

The Circumcision of Christ  
A Warranted Translation of the Genitive Phrase τοῦ Χριστοῦ in Colossians 2:11

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## Introduction

At the end of Colossians chapter 2 verse 11 Paul makes mention of "the Circumcision of Christ" (τῆ περιτομῆ τοῦ Χριστοῦ). This phrase has been interpreted in various ways. In this paper I will seek to establish that Paul is using the subjective genitive and therefore the proper understanding of the phrase is "the circumcision that Christ performed" and not "the circumcision performed upon Christ".

## Exegetical History

The phrase τῆ περιτομῆ τοῦ Χριστοῦ (the circumcision of Christ) has been interpreted throughout Church history in three general ways, as: 1) regeneration, 2) baptismal regeneration, or 3) Christ's crucifixion. The earliest references to "the circumcision of Christ" from Colossians 2:11 come from Tertullian in 205 A.D. in Book III of his *Against Marcion*<sup>1</sup> and from Cyprian in his *Treatise XII*<sup>2</sup> written in 251 A.D. Both of these Ante-Nicene fathers take the phrase as a subjective genitive in their use of it and speak of our circumcision in terms of regeneration. Later Post-Nicene writer St. John Chrysostom<sup>3</sup>, writing in the last half of the fourth century similarly saw the phrase as subjective genitive but instead tied it to baptismal regeneration. St. Augustine likewise seems to have understood the phrase as speaking of regeneration and connected it with baptism<sup>4</sup>. At the time of the Reformation, both John Calvin<sup>5</sup> and Philip Melancthon<sup>6</sup> interpret the phrase as referring to regeneration in their respective commentaries on Colossians. Likewise, John Owen<sup>7</sup> and Jonathan Edwards<sup>8</sup> follow suite.

The earliest reference to the viewing the phrase as an objective genitive that I have been able to find is in Bishop Charles J. Ellicott's 1860 commentary on Colossians where he rejects

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<sup>1</sup> *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol 3, p 335, edited by Alexander Roberts, D.D. & James Donaldson, LL.D. (Peabody, MA: Henderckson Publishers, Inc., 1995)

<sup>2</sup> *Fathers*, vol 5, p 210

<sup>3</sup> Homily IV on Colossians, *Post-Nicene Fathers*, first series vol 13, p. 285

<sup>4</sup> J. E. Rotelle, ed. Edmund Hill, O.P., trans. *The Works of St. Augustine: A Translation for the Twenty-first Century* (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991) vol III/6, p 279

<sup>5</sup> Commentary on Colossians. *Commentaires on The Epistles of Paul to The Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians* by John Calvin, Trans. Rev. William Pringle, Baker, 1979 reprint, p184

<sup>6</sup> Melancthon, Philip (trans. D. C. Parker) (Sheffield UK: Almond Press, 1989), p. 61

<sup>7</sup> Owen, John (Thomas Russell, ed.) *The Works of John Owen* (London: Printed for Richard Baynes, 1826.), vol. 2, p 377.

<sup>8</sup> Edwards, Jonathan, *The Works of President Edwards in Four Volumes* (8th ed), (New York: Leavitt, Trow & Co., 1849), vol. 1, p. 105; vol. 2 pp. 468, 470.

such a translation in a work from 1733<sup>9</sup>. We see rejection of the objective genitive again later in A. T. Robertson's 1928 Colossians commentary. After stating his position that this to be understood as the circumcision that Christ performs, Robertson comments that some "take the circumcision of Christ here to refer to his death, a curious idea, surely."<sup>10</sup>. Sadly, Robertson doesn't list these sources.

The modern rise of the preference of the objective genitive seems to have gained momentum with John A. T. Robinson in his 1952 book *The Body: A Study in Pauline Theology*<sup>11</sup>, though Robinson simply includes this phrase in a list of benefits Christians receive from Christ's death and adds no exegetical reason. C. F. D Moule in his 1957 commentary on Colossians<sup>12</sup> cites Robinson and then briefly seeks to explain why this is the best reading<sup>13</sup>. O'Brien in 1982<sup>14</sup> and Garland in 1998<sup>15</sup> likewise prefer the objective genitive and refer to Moule in their explanations.

Obviously this is far from an exhaustive examination of the various positions, but it shows, at least to some extent, the progress of the translation of the phrase

### **Exegetical Examination**

Standing on its own, τῆ περιτομῆ τοῦ Χριστοῦ can legitimately be interpreted as either a subjective genitive or an objective genitive. There is nothing in the structure of the phrase that demands either interpretation, therefore, the larger context of the verse must be considered. In referring to the larger context, Markus Barth, in favor of the objective genitive says,

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<sup>9</sup> Ellicott, *A Critical and Grammatical Commentary on St. Paul's Epistles to the Philippians, Colossians, and to Philemon with a Revised Translation* (Andover, UK: Warren F. Draper, 1882), p.166. This appears to be a reaction against Christian Schöttgen's, *Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae in universum Novum Testamentum*. Dresden-Leipzig, 1733. Likewise, T.K. Abbot dismisses Schöttgen's interpretation in *The International Critical Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians* (London: Morrison and Gibb, 1897), p 251.

<sup>10</sup> Robertson, A. T., *Paul and the Intellectuals: The Epistle to the Colossians*, (Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1928), p. 122.

<sup>11</sup> Robinson, John A. T., *The Body: A Study in Pauline Theology* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1952), p.46.

<sup>12</sup> Moule, *Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary, The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1957), p 96.

<sup>13</sup> At this point the history becomes self-referential as Robinson cites Moule in interpreting 2Co 5:4, see Robinson, p. 77fn2.

<sup>14</sup> O'Brien

<sup>15</sup> David E. Garland, *The NIV Application Commentary: Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), p. 148.

[W]e can best explain the absence of the possessive pronoun in the expression "in the laying down of the body of the flesh" in light of the emphatic "in him" not only in v 11, but also in the whole paragraph; the pronoun was viewed as self-evident and therefore left out.<sup>16</sup>

But is this warranted? To make all of this work, Barth must take "in the laying down of the body of the flesh" from verse 11 the same way it is understood in 1:22, i.e. as Jesus' death. A possible translation of ἐν with the dative is an instrumental dative, so it is linguistically possible here. But significant questions remain. First, how does Christ's circumcision (i.e. His death) circumcise me? Second, this reading implies that Christ has permanently put off His "body of the flesh" meaning that His resurrection not in sight here or is not physical. Third, the circumcision the Colossians experienced was "made without hands" and surely Christ's death was at the 'hands' of wicked men (Acts 2:23). So for Barth's interpretation to work, the "handless" circumcision of the Colossians had to be effected by the "handful" crucifixion of Christ. Fourth, if ἀπεκδύσει is speaking of Jesus' putting off his flesh, then what is missing is when he "took it up" again: the resurrection. In Paul's theology, the resurrection is crucial as seen in Romans 4:25. While the resurrection is mentioned in Colossians 2:12 in connection with baptism, it is missing from the picture of circumcision. Fifth, there is a seventh century insertion in the text which placed τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν (of sin) into the phrase. While the words obviously don't belong there, it does show that a copyist saw the "laying aside" or "stripping off" of the flesh was removal of the sinful nature and not Christ's crucifixion since Christ's remained sinless. Sixth, to consistently understand "the circumcision of Christ" as applying to Him and not us, most of this verse gets swallowed by that circumcision. All that remains for the Colossians is the fact that they have been circumcised with no further explanation. They were circumcised with a circumcision done without hands (Christ's crucifixion) in the putting off of the body of the flesh (Christ's crucifixion) in the circumcision of Christ (Christ's crucifixion). Barth (and others) make much of the fact that τοῦ σώματος τῆς σαρκός is the same as in 1:22 which speaks of how we were saved, therefore the putting off of the body of the flesh is Christ's crucifixion.

He backs up this statement by saying "In Greek, a simple determination can be made by using the article instead of the possessive pronoun in a case like this."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Barth, Astrid B. Beck trans., *The Anchor Bible Colossians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), p. 365.

<sup>17</sup> Barth, p. 365 fn 8