truly nothing, and thus the commandments of God must be different than or a modified version of those found in the Torah.<sup>37</sup>

Does Paul, however, really think of circumcision and foreskin as nothing—or irrelevant—as so many exegetes have claimed? The main problem with taking this text at face value is the surrounding context in which Paul outlines his rule for individuals to walk in and remain in the calling to which they were called. Paul demands that both Jews and gentiles remain in their respective identities, upholding their distinctive natures. Does the language of “nothing” point to relativization, unimportance, or the removal of distinction, or is Paul doing something else here? In upholding these identities in 7:17–18, Paul demonstrates that these statuses have a continuing value and function for those

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<sup>33</sup> Albert Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, trans. William Montgomery (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 192–198.

<sup>34</sup> N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 1434.

<sup>35</sup> Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 112, 290 n.10.

<sup>36</sup> C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (BNTC; London: A&C Black, 1968), 169; E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 103; Thomas R. Schreiner, “The Abolition and Fulfillment of the Law in Paul,” *JSNT* 35 (1989): 47–74, at 62.

<sup>37</sup> Elsewhere, *ἐπιτολή* is used to refer to the contents of Torah; see Rom 7:8–12; 13:9; Matt 19:17–19; Sir 32:23–24; Josephus, *Ant.* 8.120.

in the *ekklēsia*. To understand what might be going on in 7:19, it is helpful to look at what Paul says elsewhere about things that are “nothing.” 1 Cor 3:5–7 is a text ripe for comparison: “What then is Apollos? What then is Paul? Agents through whom you believed, and each as the Lord gave. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything (οὐτε...ἔστιν τι οὐτε), but God who gives growth.” Does Paul here negate the value of his or Apollos’ work? Of course not; he is using the language of comparison and hyperbole to highlight how great God’s work is when compared to the work of mere men. Likewise, in 2 Cor 12:11 Paul states, “...for I am not less than the super-apostles, even though I am nothing (οὐδὲν εἰμι).” Once again, is Paul really nothing, or is he using hyperbole to make a rhetorical point about the so-called “super-apostles”? Both of these texts demonstrate the possibility that Paul’s assertion that circumcision and foreskin are nothing could be hyperbole in 1 Cor 7:19.<sup>38</sup>

David Rudolph has noted that a similar type of rhetorical device may also be at work here. He points out that Paul may be employing a “dialectical negation” to demonstrate that, “‘the not...but...’ antithesis need not be understood as an ‘either...or,’ but rather with the force of ‘more important than.’”<sup>39</sup> In his *A Grammar of the NT Diction*, G. B. Winer points out the crucial role that context plays in understanding how one should interpret this type of negation and comparison (οὐ...ἀλλά [or οὐδὲν...ἀλλά in the current text]): “Or, as in other passages, an absolute negation is, on rhetorical grounds, employed instead of a conditional (relative), not for the purpose of really (logically) cancelling the first conception, *but in order to direct the undivided attention to the second, so that the*

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<sup>38</sup> Additionally, David Rudolph (*A Jew to the Jews: Jewish Contours of Pauline Flexibility in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23*, 2nd ed. [Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016], 30) has noted that Hosea 6:6 could also serve as a helpful comparison: “For I desire covenant faithfulness (חסד) and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.” Yahweh’s relationship with Israel demands sacrifice, but here the author is using hyperbole or dialectical negation to say that חסד is more important.

<sup>39</sup> Rudolph, *A Jew to the Jews*, 30; quote from James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 51. It should be noted that Dunn does not apply this type of argument to his reading of 1 Corinthians 7:19. The term “dialectical negation” comes from Heinz Kruse, “Die ‘dialektische Negation’ als semitisches Idiom,” *VT* 4 (1954): 385–400. See also Andrew H. Bartelt, “Dialectical Negation: An Exegetical Both/And,” in *Hear the Word of Yahweh: Essays on Scripture and Archaeology in Honor of Horace D. Hummel*, ed. Dean O. Wenthe, Paul L. Schrieber, and Lee A. Maxwell (St. Louis: Concordia, 2002), 57–66.

*first may almost disappear.*<sup>40</sup> The reason for Paul’s rhetoric is not to erase the difference between circumcision and foreskin—Jewish and non-Jewish identity—nor is it to state their irrelevance, rather, it is used to highlight the importance of keeping the commandments of God. Since Paul is primarily making a legal argument about the way in which Jews and gentiles in Christ should live (*περιπατείτω*, 7:17), he rhetorically negates their respective identities in order to place his emphasis on necessity of keeping the commandments of God.<sup>41</sup>

The next step in making sense of this verse is determining how the commandment of circumcision fits into the picture. Recently, a creative solution to this perplexing issue has been gaining traction among a group of scholars in the wide-ranging Paul within Judaism *Schule*. This view proposes that the commandments of God are not monolithic amongst all people groups; rather, there are a set of commandments applicable to Jews and a set for non-Jews. The first fully formed expression of this solution was made by Peter Tomson in his monograph, *Paul and the Jewish Law*.<sup>42</sup> Subsequently, this view has been espoused

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<sup>40</sup> G. B. Winer, *A Grammar of the NT Diction*, trans. Edward Masson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1860), 518–519.

<sup>41</sup> Based on this rhetoric some have argued that Paul is relativizing this aspect of their previous identities, but the language of reprioritization offered by Tucker (*Remain in Your Calling*, 77–79) seems to capture Paul’s ideas more thoughtfully. While relativization and reprioritization may seem to be functionally equivalent language, relativizing implies that circumcision and foreskin lose their significance and “downplays the need for [Paul’s] rule” (78). Reprioritization, on the other hand, upholds the particular identities of Jews and gentiles without diminishing them. This distinction is important as it directly impacts what it means to keep the commandments of God. Although he uses the language of relativization, William S. Campbell captures the ongoing significance these various aspects of identity have: “We need to be more careful in Pauline studies in our use of words such as ‘obsolete’ or ‘abrogated’ especially in ethical contexts. This world may be passing away but even if it is, the whole of one’s Christian calling has to be lived within it... Thus whilst theologically, ethnic, gender, and sexual issues are *relativized* by the call of Christ, they are neither *obsolete* nor *irrelevant* when it comes to real life situations, as liberation theology and other contextual theologies have long since stressed” (*The Creation of Christian Identity* [LNTS 322; London: T&T Clark, 2006], 93; emphasis original). Campbell has since abandoned the language of relativization and now prefers to use reprioritization (William S. Campbell, “As Having and as Not Having: Paul, Circumcision, and Indifferent Things in 1 Corinthians 7:17–32a,” in his *Unity and Diversity in Christ: Interpreting Paul in Context: Collected Essays* [Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013], 106–126, at 109).

<sup>42</sup> Peter J. Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law: Halakha in the Letters of the Apostle to the Gentiles* (CRINT 1; Assen: Van Gorcum; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 88–89, 271–274.

by Markus Bockmuehl,<sup>43</sup> Pamela Eisenbaum,<sup>44</sup> David Rudolph,<sup>45</sup> J. Brian Tucker,<sup>46</sup> Anders Runesson,<sup>47</sup> Matthew Thiessen,<sup>48</sup> and others.<sup>49</sup> While each of these scholars' interpretations have their own nuances, the core argument they make is broadly the same: Jews in the Jesus movement are still responsible for keeping the traditional law of their ancestors, and gentiles—although not responsible for the Jewish law—must keep the commandments that pertain to them. For most of the interpreters above,<sup>50</sup> these commandments are represented in the apostolic decree of Acts 15:20 and 29, or are akin to—what are later referred to in rabbinic literature<sup>51</sup> as—the Noachide Commandments.<sup>52</sup> This view coheres with Paul's rule, specifically the call to walk in the way each was assigned and called (ἐκάστῳ ὡς ἐμέρισεν ὁ κύριος, ἕκαστον ὡς κέκληκεν ὁ θεός, οὕτως περιπατεῖτω

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<sup>43</sup> Markus Bockmuehl, *Jewish Law in Gentile Churches: Halakhah and the Beginning of Christian Public Ethics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 170–172.

<sup>44</sup> Pamela Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian* (New York: Harper One, 2009), 62–63.

<sup>45</sup> Rudolph, *A Jew to the Jews*, 82–85.

<sup>46</sup> Tucker, *Remain in Your Calling*, 77–80.

<sup>47</sup> Runesson, “Paul’s Rule in All the *Ekklēsiai*,” in *Introduction to Messianic Judaism: Its Ecclesial Context and Biblical Foundations*, ed. David Rudolph and Joel Willits (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 214–233, at 216–219.

<sup>48</sup> Thiessen, *Gentile Problem*, 8–11.

<sup>49</sup> It is worth noting that, like scholars who identify with the New Perspective on Paul, those who position themselves within the Paul within Judaism *Schule* are not monolithic. On this text in particular, Paula Fredriksen’s reading is vastly different. She argues that this text only deals with gentiles—both circumcised proselytes and naturally foreskinned—and the commandments that pertain to them, not Jews (*Pagans’ Apostle*, 107). Here, her understanding of the commandments of God for gentiles closely aligns with the view presented by Anders Runesson in the footnote below. She emphasizes that the commandments in 7:19 refer to “community love and the standard of decent community life” (108, 111).

<sup>50</sup> On this point, Runesson deviates (“Paul’s Rule,” 217). He refers to Rom 13:10 (“love is the fulfilling of the law”) and Rom 5:5 (“God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the holy *pneuma*”) to make the argument that since the condensed form of the law is love, and since Christ-followers have love through the *pneuma*, then all are able to obey “the commandments of God, the essence of which is love” (218). Jews in Christ, however, are still liable to obey the whole law.

<sup>51</sup> The first explicit Rabbinic mention of the Noachide Commandments is found in t. ‘Abod. Zar. 8:4.

<sup>52</sup> For a brief but thorough discussion of the Noachide Commandments, their antecedents in Second Temple texts, and their rabbinic development, see Bockmuehl, *Jewish Law in Gentile Churches*, 145–73. See also, Christine Hayes, *What’s Divine about Divine Law? Early Perspectives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

[7:17]). If their callings are different and they are to remain in their respective callings, it plausibly follows that the commandments applicable to each are also different. When 1 Cor 7:19 is read in the context of Paul's rule for all of his *ekklēsiai*, it becomes clear that circumcision and foreskin continue to have relevance for Paul and are not simply declared to be nothing.

## 6. Galatians 6:15

Due to the similarity in vocabulary and form between Gal 6:15 and 1 Cor 7:19, I will look at Gal 6:15 before finally turning to 5:6. In Gal 6:15, Paul makes the assertion that “neither circumcision is anything, nor foreskin, but new creation.” Like the similar phrase in 1 Cor 7:19, many interpreters have concluded from this text that circumcision and foreskin are now nothing for Paul, and all that matters is “new creation.”<sup>53</sup> In this section of Galatians, Paul continues his argument against the imposition of circumcision on the Galatian men. He states that those who are compelling the Galatians to be circumcised do so to make a good showing in the flesh and to avoid persecution. Furthermore, the reason they want to have the Galatians circumcised is so that they can boast in their flesh.<sup>54</sup> In contrast to these individuals, Paul notes that he himself will only boast in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, through which the cosmos has been crucified to him and he to the cosmos. Paul then makes the familiar declaration in 6:15: “For neither circumcision is anything, nor foreskin, but new creation.”

When approaching Gal 6:15, it is important to note this context in which it occurs, specifically how 6:15 is connected to what precedes it in 6:14.<sup>55</sup> The first thing we must do when reading 6:15 is to establish the connection Paul makes between 6:14 and 6:15 though the conjunction γάρ. It seems most likely that Paul here uses γάρ in 6:15 in its basic sense to explain the cause or reason for his statement in 6:14.<sup>56</sup> If Paul is using the conjunction γάρ in this manner, we must

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<sup>53</sup> E.g., Martyn, *Galatians*, 565.

<sup>54</sup> James Dunn describes the fleshly boast of the opponents as a “(typically Jewish) attitude” that Paul was no longer able to share (*Galatians*, 340). This is unhelpful for a number of reasons, notably because the boast that Paul attributes to his opponents is not related to their own flesh (i.e., their circumcised penises or ethnic origin), but the flesh of the Galatians (“boast in *your* flesh”; ἐν τῇ ὑμετέρᾳ σαρκὶ καυχήσονται; Gal 6:13) As far as I am aware, there is no evidence that points to Jews boasting in the flesh of circumcised converts. Here, Dunn incorrectly reads his ethnocentric depiction of ancient Judaism into this text.

<sup>55</sup> Jeff Hubing, *Crucifixion and New Creation: The Strategic Purpose of Galatians 6:11–17* (LNTS 508; London: T&T Clark, 2015), 229–245.

<sup>56</sup> BDF §452; BDAG, s.v. “γάρ.”

then determine what Paul is using 6:15 to explain in 6:14; is he using it to explain the main clause or the subordinate clause?<sup>57</sup> Does Paul use his negation of circumcision and foreskin, and his emphasis on new creation to explain his reason for boasting in the cross, or to explain the mutual crucifixion between the cosmos and himself? The subordinate clause, “through which the cosmos has been crucified to me and I to the cosmos,” serves to lay out one of the results that is effected by the cross of Christ, so it does not seem likely that Paul is using 6:15 to explain this sub-clause.<sup>58</sup> If 6:15 served to build on Paul and the cosmos’ mutual crucifixion, one would expect to find *οὗν* rather than *γάρ* in 6:15, which would read thusly: “...through which the cosmos has been crucified to me and I to the cosmos. *Therefore*, neither circumcision is anything, nor foreskin...” Rather, in 6:15 we have *γάρ*, which serves to explain the main clause of 6:14, that is, why Paul only boasts in the cross of Christ. The reason that Paul only boasts in the cross of Christ is because circumcision and foreskin are both nothing, but new creation—full stop. While we have established the syntactic relationship between the two verses, the meaning of 6:15 is still slightly opaque.

As I have noted above, circumcision and foreskin both have a place in Paul’s worldview and in his understanding of the relevant identities of Jews and gentiles. In Galatians, it is especially clear that circumcision and foreskin are not simply nothing or irrelevant for Paul.<sup>59</sup> The entire letter was written to prevent foreskinned gentiles from undergoing circumcision because it would have damning consequences for them. If they undergo circumcision, then Christ will not benefit them (5:2) and they will be cut off from Christ and fall away from grace (5:4). It seems unlikely that Paul would now conclude his letter—with his own pen (6:11)—stating that circumcision and foreskin are now irrelevant, meaningless, or *adiaphora*; this could potentially be interpreted as undoing much of what he previously wrote. Since 6:15 serves to explain Paul’s reason for boasting in the cross of Christ—and not in flesh, like those seeking to impose circumcision (6:13)—Paul’s declaration that circumcision and foreskin are nothing should be interpreted as relating to their relevant merits as things to boast in.<sup>60</sup> That is,

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<sup>57</sup> Hubing, *Crucifixion and New Creation*, 237.

<sup>58</sup> Pace Martyn, *Galatians*, 565.

<sup>59</sup> See note 20 above.

<sup>60</sup> So William S. Campbell, “‘I Rate All things as Loss’: Paul’s Puzzling Accounting System: Judaism as Loss or the Re-evaluation of All Things in Christ,” in his *Unity and Diversity in Christ*, 203–223, at 210–211. While Campbell rightly highlights the context of boasting in which this statement is made, his overall reading of this text focuses on the relative value of circumcision and foreskin in relationship to the cross and new creation.



circumcision is nothing to boast in and neither is foreskin.<sup>61</sup> The inclusion of foreskin here may seem a bit unusual; who would boast in foreskin? Paul may simply have included it as the counterpart to circumcision, but there are also two other possible explanations: 1) like his rivals who desired to boast in the circumcised flesh of the Galatians, Paul too could have been tempted to boast in the preservation of their foreskins as an accomplishment of his mission; or 2) in the Greco-Roman world, foreskin was valorized and an important aspect of the ideal penis and male body. It is possible that foreskinned Galatian males could have had cultural reasons for boasting in their foreskin over circumcised Jews or Judaized gentiles.<sup>62</sup>

Situating this verse within the context of boasting also helps us make sense of Paul's abrupt utterance, "but new creation" (*ἀλλὰ καινὴ κτίσις*; 6:15). Like 1 Cor 7:19, Paul is here using the rhetoric of comparison<sup>63</sup> to demonstrate that—while circumcision and foreskin are not things to boast in—new creation is something to boast in.<sup>64</sup> This new creation corresponds to the cross of Christ and being in Christ. As Paul writes in 2 Cor 5:17, "So if anyone is in Christ—new creation!"<sup>65</sup> Throughout his epistles Paul describes proper and improper boasting. In Romans, Galatians, 1 Corinthians, and Philippians—all of the Pauline epistles

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<sup>61</sup> Alternatively, one could read circumcision and foreskin as metonymically referring to Jewish and non-Jewish identity, but given the context of this passage, it seems more probable that Paul is referring specifically to the practice of circumcision.

<sup>62</sup> On the value placed on penile aesthetics in the Greco-Roman world, see Hodges, "The Ideal Prepuce"; Blanton, "The Expressive Prepuce."

<sup>63</sup> Contra Martyn (*Galatians*, 565), who explicitly denies the possibility that Paul is speaking in comparative terms.

<sup>64</sup> It is possible to understand Paul's reference to new creation as representing the product of his mission. His rivals' desire was to boast in the circumcised flesh of their Galatian proselytes, which was the product of their fleshly mission. Paul's mission, however, resulted in new sons of Abraham being born through *pneuma*, which could be understood as being a new creation; at one point they were not sons of Abraham, but through their reception of the divine *pneuma* they have become sons of Abraham (Gal 3:3, 29; 4:6, 21–31). On this interpretation, Paul is saying that those seeking to impose circumcision wrongfully boast in what their mission produces, whereas Paul correctly boasts in what his mission produces. Though he comes to more traditional conclusions about the interpretation of Gal 6:15, John W. Yates (*The Spirit and Creation in Paul* [WUNT 2/251; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008], esp. 120–121) succinctly demonstrates the important connection between the *pneuma* and new creation.

<sup>65</sup> This verse also appears in a wider context related to boasting in appearances (2 Cor 5:12) and knowing individuals "according to the flesh" (*κατὰ σάρκα*, 2 Cor 5:16).

that deal with circumcision and foreskin in some manner—boasting in the flesh, in appearances, or in status is always excluded (Rom 2:17, 23; 4:2; 11:8; 1 Cor 1:29; 3:21; 4:7; 5:6; 13:3; Gal 6:13). In these epistles, boasting is confined to being in Christ, in God, in the Lord, in hope, in suffering, or in the faithfulness of the *ekklēsia* (Rom 5:2–3, 11; 15:17; 1 Cor 1:31; 9:15–16; 15:31; Gal 6:14; Phil 1:26; 2:16; 3:3; cf. 1 Thess 2:19).<sup>66</sup> Of these boasting passages, Phil 3:3–8 offers a close parallel to Gal 6:15. Here, Paul notes that his boast is in Christ and not in his fleshly pedigree despite it being pristine in every respect: an eighth-day circumcision, from the nation of Israel, from the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born from Hebrews, a Pharisee in regard to the law, whose zeal led to persecution of the *ekklēsia*, and blameless according to the righteousness from the law. Although he has confidence in his flesh (Phil 3:4),<sup>67</sup> Paul only boasts in Christ, and has come to consider all things as a loss in order to know and gain Christ (Phil 3:7–8). Paul’s assessment of his own pedigree and of all things is that in comparison with Christ, they are to be regarded as loss. That is not to say that they are actually worthless, but within the rhetoric of comparison, Christ is exceedingly more profitable and something to be boasted in.<sup>68</sup>

In summary, Gal 6:15 should not be read as a standalone declaration that circumcision and foreskin are nothing; rather, read in its rhetorical and syntactical context, Gal 6:15 serves to demonstrate why Paul only boasts in the cross of Christ. This is because circumcision and foreskin are not things to boast in, but new creation as effected by the cross of Christ is something to boast in. Paul uses this to set himself in contradistinction to his rivals based on what each party respectively boasts in. For his rivals, it is the flesh of the Galatian males, which

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<sup>66</sup> The issue of boasting in 2 Corinthians is complex and outside the scope of this current article. While boasting there does seem to follow the general schema Paul lays out in his other epistles, there are many perplexing texts as well. Notably, in a letter like 2 Corinthians where circumcision, foreskin, and the law are not issues, positive boasting is much more prevalent than his other epistles. I have also excluded Gal 6:4 from the aforementioned boasting texts. This is because positive boasting is presented here as being directed inward towards oneself and not outwardly toward others. This appears to be a different type of boasting altogether.

<sup>67</sup> In Phil 3:4, Paul is almost universally translated as saying he has “*reason for confidence in the flesh*,” but the text actually says he *does* have confidence in the flesh (*καίπερ ἐγὼ ἔχων πεποιθήσιν καὶ ἐν σαρκί*). The interpretive tendency to include “*reason for*” seems to be a way to ensure that Paul does not contradict what he said in the previous verse: “...and have no confidence in the flesh” (*καὶ οὐκ ἐν σαρκὶ πεποιθότες*).

<sup>68</sup> For a judicious study of Phil 3 and its relationship to these “*neither...nor*” statements, see Campbell, “*I Rate All things as Loss*’.”

seems to euphemistically refer to their foreskinned penises becoming circumcised.<sup>69</sup> Paul, however, states he only boasts in the cross of Christ, because circumcision and foreskin are not things to be boasted in. This type of boasting is important for Paul and he urges the Galatians to follow his model of boasting in the following verse: “And for anyone who follows this standard (τῷ κανόνι τούτῳ; i.e., boasting not in circumcision or foreskin, but in the cross and new creation), peace be upon them” (Gal 6:16a).<sup>70</sup>

### 7. Galatians 5:6

Gal 5:6 follows Paul’s discussion about how the Galatians are children of the promise—like Isaac—and are incorporated into Abraham’s family through divine *pneuma*. The emphasis in this section of Galatians is on the existential threat that circumcision poses to the Galatians and their newly found incorporation into Abraham’s family. In Gal 4:21–31, Paul exhorts those who want to be under the law to listen to the law. He then lays out a perplexing allegorical interpretation of the Hagar and Sarah narrative to demonstrate how the Galatians were birthed into Abraham’s family through Sarah—the free woman—and are no longer enslaved to the *stoicheia* of the world (Gal 4:3, 7–9). Since the Galatians have been liberated from the power of the *stoicheia*, Paul exhorts them to not submit to circumcision, because submitting to circumcision would make them children of the slave woman and would put them back in a state of slavery (4:28–5:1). Since their sonship is rooted in their reception of divine *pneuma* and not in a modification of their foreskins (Gal 3:3; 4:6, 28–31), submitting to circumcision—in some mysterious way—cuts them off from Christ.<sup>71</sup> After stating the damning nature of circumcision for gentiles, Paul says, “For<sup>72</sup> we, by *pneuma* from faithfulness, eagerly await the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision

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<sup>69</sup> Thus, Craig Keener writes, “Paul’s depiction of the rivals’ desire to show off in the flesh (Gal 6:12) now takes a grotesque turn: they want to boast in your flesh, i.e., the flesh of your sliced foreskins” (*Galatians*, 285).

<sup>70</sup> The majority of scholars rightly interpret τῷ κανόνι τούτῳ (6:16) as referring back to the content of 6:15 (e.g., Dunn, *Galatians*, 343; Martyn, *Galatians*, 566–567).

<sup>71</sup> For some recent discussion of Abrahamic sonship and reception of divine *pneuma*, see Caroline Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in the Letters of Paul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 67–77; Thiessen, *Gentile Problem*, 105–128.

<sup>72</sup> The γάρ (“for”) in verse 5 serves to establish a contrast between those who seek *dikaiosynē* in the law (Gal 5:4) and those who wait for *dikaiosynē* by *pneuma* from faithfulness; de Boer, *Galatians*, 315; cf. Martyn, *Galatians*, 472.

has any power (τι ἰσχύει), nor foreskin, but faithfulness working through love” (Gal 5:5–6).

The critical thing to note for our current investigation is Paul’s usage of ἰσχύω in 5:6 instead of the simple negations (a negative + ἐστίν) found in 1 Cor 7:19 and Gal 6:15. While some interpreters translate ἰσχύω as being related to power,<sup>73</sup> the majority translate it in a way that conveys value (i.e., neither circumcision nor foreskin has value/means anything/counts for anything).<sup>74</sup> If one turns to most modern English Bible translations, a variant of this reading is what they will find.<sup>75</sup> In the context of his work on ancient gift-giving, John Barclay argues that ἰσχύω should here be translated in a financial sense related to value.<sup>76</sup> Since—for Barclay—Paul has put aside the old Jewish system of value, he can now say that circumcision and foreskin no longer have any value in the divine economy; the only thing that now has worth is faith.<sup>77</sup> Barclay argues that ἰσχύω must be translated as conveying value based on syntactical and lexical grounds. He contends that ἰσχύω plus an accusative—here, τι ἰσχύει—should be translated in financial terms, and that translations conveying power are not applicable.<sup>78</sup> This, however, is incorrect. The only other instance in the *corpus Paulinum*<sup>79</sup> where ἰσχύω is employed is in Phil 4:13, when Paul says πάντα ἰσχύω ἐν τῷ ἐνδυναμοῦντί με, “I am able to do/have power to do all things in the one who strengthens me.” Here, Paul employs ἰσχύω plus an accusative to clearly convey power or the ability to accomplish something.<sup>80</sup> In a few cases, some scholars translate ἰσχύω in Gal 5:6 as conveying power, but their interpretation of the text falls back onto a reading that conveys value. For example, N. T. Wright correctly translates τι ἰσχύει as “has any power,” but in his explanation of this text he immediately reverts to language that

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<sup>73</sup> Notably, Martyn, *Galatians*, 472–473.

<sup>74</sup> E.g., Dunn, *Galatians*, 270; Sanders, *Paul*, 551–552; Keener, *Galatians*, 235.

<sup>75</sup> E.g., NRSV, NASB, ESV, NIV, CEB. The notable exception to this rule is the KJV. Similarly, most German, French, and Spanish translations also follow this interpretive trend.

<sup>76</sup> Barclay, “Gentile Circumcision,” 37, 52–53.

<sup>77</sup> For Barclay’s reading of Galatians in relationship to ancient gift-giving and systems of value, see John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 351–446.

<sup>78</sup> Barclay, “Gentile Circumcision,” 52 n.51; Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 393.

<sup>79</sup> Outside of the *corpus Paulinum*, Matt 5:13 and Jas 5:16 also attest to idea of power or ability when ἰσχύω is paired with an accusative.

<sup>80</sup> John Reumann, *Philippians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 33B; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 703; Paul A. Holloway, *Philippians* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 187.

conveys value or worth without any explanation.<sup>81</sup> Similarly, Hans Dieter Betz states that *τι ἰσχύει* conveys the idea that circumcision does not have power to achieve righteousness, but when explaining the second half of the verse (*ἀλλὰ πίστις δι' ἀγάπης ἐνεργουμένη*), he reverts to value language.<sup>82</sup>

Further confirming a translation related to power is the context of this passage. The emphasis in 5:4–6 is on what has the ability to bring about *dikaïosynē*.<sup>83</sup> Paul denies that circumcision and the law have the ability to bring about *dikaïosynē* for the Galatians, rather, *dikaïosynē* comes to them through *pistis*.<sup>84</sup> Thus, when we read “neither circumcision has power, nor foreskin,” we should understand this statement in the context of bringing about *dikaïosynē*.<sup>85</sup> That is, neither circumcision nor foreskin have the power or ability to make one righteous/justified/rightwised, but *pistis* does.<sup>86</sup> While *pistis* is typically understood here as referring to an individual’s faith in Christ, the use of the verb *ἐνεργέω* may indicate otherwise. Elsewhere in Galatians (2:8; 3:5), Paul uses *ἐνεργέω* to demonstrate divine power or action. In fact, in all but one occurrence of *ἐνεργέω* in Paul’s epistles (2 Cor 1:6), it has a divine or supernatural power as its subject.

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<sup>81</sup> Wright, *Faithfulness of God*, 1140.

<sup>82</sup> Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Churches in Galatia* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 263–264. Betz comments, “The symbol of circumcision (or its absence) no longer has any power,” and “It does not have the power to achieve (*ἰσχύει τι [sic]*) salvation and righteousness before God...” He follows this up by saying, “...what matters to those ‘in Christ Jesus’ is instead *ἀλλὰ πίστις δι’ ἀγάπης ἐνεργουμένη* (‘but faith working through love’)” (emphasis added).

<sup>83</sup> Hung-Sik Choi, “ΠΙΣΤΙΣ in Gal 5:5–6: Neglected Evidence for the Faithfulness of Christ,” *JBL* 124 (2005): 467–490, at 487–489; cf. Dunn, *Galatians*, 271; Simon Claude Mimouni, *La circoncision dans le monde judéen aux époques grecque et romaine: Histoire d’un conflit interne au judaïsme* (Collection de la Revue des études juives 42; Paris-Louvain: Peeters, 2007), 218.

<sup>84</sup> Throughout Galatians—most notably in Gal 3:2–14—the concepts of *dikaïosynē*, *pistis*, and *pneuma* are all interrelated and linked to Abrahamic sonship. In the passage preceding our current text (Gal 4:21–31), Paul argues that the Galatians are sons of Abraham through their reception of *pneuma* and not through the acceptance of circumcision. When we arrive at 5:4–6, we find *dikaïosynē*, *pistis*, and *pneuma* once again. It is likely that Abrahamic sonship is also in view here as it pertains to those, who, by the *pneuma* and out of *pistis* wait for *dikaïosynē*, which is brought about by *pistis* and not circumcision or foreskin.

<sup>85</sup> While circumcision does not have the power to bring about *dikaïosynē*, it does have the power to cut someone off from Christ and sever them from the benefits of being in Christ (Gal 5:2–4).

<sup>86</sup> Betz (*Galatians*, 263) notes that *pistis* functioning as a power is surprising. See also, Choi, “ΠΙΣΤΙΣ in Galatians,” 482–489.

Therefore, *pistis* can and should be understood as referring to the faithfulness of Christ, not to an individual's faith. This is further confirmed by Gal 1:4; 3:13; 4:4–5; and 5:1, where the actions of Christ are depicted as having positive effect on those who are in him. Christ's faithfulness working through love is the thing that Paul believes has power to bring about *dikaioyneē*, not circumcision or foreskin. The comparison of circumcision and foreskin with *pistis* is not one of ontology, but dynamology. This picture of circumcision and *pistis* agrees with what Paul says throughout Galatians about *dikaioyneē*; it is not from works of the law (ἐξ ἔργων νόμου; Gal 2:16; 3:2, 5, 10–11), but it is from faithfulness (ἐκ πίστεως; Gal 2:16; 3:8–9, 11–12, 22, 24). "...and we have trusted in Christ Jesus, so that we may be righteous/justified/rightwised from faithfulness (ἐκ πίστεως) and not from works of the law (ἐξ ἔργων νόμου)" (Gal 2:16).

As was the case in Gal 6:15, the inclusion of foreskin in this text appears to be superfluous. While it could simply be the counterpart to circumcision, Paul could also be using it emphasize to the Galatians that their continuing in a state of foreskin in and of itself does not have power to bring about *dikaioyneē*. That is, though Paul thinks it is imperative that the Galatian males do not modify their foreskins, this preservation does not have any power.

Like 1 Cor 7:19 and Gal 6:15, Paul compares circumcision and foreskin to something else to make a specific rhetorical point. Here, when commenting on what has power to bring about *dikaioyneē*, Paul rejects the idea that circumcision and foreskin can bring about this desired result. Rather, the only thing that can bring about *dikaioyneē* is *pistis*. As with our previous texts, this one too does not claim that circumcision and foreskin are irrelevant or indifferent things for Paul. Paul only states that they do not have a specific type of power.

## 8. Conclusion

In closing, this article has demonstrated that each of these texts use the pair of circumcision and foreskin in different ways to convey different messages. In 1 Cor 7:19, circumcision and foreskin are used metonymically to refer to Jews and gentiles and have ethical implications for how those in the Jesus movement should live. In Gal 6:15, to highlight that his boast is only in the cross of Christ and the new creation effected by it—and not in the flesh of the Galatians like his rivals—Paul notes that this is because circumcision and foreskin are not things to be boasted in. Lastly, in Gal 5:6, Paul notes that circumcision and foreskin do not have power to bring about *dikaioyneē*, but that *pistis* does. In all of these texts, Paul utilizes the rhetoric of comparison to make specific points in particular contexts. Each of these instances of negation and comparison are highly contextualized and should not be flattened into a single maxim. If Paul simply said, "Neither

circumcision is anything, nor is foreskin anything”—full stop—then maybe the majority interpretation of these texts would have more textual merit, but he did not. Rather, in all of these instances, Paul does not stop at a simple negation of circumcision and foreskin, but always compares this pair to something else. Or—in the case of Gal 5:6—Paul does not discuss the value of circumcision and foreskin, but rather their lack of power to bring about *dikaioynē*. So, to answer the question posed in the introduction, is circumcision—or its fleshy counterpart, foreskin—as insignificant as just a flesh wound for Paul? Not according to 1 Cor 7:19 or Gal 5:6 and 6:15. In light of these findings, what is now needed is a comprehensive, constructive account of how Paul employs circumcision and foreskin language in his epistles.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> See my forthcoming PhD thesis, “The Apostle to the Foreskin: Circumcision in the Letters of Paul” (University of Edinburgh).