

The fact is, God set apart Jews through His covenant with Abraham. And, from the very start, the sign of that covenant was *circumcision*. Here's the genesis of that...in the book of Genesis, of course! "And God said to Abraham, 'As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.'" (Genesis 17:9-11 ESV)

But God reveals later in time in the book of Deuteronomy that the Israelites were stubborn...and that they should serve God with all their hearts and that the circumcision called for was *circumcision of their hearts!*

"...Fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul...Behold, to the Lord your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it. Yet the Lord set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day. Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart and be no longer stubborn." (*emphases* mine) (Deuteronomy 10:12b, 14-16)

And God's blessing on the set-apart Jews has been clear, both to them and to many others around the world! But it's a case of *for better or for worse*...ranging from significant deliverances, spiritual blessings, and material prosperity all the way to deep persecutions and the attempted extermination of Jews. These latter types of tactics are labeled "*anti-Semitism*," which Webster's defines as "hostility toward or discrimination against Jews as a religious, ethnic, or racial group." That's helpful...but rather bland, so here are excerpts showing how Oxford Reference concisely covers anti-Semitism.

"...In the late 19th and early 20th centuries it was strongly evident in France, Germany, Poland, Russia, and elsewhere, many Jewish emigrants fleeing from persecution or pogroms in south-east Europe to Britain and the USA. ...The 'final solution' which Hitler worked for [in Germany] was to be a Holocaust or extermination of the entire Jewish race; some six million Jews were killed in concentration camps before the defeat of Nazism in 1945. Anti-Semitism was a strong feature of society within the former Soviet Union, especially after World War II, and remains a problem in eastern Europe and in the former Soviet republics. In western Europe, especially in France and Germany, there has been an increase in racist violence by neo-Nazi groups since the 1990s."

Jews being set apart as God's people certainly hasn't always been a bed of roses! Or for that matter, how about using the present tense: *is it?* Throughout history, cultural conflict explicitly with Jews—persecution both formal and informal—has often been in the mix. Beyond that, in America nowadays, cultural condemnations and disputes that are focused on race, beliefs, and behaviors are burning. And, as always, rage is precipitated and continually stirred up in the name of cultural righteousness and social justice.

But wait, let's round out a Biblical view about being set apart by circumcision. What does God say about *circumcision in the New Testament*? What, you say? The *New Testament*? Yeah... "For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God." (Romans 2:28-29) God records that His circumcision is spiritual, not physical!

The Apostle Paul also wrote to the Colossian believers—yes, writing to both Jews and non-Jews—that this circumcision of the heart "made without hands" is the "circumcision of Christ." Here's Colossians 2:11-12: "In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the

flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.”

What does this mean? Well, let’s acknowledge God first expanded on Genesis 17’s physical sign of circumcision to Deuteronomy 10’s heart circumcision for Israel, moving *from* a parent making a sign on behalf of an eight-day-old infant to a significantly higher standard of a Jewish adult agreeing to a heart-change. Then God pivoted significantly in the New Covenant by expanding His targeted scope, revealing His desire of a faith-driven new life in Christ *for every Jew and Gentile on the planet!* And that New Covenant is effected with a “circumcision of Christ” and evidenced by a heart-change! And to make it emphatically clear, all that was accompanied by a spiritual diminishing of Jewish physical circumcision!

And in His teaching ministry, Jesus gave the radical guidance of how we are to live out this New Covenant. A Pharisee, who was a lawyer, asked Jesus a question in order to test him. “‘Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?’ And he said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Matthew 22:36-39)

As if that wasn’t enough, here’s what Jesus also taught. “‘You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.’” (Matthew 5:43-45)

So, there we have it! Believers are to engage in the world with God’s love...with all our neighbors, in all our workplaces...and even doing that with our enemies! But Christians worldwide have discovered that His people can be persecuted just for being Jesus-followers. And, just like Joseph and Daniel of the Old Testament, Christians can be falsely accused—yes, Christians have been and are being persecuted for their faith. But no surprise there...Jesus promised that: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matthew 5:10-12) As you listen, breathe a prayer for Christian brothers and sisters in current-day China, Nepal, Iran, Sudan, and other nations...yes, those Christians who are experiencing extreme persecution for their faith.

But we must be very careful here in all this. Even from the beginning of the church—believers have often gravely confused law-righteousness from Mosaic Law with God’s true righteousness that comes *only* through faith in Christ. Paul wrote eloquently on that in God’s Word. So, a Holy Spirit-effected circumcision of the heart—“*the circumcision of Christ*”—commands that we are to love others in the workplace and witness to the loving grace of righteousness through Christ. Indeed, the righteousness of Jesus...not Moses! So...is it Christians being persecuted for their loving proclamation of the Gospel...or is it that it’s Christians’ harsh condemnation of others’ behaviors being returned in kind? *Very likely it’s a mix of both.*

So, what to make of all this? Well, Jews—ethnic sons and daughters of Abraham—have been and continue to be persecuted for their identity. Christians are sons and daughters of Abraham by faith (Galatians 3:7) and have been given a new identity, a circumcision of the heart. And Jesus said that Christians would be persecuted “on [His] account.” Hopefully, it’s from sharing the good news. Even so, Jesus calls us to love our enemies. *So, Christ-circumcision prompts the loving of others in the workplace!* And here’s the key: in the coming days, every workplace Christian is called to proceed with loving Spirit-led discernment. Just what does that look like now and in the future...in a rapidly changing social climate? *Spirit-led discernment.*

A&A: Application & Action

1. In the Bible, Paul wrote that the ministry of condemnation based upon “the tablets of stone” (the Ten Commandments) leads to death and contrasted that to the ministry of reconciliation.

So, on national news and political programs you have seen nowadays in America, do you perceive that the Christians speaking are focused on a ministry of condemnation or a ministry of reconciliation? Discuss.

2. Is your perception that most all Christians, say, in America, give clear evidence of a circumcised heart—the circumcision of Christ—by a relentless loving of their neighbors? And the loving of their enemies? And, specifically, the loving of their enemies who believe and act differently in the practice of politics? Or is it often the contrary? Give examples and discuss.

3. Hebrews 13:3 (ESV) says “Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.” When was the last time you prayed for your brothers and sisters who are persecuted for their faith? No guilt, just opportunity! Take a moment to pray together for those experiencing extreme persecution for their Christian faith.