

**A Survey of Christian Critiques of Circumcision:  
Making Room for a Progressive Christian Intactivist Ethic  
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**Abstract** The long history of Christian opposition to Jewish circumcision, as well as Christian influences on the advent of secularized circumcision in the United States, bear on American Christian attitudes toward circumcision today. The small body of Christian academic scholarship that has been done on Jewish circumcision does not comprise an ethical critique of circumcision. At the grassroots level, progressive Christians in the US are largely silent on this critical and local issue, despite their general ethical orientation in favor of human rights. The theo-ethical messaging against circumcision that has been pioneered by conservative Christian intactivists would require adaptation to reach progressive Christians. Progressive Christian intactivists have a responsibility to contribute their own ethical reasoning about circumcision to the multiplicity of intactivist communities and cultures working to end circumcision.

Do Christians practice circumcision? Should they? What should they think about faith traditions that circumcise their members? Christians have answered these questions in different ways over the centuries. In light of the newly understood medical impacts of circumcision, as well as the participation of American Christians in modern circumcision, it is time for new answers. Today for the first time, some Christian opposition to circumcision is being motivated principally by concern about bodily harm and well-being, rather than denigration of Judaism. Yet the vast majority of churches remain silent on this issue in medical ethics. This essay will raise, and try to resolve, progressive Christian inhibitions against critiquing circumcision. I hope to motivate a greater number of progressive American Christians, of a variety of denominations, to approach circumcision as a deliberately discerned personal decision, a collective moral issue, a public civil rights struggle, and a potential topic for interfaith dialogue with Jews and Muslims. Despite the low profile of circumcision controversy in Christian circles, I see the potential, not to mention the responsibility, for Christians to contribute to the gradual, voluntary abandonment of circumcision in the United States.

I understand the institution of infant male circumcision to be simultaneously a material, bodily practice, as well as a cluster of cultural and religious meanings. I write as a progressive Christian participant in the contemporary Western movement to end involuntary genital cutting of male, female, and intersex children globally. This intactivist movement is led by people of all faiths and none who use secular arguments, as well as Jewish intactivists who use both secular and religious arguments in appealing to their own tradition.<sup>1</sup> Intactivists define infant male circumcision as unjustified foreskin amputation, a violent practice that can accurately be described as partial penis amputation.<sup>2</sup> As a material practice, circumcision is the nonconsensual, painful removal of a part of a person's body that is healthy and functional, that belongs to each person, and about which they should have a choice. It is an invasive use of force that carries

medical risks as well as inherent injury and harms, as the foreskin has sexual functions that might be valued by the person later in life.<sup>3</sup> As a cultural institution in Judaism, circumcision has important meanings to Jewish religion and culture; it functions as a technology and symbol of Jewish ethnic identity; and it also remains a significant cultural trope of Christian anti-Semitism.

Religion plays a numerically small part in circumcision in America, yet it holds an important legal role because of freedom of religion in the Constitution. Christians tend to include the religious aspects of circumcision in our reflection, despite the fact that the majority of American Christians who circumcise their sons do so for secular reasons,<sup>4</sup> because religion is personally important to us, as is our relationship to Judaism and Islam. I focus on Jewish circumcision because it has long been interconnected with Christian scripture, tradition, and history, playing a role in the Christian theological imagination, affecting notions of salvation, identity, mission, even the mechanics of baptism. Christian ideas about the meanings of circumcision have also affected the meanings this Jewish practice has held within Judaism. Growing numbers of Christian scholars approach Jewish circumcision as a tool for understanding religious identity, a historical phenomenon that sheds light on early Christian identity and Christianity's outgrowth from Judaism. At least three of the scholars of religion who have published on the role of circumcision in early Christian identity are members of various Christian denominations,<sup>5</sup> and Jewish scholars of religion have also done a great deal of work on this topic.<sup>6</sup> Their body of research sheds light on the Jewish people's valuation of circumcision and contextualizes Christianity's longstanding negative attitudes toward the practice.

Because Jewish circumcision is arguably intercultural and inter-religious in its historical development, Christianity shares responsibility for its harms, as do, therefore, all self-proclaimed Christians. Christian discourse has inadvertently encouraged Jewish circumcision, and Christian intactivist groups<sup>7</sup> are not exonerated from this legacy simply because they work to end circumcision harms. In contrast, progressive Christians are often uncomfortable discussing circumcision because of its importance to Jews. But the fact that Christian opposition to Jewish circumcision has been a tool of anti-Semitism does not mean we have a responsibility to say *nothing* now. Our historical involvement gives us *more* responsibility to get involved, not less, as long as we do so in a better way. Christian opponents of circumcision must sift carefully through the judgments Christians have made on circumcision in the past, analyzing each for its motivation and the effect it had on those being judged. The more aware we are of Christian tradition, and wary of its destructive history, the more wisely we will use the Church's theological and biblical resources in arguments against circumcision. Circumcision entered the Christian story very early, notably in the writings of the apostle Paul of Tarsus, whose letters became part of the Christian New Testament. Paul was a Hellenistic Jewish missionary to the gentiles (non-Jewish peoples) in the first fifty years of the Jesus movement. Paul argued strenuously, in letters to early Christian communities in Galatia,<sup>8</sup> Corinth, Philippi, and later in Rome, that gentile joiners of this originally Jewish sect did not have to be circumcised (or, we can surmise, circumcise their sons, although Paul is not worried about transmission of the faith to the next

generation because of his apocalyptic expectations).<sup>9</sup> Paul did not, however, argue for abolishing the commandment of circumcision for the Jewish followers of Jesus, stating in his letter to the Romans that the value of circumcision was “much in every way.”<sup>10</sup> Rather, he bragged about his own circumcision and the status it gave him as a member of God's covenanted people,<sup>11</sup> said that those who were circumcised (aka Jews) should not seek uncircumcision [presumably referring to epispasm, foreskin restoration],<sup>12</sup> and allegedly circumcised his helper Timothy.<sup>13</sup> The varieties of progressive Christian biblical scholarship that emphasize the fidelity of Paul to his own Jewish practices, such as circumcision, are known as the “new perspective” on Paul.<sup>14</sup> According to new perspective scholars, Paul’s agenda in solely opposing gentile circumcision was to fulfill the Hebrew prophecy that gentiles would come to worship Israel’s God as ethnically distinct gentiles, not necessarily as Jewish converts.<sup>15</sup>

Circumcision also appears frequently in the writings of the early church fathers, including Justin Martyr, Origen, Ambrose, John Chrysostom, Jerome, Augustine, and the Venerable Bede.<sup>16</sup> These early writings, like Paul’s letters, argue against gentile Christians being circumcised, but unlike Paul, they also argue against the value of Jewish circumcision. As gentile Christians, who were uncircumcised because they were gentile, gained the majority in the Christian movement over Jewish Christians, they avoided and denigrated circumcision as a sign of “inferior” Jewish identity. Church father Origen in the third century CE named this dynamic as “the disgrace which is felt by most people to attach to circumcision.”<sup>17</sup> Gentile-dominated Christianity therefore took a cue from Rome and reproduced circumcision as a significant and unflattering stereotype of the Jewish people. Meanwhile, in Jewish rabbinical teachings, circumcision took on additional valued meanings, as it had done under Greek and Roman repression earlier.<sup>18</sup>

As Christianity was gradually established as a religious institution, separate from the emerging framework of rabbinic Judaism, four intellectual moves came to characterize Christian attitudes toward circumcision: stereotyping, fear, appropriation, and replacement.<sup>19</sup> In an effort to downplay the significance of Jewish circumcision as a ritual requirement and particular ethnic practice, ancient Christians turned circumcision into a biblical metaphor and theological symbol. Making circumcision properly pertain only to the spirit, not to the body, was a way of making it more universally applicable. Early Christian theologians sought to appropriate the spiritual aspects of circumcision as a religious antecedent and supplement to Christian baptism. Following Paul in using certain Hebrew prophetic rhetoric on allegorical circumcision, such as in Jeremiah and Ezekiel, they found it useful to insist on the primacy or singularity of a spiritual “circumcision of the heart,” such as the conversion that takes place in baptism.<sup>20</sup> Circumcision was said to symbolize a set of moral virtues to be imitated, such as obedience, self-denial, and renunciation.<sup>21</sup> Replacing the bodily ritual of circumcision with the symbolic ritual of baptism, both for infants and converts, was a liturgical expression of the new “replacement” theology. This theological supersessionism said that Jesus’s “new covenant” (interpreted as being between God and the gentiles) supplanted the “old” Israelite covenants.<sup>22</sup> Christians held themselves to be separate from and superior to Jews, as they practiced the “new” spiritual, not physical,

circumcision. It is important to note here that Christians de-emphasized physical circumcision for ethnic and doctrinal reasons, not for reasons of bodily wellbeing or rights.

Christian theologians of late Antiquity also spilled a lot of ink about why Christ was circumcised. They asked, why would God in Jesus allow Himself to be marked by an “inferior” Jewish ritual? Some concluded that Jesus allowed himself to be circumcised to “pass” as a Jew in order to better reach the Jews, but he was not really a Jew, being God.<sup>23</sup> In the Middle Ages, theologians like Bernard and Ambrose connected Jesus’s circumcision to the crucifixion, arguing that he chose to undergo the ritual so as to be the last one to ever be circumcised, fulfilling the sacrifices of the “old” covenant and putting it to an end. This theology valorized Jesus’s circumcision as a saving act, as the crucifixion was thought to be a saving sacrifice. Christians began to collect and revere supposed holy relics of the physical, detached foreskin of Jesus (not an attached, functional, healthy foreskin). The theology that God asked his beloved son to suffer to benefit humans, is not far from the cross-cultural religious ethos that parents can inflict suffering on their children as long as it’s for a higher cause. This theology also denigrated circumcision as an act of humiliation, descent, and debasement, which resonated neatly with the low view of Jewish practices at the time. Art that depicted the infant Jesus getting circumcised often connected it to crucifixion, emphasizing its pain and depicting the Jewish characters involved in an ugly, violent light.<sup>24</sup> This theology rendered Jews into ingrates, who mocked the sufferings of Christ by persisting in what he came to abolish.

In the Middle Ages up through the Holocaust, circumcision became a major trope in Christian anti-Semitism. In medieval and Renaissance art, the naked body of the adult Christ was ironically depicted as uncircumcised, because the sacred body and the body politic could not be allowed to resemble the Jewish “outsiders” who lived in Europe.<sup>25</sup> Medieval Christians reviled Jews as feminized through circumcision, hopelessly carnal rather than spiritual, and worse, bloody and dangerous. The “blood libel,” closely connected to dread of circumcision, was a Christian fantasy that Jewish people engaged in ritual murder of Christians. In the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, widespread persecution of Jewish communities was crowned by several cases in which groups of Jewish men were executed for allegedly circumcising and murdering Christian children. The trauma of the Holocaust, inspired and enabled by centuries of Christian anti-Semitism, is often cited by Jews as a reason why circumcision remains a necessary way for Jews to resist assimilation and cultural eradication. Thus Christian opposition to circumcision, beginning as a reconceptualization of ethnic identities approaching God and ending up as a technology of ethnic hatred, perpetuated the centrality of circumcision to Jewish cultural survival.

In Britain and the United States, circumcision shifted from being a Jewish religious practice to a widespread, secular, medical (but non-therapeutic) practice in the late 1800s. The medical “benefit” of the procedure, reducing masturbation, which was thought to cause other diseases, was influenced by Christian teachings about the dangers of sex. The openly admitted discovery that foreskin removal reduced sexual

pleasure was religiously agreeable to Victorian Christians, who viewed sexuality as negative for a variety of reasons. Christianity also provided some of the allegedly positive cultural meanings of this new type of Victorian circumcision, supplementing the alleged physical benefits of the surgery. It was a time of hypermasculine Christian identity that sought to beat back feminist political reforms through masculine self-discipline and control of sexuality, as well as demonstrate racial and cultural superiority over colonized and immigrant people who were labeled as less clean.<sup>26</sup> The Victorian campaign against masturbation, and sexual pleasure itself, was a racialized enforcement of a certain vision of Christian “civilized” sexuality over and against “heathen” sexuality.

The rehashing of traditional Christian arguments against circumcision *as a religious concept* continued in the twentieth century, with no acknowledgement of the mounting criticism of it as a non-therapeutic medical practice. At the same time that British and American Christians began circumcising their sons, German theologians such as Rudolf Bultmann and Ernst Kasemann continued to write about circumcision only in abstract and Pauline terms. Many modern biblical interpreters in the West, staying within the Bible and its polemical universe, have followed their lead. Traditional Christian theologians who write about circumcision today continue to conceptualize it as a work of law that does not bring about salvation, as an indicator of achievement and boasting, a means of nationalistic distinction, and as a sign of an ineffectual religion or lifestyle.<sup>27</sup> These are anti-Jewish concepts, founded on an interpretation of Paul that falsely separates him from his Jewish practice.

To summarize, historically, Christianity has opposed circumcision in ways that do not necessarily augment principled critiques of the practice. Christians maligned circumcision as a way of maligning the Jewish ethnicity and covenant with God that were represented by it, rather than to critique its harmfulness as a bodily practice. During centuries of oppressive power imbalances between Christianity and Judaism, imperialism and religious supremacy fused circumcision to notions of identity. Religious and ethnic identity powerfully influence people's daily lives and concrete cultural practices, including bodily practices like circumcision. By denigrating circumcision, Christianity magnified the value of circumcision as a marker of identity, resistance, and cultural survival for the Jewish people. Christians who oppose Jewish circumcision today, simply because they oppose circumcision itself, have the opportunity to vilify circumcision in a more principled and effective way: by criticizing its harms, rather than its cultural and religious meanings in Judaism and Christianity. This would be a strategic response to the observation that critique in the context of oppression strengthens that which is critiqued, as Jews still experience religious and cultural oppression today.

Since the 1960s, Jewish-Christian relations are in a somewhat better place; every major Christian denomination has repudiated supersessionist theology, even if this new teaching doesn't always make it to the level of the pews.<sup>28</sup> The downside of this positive theological development is that American Christians, who may be inclined to circumcise for medical or social reasons, can more easily find Christian discourse that seems pro-circumcision. Compared to ancient Christians, Christians today have fewer anti-Jewish

hang-ups to cast ambiguity into their hazy, Bible-based perceptions that God invented circumcision in the Old Testament, or that Christians imitate Jesus who was circumcised in the gospel of Luke. Indeed, there is evidence that more and more, North American Christians are thinking positively of circumcision not just in medical terms, but in terms of religion as well. Evangelical pastor and intactivist Jim Bigelow hypothesizes a few theological reasons why many American Christians today perceive circumcision as a Judeo-Christian, beneficial practice (though not ritual, per se): God wants us to live by God's word and keep all the commandments, never settling for less; Christ asks us to glory in going the extra mile and sacrifice in order to show dedication to God; God is all good, beneficent, and perfect, showering only blessings on God's people and never making truly sacrificial demands; and Jesus, as the example of all things good and right, was circumcised and should be imitated.<sup>29</sup>

Still, most American Christians (who are not intactivists) do not look at circumcision through the lens of religion at all, much less in light of the historical religious identity conflicts between Christians and Jews. For most American Christians today, the concept of "Christian responsibility for circumcision" would simply refer to the responsibility of Christian parents to make the *medical* decision whether or not to circumcise their sons (as though this was rightly their decision, when it should actually be their grown son's choice about his body). Christian parents in the United States tend to make the "circumcision decision" without recourse to the resources of the church, viewing it as a personal medical or social decision rather than anything connected to faith or morals. Christian intactivists have done some work to influence pastors, denominations, and religious hospitals, but at this time no American church has produced an ethical policy statement on male circumcision.<sup>30</sup> In light of widespread circumcision among active and nominal Christians, whether for religious or secular reasons, it is more important than ever to craft a responsible Christian intactivist interpretation of circumcision in scripture, tradition, theology, and ethics. "Christian responsibility for circumcision" extends far beyond nuclear family and parental agency, into the responsibility that every Christian has to examine Christian discourses about circumcision, including in the light of anti-Jewish discourse.

It is encouraging that Christians today can finally talk about circumcision without denigrating its meaning to Judaism. In the academic realm, there are a few progressive Christian scholars who address Jewish circumcision in their work in a historically conscious way. Unfortunately, these scholars tend to implicitly value circumcision as a way of valuing Judaism, with no discussion of its health and human right impacts. They restrict their ethical reflection to critiquing the way circumcision was maligned as a cultural practice and used as an excuse for theological violence in history.<sup>31</sup> While perhaps contributing to the broader systemic and cultural changes needed for circumcision politics to shift in the United States, namely reparations for Christian anti-Semitism, this work builds absolutely no momentum for progressive social change around circumcision, mainly because it makes no attempt to do so. Affecting the practice of circumcision itself is absent from these progressive scholars' agenda. Worse, some progressive Christian scholars today critique Jewish circumcision not as a material practice, but as a spiritual metaphor about bodies and embodiment. For

example, the handful of feminist scholars in Christianity who discuss circumcision do so to talk about embodiment and gender in religious contexts. For them, circumcision is a distracting fixation on the male body, created by patriarchy.<sup>32</sup> Any critique of the practice itself is about its effects on society, rather than its effects on the person.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, some scholars have drawn on biblical circumcision to create analogies for contemporary Christian identities, for example controversies about LGBT church members, people of color in a multicultural church, or Filipino Catholic migrants returning to their homeland.<sup>34</sup> Several scholars of Christianity even use circumcision merely as a metaphor for religious methodologies, hermeneutical (interpretive) moves, and theological practices.<sup>35</sup> In these cases, talking about circumcision is just a way of talking about other things. Thus circumcision becomes a metaphor for another form of violence other than its own violence, in some cases minimizing the pain of it as an actual practice<sup>36</sup> and in other cases perpetuating a negative attitude toward circumcision as a theological practice.<sup>37</sup>

This focus on symbolic meanings disables and distracts from critique of physical meanings, recapitulates the long-standing Christian habit of turning concrete realities for analysis into disembodied allegories, and discounts the pain of survivors of actual circumcision. For survivors, circumcision can only be a terrorizing metaphor. Medical historian David Gollaher (*Circumcision: a History of the World's Most Controversial Surgery* (New York: Basic Books, 2000, 180) quotes intactivist Tim Hammond:

"Awareness that this was done to you is something that a lot of circumcised guys more or less stumble upon. If he reads enough he eventually learns that this circumcision was not only unnecessary, but deprived him of fully functioning genitalia. This widespread ignorance before such an awareness occurs is a kind of *mental circumcision*. Later when he gets the message that people are uncomfortable talking about it, and he is treated like it's not important or that he shouldn't question it, a man becomes aware of being cut off from society, and then a deeper *circumcision of the soul* sets in." Emphasis mine] Gollaher is quoting from Hammond's report on the Harm Documentation Survey conducted by NOHARMM in 1994. Gollaher comments, "There is irony in Hammond's choice of words. Whereas St. Paul's 'circumcision of the heart' metaphorically included an uncircumcised Gentile in the community of the Christian faithful, Hammond's 'circumcision of the soul' expresses a profound sense of alienation." )

When circumcision is treated merely as a historical or timeless phenomenon, marshalled as a tool in a wide range of arguments, any impacts on the contemporary circumcision debate will by definition be side-effects, sloppy and unexamined. The widespread lack of understanding of circumcision harm in society, left undisturbed by these scholars, contributes to Jewish people's perception of anti-Semitism in contemporary discourse about circumcision. Progressive Christians, who care about human rights but talk about circumcision without mentioning harms, make it easier for people to distrust intactivist Christians when they discuss circumcision harms. Often these harms are seen as suspect allegations designed to cover up a Christian distaste for all things Jewish.

While grassroots Christian intactivists do focus on the harms that the academic scholars neglect, they unfortunately seem unaffected by the new Christian scholarly insights into the importance of affirming Jewish culture, religion, and ethnicity. Existent Christian intactivist sites, mostly from conservative Catholic and evangelical Christian backgrounds,<sup>38</sup> are often hostile to Judaism in their critiques of Jewish circumcision as a human rights issue. In their attempt to mine the Christian tradition for intactivist resources, Christian intactivist writings parrot millennia-old Christian teachings against circumcision that perpetuate anti-Jewish prejudice. The use of traditional Pauline interpretation and theology to oppose circumcision, motivated by good intentions and an important cause, is not just incorrect from the perspective of progressive Christian biblical scholarship. It unfortunately continues to cause harm to the Jewish people by undergirding anti-Jewish religious prejudice. Anti-Judaism is not the same as the ethnic hatred of anti-Semitism, but the former has historically contributed to the latter. Christian intactivist writings usually fail to contextualize, explicate, and analyze the thousands of years of Christian teachings against circumcision. Rather, they simply and uncritically reiterate the gist of these teachings, usually in the process of turning to the Bible as a resource against circumcision. For example, the “Christian Parents and the Circumcision Issue” pamphlet tells the story of circumcision in the Bible in the following manner:

Circumcision, as defined in the Old Testament (Genesis 17), was a symbolic act by which a Jewish male was entered into a covenant with God. It required the participants in this covenant to accept and obediently follow sanctions and strict commandments. Circumcision became the “badge of membership” within the covenant community. It became the distinguishing mark of being a Jewish male. The picture changes in the New Testament. The covenant with God for Christians is through acceptance and belief in the redeeming grace of Jesus Christ. By this New Testament covenant, Christians are enjoined not to submit to circumcision. Christian families are not bound to God through the mark of circumcision. As defined by the Apostle Paul, circumcision could be interpreted as contrary to the Christian faith and teachings. Although Paul speaks only with regard to religious ritual circumcision, it is uncanny how his [sic] statements in Titus 1:10-11 [*“there are also many rebellious people, idle talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision; they must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for sordid gain what it is not right to teach”*] define the situation today. Circumcision was not simply viewed as a sign of the covenant community, but was viewed as a sign of separation. It was the *sine qua non* of being a Son of Abraham, in distinction to being a Christian.<sup>39</sup>

In this short narrative, the author rehearses many traditional Christian arguments against Jewish circumcision throughout history: the covenant is only for males and excludes women; Judaism's God is strict and punishing; circumcision is a prideful badge; Judaism is separatist rather than universal; Jesus brought a “new covenant” that changed the way the people of God are to relate with God; and the followers of Jesus were a monolithic group of believers that could be called “Christian” and were distinct from Jews.

This pamphlet maintains that Paul was against ritual circumcision for all Christians, whereas biblical scholars have pointed out that Paul was not against circumcision for Jewish Christians, only for gentile Christians. In turning to the Bible, existing Christian intactivist discourses deploy arguments and interpretations that are problematic from the perspective of modern biblical scholarship. They quote from New Testament texts such as the genuine and disputed letters of St. Paul, as well as the Acts of the Apostles, to say that the first Christians (inspired by the Holy Spirit) abolished circumcision for the people of God. Reading Paul's letters through the eyes of traditional Christian theology that privileges "faith" over "law," they quote the Bible to say that Christians must not be circumcised or they will be spiritually inferior. But Paul and the early church leaders portrayed in Luke-Acts did not universally oppose circumcision as a destructive physical practice or a categorically false religious ritual. When Paul prohibited circumcision for gentiles in the Christian movement, it was for political and ethnic, rather than spiritual and ethical, reasons. In contrast to Christian intactivist interpretation, Luke does not just allow circumcision for Jews, he emphasizes its continued importance, even mandates its continuation.<sup>40</sup> In addition to being inaccurate, Christian intactivist use of the Bible can be strikingly selective. For example, Christians for Wholeness, whose website is called Acts 15, present writings, which do not mention that in Acts 16, Paul circumcises Timothy, a fellow Christian, with his own hands!

Conservative Christian intactivist groups tend to appeal to the Bible as God's ultimate and superior word for everybody, including Jews. But they are also trying to specifically inspire their fellow Christians to forgo and oppose infant circumcision, by striking at the heart of its religious appeal for Christians: that it appears in the Bible. However, when Christian intactivists say to other Christians, "You are a Christian and your religion says you are not allowed to circumcise," they misquote Paul, who said gentiles didn't *need* to be circumcised, and that he preferred for them not to for ethnic reasons. They also erase the existence of those early Christians who circumcised because they were ethnic Jews, which was totally religiously acceptable according to Paul. It would be more accurate to say to Christians, "You are not ethnic Jews so you don't need to be circumcised." But intactivist Christians insist on quoting the Bible's ethnic politics to make a *religious* argument, and unfortunately one that says that Christians are disconnected from and better than Jews. Rather than saying, "Persons of all faiths and none should not circumcise out of care for their sons," the Christian intactivist message for other Christians says to Jewish onlookers, "You don't need to be circumcised because circumcision expresses a covenant with God that was replaced by us; you and your babies will be saved by becoming like us."

As you can see, Christian intactivist New Testament interpretation leads right back into the highly suspect and historically damaging traditional Christian theological claims about circumcision. For example, an intactivist woman named Sophia, who summarizes the arguments against circumcision she has found in various religions, summarizes the so-called "contemporary" Christian argument with the following bullet-points on her website:

- “Christianity split off from Judaism because its followers did not see any value in the Old Testament requirement.
- Ironically, some Christians mistakenly believe circumcision is still required.
- Circumcision is against the Christian religion.
- Jesus was the last blood sacrifice.
- Jesus came to free the people of the Old Testament and welcome them into the New Testament.”<sup>41</sup>

Likewise, an essay called “Circumcision and the Christian Parent” states that “Jesus Christ is the New Covenant, rendering all of the Old Testament practices, including the Abrahamic covenant of circumcision, null and void.”<sup>42</sup> No clarification is made if the dismissive phrase “null and void” applies only to gentile Christians, or to everyone, including Jews today who cherish Old Testament *Torah*.

Christian intactivists argue against the God-given aspect of circumcision in the Old Testament by saying it is part of the “old covenant” which is abolished. Rather than considering whether some practices in the Bible could be pre-existing anthropological practices given divine sanction by the text, Christian intactivists prefer to argue that God changed His mind about circumcision at the expense of His formerly covenanted people, the Jews. Other Christian intactivists have extended this line of Christian supersessionism right back into the same tortured theological debates about Jesus and circumcision that developed in late Antiquity. Conservative Christian intactivists seek to answer that old question, what about Jesus himself being a circumcised Jew? Instead of exploring how circumcision was an important marker for Jesus’s family of his Jewish cultural identity under Roman rule, at a time when the health and human rights impacts were simply not understood, Christian intactivists prefer to speculate that Jesus stood apart from his culture. They claim that Jesus must have protested his own circumcision, and according to a Facebook group called Christians Against Circumcision, he was actually the first “Christian” intactivist!<sup>43</sup>

The Christian-friendly intactivist Dr. Momma website sells t-shirts in its Christian section that proclaim an apparently innocuous religious preference: “BAPTISM not circumcision.”<sup>44</sup> However, as we have seen, this was an ancient slogan in the Christian quest to prove Christianity separate from and superior to Judaism. Some Christian intactivists rehearse traditional Christian anti-circumcision polemics much more offensively, extending them to their logical anti-Jewish conclusions so prevalent in the Middle Ages. Laura Jezek, who studied at the nondenominational and unaccredited Trinity College of the Bible and Theological Seminary, writes in an online essay: And what about those Jews who continue to cling to the Old Covenant and the shedding of their sons' blood? Are these the heroes, the people of God? Are these the ones who should be sympathized with and honored? Not by any means. Only the Messianic Jews who recognize the Savior as the Way and the Truth and the Life are God's people. Those who continue to sacrifice the flesh of their baby boys as part of the Old Covenant do so in rejection of Christ and His atoning sacrifice. These lost souls are still waiting for their messiah and thus they continue in the Old way, the bloody way, the way that Christ came to end forever. These people who have been given the prophecies of Christ,

reject Him and His work on the Cross. They are enemies of God (as are all unbelievers of every race). But the Good News is that there are Christian Jews everywhere. More and more Jewish people come to know Jesus everyday and they are raising little Christians under the New Covenant who are spared the burden of Old Covenant circumcision. These are the Jews that God honors; and their children's God-created anatomy is intact! As more and more people of all races come to Christ, there will be less and less infant circumcision, for the things that are abhorrent to God (namely the shedding of innocent blood, Prov. 6:17, Is. 59:7, Deut. 19:10, etc.) will become obsolete. In the end, only the enemies of God, and those who disobey God, will practice this modern foreskin amputation. This group will undoubtedly have some Jews and some Gentiles in it, as well as a whole lot of Muslims, Hindus, African animists, and other pagan tribes and cultures. Our allegiance is to God and not his enemies. Let us find glory in letting our bodies bear testimony of our obedience to God and the commandments of the New Covenant in Christ.<sup>45</sup>

Jezek's writing makes palpable the violent religious supremacy that was quietly present in formerly official Christian teachings about the "old" and "new" covenants.

An online essay by another Christian intactivist author, Van Lewis, takes a different but equally sensational approach:

Jesus was crucified and killed by the mistaken, fearful, circumcising, sick and sickening, sexually mutilating religious culture of the Jews of the day. Judaism, I believe, is fundamentally about justice, mercy, and walking humbly with God, not about unjustly, unmercifully, arrogantly chopping up babies' penises, sexually butchering and mutilating men for life. I believe that Judaism is changing, too, now, going back at last to its fundamental foundations: Justice, Mercy, and Humility in the presence of a loving and merciful God. If God does not want us chopping up our babies' sex organs, did Jesus know it 2000 years ago? For Christians, the answer is obvious: Jesus knew it from before the beginning of the world. Would such knowledge of God have gotten Jesus into serious trouble with the proud and arrogant Jewish religious authorities of the day? For intactivists, the answer is obvious: Everyone who tries to keep parents from sexually abusing their children gets themselves into serious trouble with the sexually abusing parents. If the parents claim "God" as their co-abuser, and believe their claim, criticism of the abuse can be deadly for the critic.<sup>46</sup>

Lewis's argument follows the same structure as a common misinterpretation of Pauline rhetoric about the true Israel/Israel of the spirit, versus the false Israel/Israel of the flesh (such as the statement in Romans 9 that not all Israel is Israel). Lewis uses this logic to accuse Jewish people who circumcise as being false Jews, which makes his raising up of Jewish intactivists as true Jews (and therefore honorary Christians?) problematic. He also repeats the classic Christian fear of circumcising Jews as violent people who killed Christ (and Christians?), which led to the blood libel that spurred murderous persecution of Jewish people in medieval and Renaissance Europe.

Likewise, a pamphlet called “Catholic Teachings on Circumcision,” produced by Catholics Against Circumcision and distributed by many intactivist groups, states proudly:

The Council of Vienna (1311) decreed that Christians should not be lured into Judaism or be circumcised for any reason. The following century, the Council of Florence ordered “all who glory in the name of Christian not to practice circumcision either before or after baptism, since whether or not they place their hope in it, it cannot possibly be observed without loss of eternal salvation.”<sup>47</sup>

In other words, the idea is that Jews are going to hell. Religious supremacy by a culturally dominant group is profoundly immoral because it contradicts the divine commandment to love one’s neighbor, and because it can lead to great violence. It is also strategically ineffective and counterproductive to the success of the intactivist movement.

Unfortunately, many secular intactivist websites host and recommend Christian intactivist writings that use explicitly anti-Jewish arguments, and even label them as a “nonviolent” approach to circumcision.<sup>48</sup> Nonviolence means more than doing no harm to people’s bodies; it also requires the realization of social justice. It is irresponsible for a third party to make use of divisive conflicts between Christians and Jews, in the hope of reaching Christian parents and drawing Christians into the movement. It is also an ineffective way of persuading, motivating, or recruiting progressive Christians, who tend to recoil from literal, unscholarly uses of the Bible and language that denigrates other faiths.

Without explicitly embracing the value of Judaism, and also insisting that the multi-faceted covenantal relationship between God and the Jewish people remains intact and ongoing, Christian intactivists cannot express the fear, disgust, and horror of forced genital surgery that is justified in the campaign to end circumcision, without coming across as Christians who are still afraid of and disgusted by Jews. When Christian intactivist writings quote sensationalist New Testament rhetoric out of context, such as Philippians 3:2 (“Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh!”), as the Catholics Against Circumcision pamphlet does, it is no wonder that Jewish commentators like Silverman conclude, “The vituperation cast at Judaism by critics of medical, non-therapeutic circumcision [who use Christian discourse] often speaks to far more than a medical procedure. It suggests an enduring hatred and fear of the Jew.”<sup>49</sup> Secular opponents of circumcision do not necessarily hold anti-Jewish beliefs, but when they link to Christian intactivist sites or make passing use of Christian cultural references, their critiques of Jewish circumcision are more easily read as critiques of Judaism. Again, when people who uphold circumcision can attribute their opponents’ motivations to prejudice or other social tensions, they can more easily deny the evidence of harm caused by circumcision.

In sum, by repeating the faulty critiques of the past, existent Christian intactivist discourse contributes to the dynamics that hold the practice in place in the present.

Christian intactivists' dedicated attempts to create social change in the practice of circumcision would benefit from additional strategies for critiquing circumcision from a theo-ethical perspective. With the postcolonial and human rights frameworks that are available to Christian ethicists for the first time at this point in history, progressive Christians are well situated to contribute additional discourses about circumcision. They should begin, of course, by building on the best ethical arguments present in existing Christian and secular intactivist discourses.

Besides their questionable biblical and theological lines of reasoning, conservative Christian intactivists do a great job of appealing to parents' consciences. To do so, they use ethical reasoning from both secular and religious philosophies, which progressive Christian intactivists could also embrace. Like all intactivists, Christian intactivist sites share scientific information about the harms and disputed benefits of circumcision and the important functions of the foreskin. They explain concepts in medical ethics such as consent and necessity, referring to what medical associations have themselves said about circumcision. They also draw on related official church teachings in medical ethics and logically extend them to apply to circumcision. For example, the catechism of the Catholic Church states, "Except when performed for strictly therapeutic medical reasons, directly intended amputations, mutilations and sterilizations performed on innocent persons are against moral law" (No. 2297). These well-reasoned, broadly applicable critiques are more effective than quoting Paul's negative statements about gentile circumcision as though they were logically and textually God's word against all circumcision.

Existing Christian intactivist discourse also seeks to persuade using basic moral principles of gentleness and compassion, rightly claiming these as Christian virtues. A pamphlet aimed at Christian parents, originally published in a southern Christian parenting magazine and distributed by many intactivist groups, urges the reader to fully evaluate any medical decision for their son "in light of your Christian obligation to love, protect, and nurture him. ... As Christians we are called upon to love, protect, and nurture our children."<sup>50</sup> This notion of Christian *filial* love may be incomplete, as it focuses on self and family rather than neighbors and strangers, but it is still valid, especially in light of the lack of productive and beneficial love experienced by many children. I could imagine building on this positive start to make the theological argument that Christian *agapic* love means sacrificing one's parental desire to determine the image of one's child, in favor of that other person's needs and unique existence. Another article addressed to Christian parents urges them to extend the Pauline "the fruits of the Spirit" (peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control) to the way they treat their children, as a matter of public witness: "Christians must always remember that when we present ourselves to the world by our actions and attitudes, we are showing them Jesus, and of course, Jesus never hurt a child in any way. ... If our Christian ideals of love, gentleness, peace, and following the Golden Rule cannot begin with our own children, how relevant can they be to the rest of the world?"<sup>51</sup>

A final compelling moral argument in these writings to Christian parents is that Christians should consider the possibility of resisting mainstream "customs" of the

dominant “American” culture, as “conformity is not a Christian value.”<sup>52</sup> Likewise, they rightly warn Christians against following medical doctrine and hospital rituals in an idolatrous fashion, giving doctors the trust and authority that belongs to God alone.<sup>53</sup> This is one area where all Christian intactivists could unite. Conservative Christian intactivists embrace the Pauline gentile Christian identity that has no need of religious, ritual circumcision, enabling them to boldly call upon American Christians to forgo circumcision. Progressive Christians, recognizing ourselves to be ethnically gentile inheritors of a Jewish religious movement, could embrace this call as well—no circumcision for ourselves, because it’s not historically part of our identity. Together, Christian intactivists of different stripes could draw on Paul’s revolutionary spirit to harangue our fellow American Christians to renounce and recover from their cooperation with the contemporary idols of American aesthetics and identity, especially those that promote forced, non-therapeutic medical circumcision.

But progressive Christian intactivists may also wish to incorporate another aspect of Pauline gentile Christian identity, which explicitly considers our religious interdependence with Jews: God’s call for ancient gentiles, who were not circumcised, to unite in loving, subversive horizontal solidarity with ethnic Jews, who were. According to some recent interdisciplinary readings of Paul’s letters, this inter-ethnic, circumcised-uncircumcised solidarity was the key genius of the Jesus movement under Roman imperial logics of divide and conquer.<sup>54</sup> Progressive Christian intactivists, in seriously examining the historical and cultural meanings of Jewish circumcision, are likely to be drawn away from an unbiblical vision of non-ethnic Christian universalism. They are likely to embrace the value of ethnic and cultural particularities, such as those symbolized by circumcision, while not embracing circumcision itself. They may reject the universalizing and homogenizing notion of Christian identity that propped up the problematic Christian argument of uncircumcised-sameness for all. They may rediscover their spiritual siblinghood with Judaism. To live up to Paul’s ideal notion of gentile Christian identity, in heartfelt solidarity with people who are oppressed under empire, would therefore be a costly process of renouncing Christian privilege, proprietary theology, religious supremacy, and the imperial legacy of Christian civilization.

Progressive Christian intactivists will face the challenge, because of their ethics around multiculturalism, to express a robust rhetorical intactivism without being forced into the position of criticizing Jewish practices from their dominant, outsider position. Critiquing a culture from the outside is different from, and may be incompatible or detrimental to, the efforts of those making changes on the inside. Progressive Christians could support Jewish intactivists’ reworking of their tradition from within, by supporting their leadership as allies. This approach would draw on a deeper respect and sense of partnership with Judaism than seems to exist within gentile (non-Jewish) intactivism, both Christian and secular.<sup>55</sup> The reward would be renewed bridge-building between Christian and Jewish intactivists, as well as the hope that comes from the way living religious traditions grow and change, through dialogue with one another and with the God who is still speaking. Progressive Christian intactivism would therefore part ways with conservative Christian intactivism, by refusing to deploy traditional Christian theological resources against

circumcision due to their basis in anti-Judaism. Rather, they will actively repudiate Christian superiority toward other faiths and uproot anti-Judaism in our theology and biblical interpretation. For example, progressive Christian intactivist discourse would avoid Christian allegorizing, which values symbolic meanings more than the physical and social significance of practices. Instead, we would challenge dualistic Christian rhetoric that has its roots in anti-Judaism, for example the dichotomies between faith and law, spirit and flesh, “new” covenant and “old.” We will recognize that the ancient and ongoing covenant between God and the Jewish people has had many expressions and symbols, not just circumcision, and rejecting circumcision should never be tied in with rejecting this still-valid and irreplaceable sacred covenant.

Progressive Christian intactivism would not merely refrain from enhancing the salience of Jewish circumcision through anti-Judaic discourse. It would focus social change efforts within, to self-reflectively criticize secular, non-therapeutic medical circumcision and Christian contributions to it. Progressive Christian intactivism would confront Christian theology and doctrines that indirectly contribute to circumcision's perpetuation of a culture of violence and victimization, for example theologies of atonement that valorize the crucifixion of Jesus as a just vicarious punishment of humans and a saving action. Progressive Christian intactivism would also have to reconsider the religious rituals that Christianity *has* embraced. For example, what does infant baptism, chosen by parents for non-consenting children, say about the spiritual and intellectual autonomy of children, their intrinsic value as individuals, and their freedom to negotiate their identities? This strategy of inward-looking critique would be at home in progressive Christianity, with its embrace of changing traditions, diverse theologies, and multiple interpretations of Scripture.

Obviously, projects of interfaith equality and the evolution of traditions are more at home in progressive than conservative Christian circles. If more progressive Christians were to develop an intactivist perspective, they would bring new resources to the intactivist table, supplementing those brought by existent Christian intactivist discourses. For example, they could draw on the liberative wisdom resources developed in the margins of Christianity, lifting these up in order to persuade additional progressive Christians about intactivism. For example, sex-positive and body-positive Christian teachings from the field of body theology are resources for helping progressive Christians affirm the goodness of sexuality. Progressive denominations often hold a positive vision of human nature (a theological anthropology) that emphasizes the goodness of all people as God-created beings, including our sexualities and bodies, rather than the traditional conservative Christian belief that humans are fallen and need to be corrected or controlled. Belief in the dignity and worth of every person is a good theological reason to oppose circumcision, out of care for every male infant. This could go a long way in healing the religious authoritarianism that underlies practices like circumcision. Additionally, explicitly sex-positive theologies can help progressive Christians become people who broadly affirm sexual pleasure from a spiritual point of view. Such people would be receptive to intactivist arguments about the value of the foreskin's pleasurable sexual functions and the healthfulness of male children touching their genitals. Also,

faithful sex-positive discourse could help heal the discomfort talking about sexual subjects like circumcision that exists in most church settings.

Likewise, Christian teachings from the fields of queer and feminist theologies would insist on genital autonomy and bodily self-determination for people of all ages and genders. Christians who are formed in this analysis would be able to limit their ethical support for genital surgery only to those forms of body modification (bodily marks of religion/culture/ethnic identity/gender identity/aesthetics) that are freely chosen by consenting adults. Conservative Christian intactivists do a great job of helping pro-life (anti-abortion) Christians see parallels with the circumcision issue. We also need pro-choice Christian intactivists, who can help feminist Christians of all genders see how circumcision connects with principles of bodily autonomy and personal reproductive choice. Christians coming from feminist and LGBT perspectives are also sensitive to the dangers of separating the private from the public and idolizing decisions made in the nuclear family. They might be open to the Christian intactivist argument that personal abandonment of circumcision practice is not enough, and collective advocacy statements from churches are needed. There also are opportunities to tie circumcision in with other social issues that progressive Christian communities sometimes focus on, such as countering domestic abuse of women and children, making churches safe for children by protecting them from sexual abuse, and exploring lifestyles of principled nonviolence, where Christ-based pacifism is integrated into all relationships.

Ethical arguments and anti-circumcision efforts that are explicitly grounded in contemporary theologies and progressive Christian politics would comprise an effective, distinctively progressive Christian contribution to the intactivist cause. These strategies could reach moderate and progressive American Christians that conservative Christian intactivist groups can't reach because of differing theological attitudes. A shared, ecumenical theo-ethical mission of putting circumcision on the agenda of Christian parents and churches, would be jointly served by a diversity of Christian intactivists, using diverse Christian theological resources, reaching out to the incredibly diverse churches of the United States. We therefore need progressive Christian intactivists to add their own unique ethical reasoning about circumcision, and add to the multiplicity of intactivist communities and cultures working to end circumcision. Unfortunately, progressive Christians lag behind conservative Christians in taking up the mantle of responsibility for ending circumcision through their own particular and original contributions. My goal has been to clear space for a newcomer intactivist subculture to find its voice, and then develop this voice through mutual critique in the diverse intactivist movement.

## References

<sup>1</sup> Muslim intactivism does exist, and an exploration of Christian and American historical and contemporary discursive participation in Islamic circumcision would be a worthy future project.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew A. Taylor, personal communication, April 8, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> The contemporary circumcision procedure, in both secular medical and Jewish ritual settings, is a lengthy and highly invasive procedure that is widely acknowledged to cause pain and shock to the infant, even in instances when local anesthesia is used. Rather than a simple snip of skin, it involves peeling, crushing, and cutting highly sensitive flesh. Serious medical complications continue to arise in a small number of cases in the United States every year. While the amputation of healthy tissue is not inherently bad, the fact that it is done to people who cannot give consent, and that its preventative health benefits (including the current focus on HIV) are disputed, raises cause for concern. In addition, the non-diseased flesh being amputated, the foreskin, has significant sexual functions, including protection of the glans, lubrication and elasticity, and the provision of a great proportion of the nerve endings that exist in an intact penis.

<sup>4</sup> The exception being Messianic Jews, an evangelical Christian movement that aims to follow Torah. However, Bigelow estimates that most circumcisions performed in America for religious reasons are actually in evangelical Christian families. I suppose that is because Jewish and Muslim populations in the US are smaller even than the minority of Christians who circumcise for religious reasons (as opposed to the large number who are Christian and circumcise for secular reasons). Jim D. Bigelow, "Evangelical Christianity and Its Relationship to Infant Male Circumcision," in *Male and Female Circumcision: Medical, Legal, and Ethical Considerations in Pediatric Practice*, edited by Denniston, George C., Frederick Mansfield Hodges, and Marilyn Fayre Milos, 173-178 (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 1999), 173.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew Thiessen (Mennonite), Jennifer Wright Knust (American Baptist), and Nina Livesey (Lutheran). The works I am referring to are Matthew Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion: Genealogy, Circumcision, and Identity in Ancient Judaism and Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Jennifer Wright Knust, "Circumcision, Semen, and the Products of a Woman's Womb," in *Unprotected Texts: the Bible's Surprising Contradictions About Sex and Desire* (New York: HarperOne, 2011); and Nina E. Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Historical accounts of circumcision by Jewish scholars include Shaye J. D. Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised? Gender and Covenant in Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Leonard B. Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh: Circumcision from Ancient Judea to Modern America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Lawrence A. Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood: Circumcision and Gender in Rabbinic Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Elizabeth Wyner Mark, ed, *The Covenant of Circumcision: New Perspectives on an Ancient Jewish Rite* (Hanover, N.H.: Brandeis University Press, published by University Press of New England, 2003); and Eric Kline Silverman, *From Abraham to America: a History of Jewish Circumcision* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> These groups include Christians for Wholeness (Acts 15, an Outreach of Galatians 5), Christians Against Circumcision, the Whole Christian Network, Christians Must Not Circumcise, and Catholics Against Circumcision, all of which seem to be mainly based on the web and Facebook. They also link to individual blog postings on circumcision by other Christian bloggers.

<sup>8</sup> At the time the Galatians received their letter from Paul, adult proselyte circumcision was apparently an active controversy there, with competing missionaries or assembly

leaders (possibly themselves gentiles) encouraging<sup>18</sup> the gentiles of the sect to become circumcised. Galatians is likely one of the earliest Pauline letters, and in it Paul refers to an earlier controversy about circumcision that had taken place between him and Peter.

<sup>9</sup> There are many interpretations and arguments about Paul's intent regarding circumcision in Galatians and Romans. Recent work includes Davina Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered: Reimagining Paul's Mission* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008); Caroline Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in the Letters of Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Susan Elliot, *Cutting Too Close for Comfort: Paul's Letter to the Galatians In Its Anatolian Cultic Context* (Sheffield Academic Press, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> In his letter to the Romans, Paul wrote, "Circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law; but if you break the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. So, if those who are uncircumcised keep the requirements of the law, will not their uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then those who are physically uncircumcised but keep the law will condemn you that have the written code and circumcision but break the law. For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God. Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much, in every way. For in the first place the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God." (Romans 2:25-3:2)

<sup>11</sup> In his letter to the Philippians, Paul wrote, "I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh—circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ." (Philippians 3:3-7)

<sup>12</sup> In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote, "Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing; but obeying the commandments of God is everything. Let each of you remain in the condition in which you were called." (1 Corinthians 7:18-20)

<sup>13</sup> This last is not attested to by Paul himself, but rather is an act attributed to Paul in the later text Luke-Acts (Acts 16:3).

<sup>14</sup> "The new perspective on Paul" and the "radical" or "post" new perspective on Paul's views on Torah and circumcision, while surprising to many Christians, are well-established in progressive bible scholarship. A key difference between these perspectives is that the first replaces so-called Jewish legalism with Jewish ethnic particularism/boundedness in its conceptualization of Paul's enemy, but the new scholarship say that Paul was okay with ethnic (including circumcised) Judaism. For a helpful overview, see Magnus Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul: A Student's Guide to Recent Scholarship* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009). Zetterholm compares the foundational work of E.P. Sanders, James D.G. Dunn, and N.T. Wright, with the more radical works of Gaston, Tomson, Stowers, Nanos, Johnson Hodge, Elliot, Ehrensperger, and Lopez. Two other post-NPP scholars include John Gager, *Reinventing Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); and Douglas A. Campbell,

*The Quest for Paul's Gospel: A Suggested Strategy* (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2005). See also the chapter on Paul and Judaism by Pamela Eisenbaum in *Studying Paul's Letters: Contemporary Perspectives and Methods*, edited by Joseph Marchal, 135-154 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> See especially the prophetic writings known as Isaiah. A pioneer of this approach to Paul was New Testament scholar and bishop Krister Stendahl. Jewish scholar Mark D. Nanos agrees with Stendahl and sees Paul as a theologically orthodox Jew. Nanos says that it was actually those gentiles and Jews who thought that gentiles should be circumcised in the end times, who were departing from Jewish tradition. Mark D. Nanos, "Paul and Judaism," in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Z. Brettler, 551-553, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Matthew Thiessen, on the other hand, controversially argues that while adult proselyte (convert) circumcision was practiced in Judaism by the first century CE, it is not in Torah and may have been controversial to some Jews of the time, possibly including Paul. See Matthew Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion: Genealogy, Circumcision, and Identity in Ancient Judaism and Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Whether or not this was part of Paul's multifaceted campaign against the circumcision of converts, so central to his school of thought, what matters is that he never explicitly opposes circumcision by ethnic Jews in his letters.

<sup>16</sup> For detailed discussions of these Patristic writings, see Andrew S. Jacobs, *Christ Circumcised*.

<sup>17</sup> Origen, *On First Principles*, IV, 3, 3, p. 293, quoted in Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>18</sup> Ancient Greeks and Romans did not circumcise and felt very averse to the physical practice. They also viewed it as a significant and stereotypical marker of Jewish identity, and looked down on the Jewish people for it. In 167 BCE, the Greek Syrian King Antiochus IV Epiphanes suppressed the practice of circumcision in Jerusalem, partially sparking the Maccabean revolt (1 Macc 1:48-60). According to the historian Josephus, the Maccabees and the resulting independent regime, the Hasmonean family, forcibly mandated circumcision. The Jewish writing *First Maccabees* also portrays Jewish mothers resisting the former ban on circumcision to the point of death. Roman rule of Judea began in 63 BCE, and repression of circumcision continued to occur on occasion, hand-in-hand with oppression of the Jewish people. Several leaders in the Roman Empire legislated against circumcision of non-Jews, linking it to castration, which was illegal. For example, the emperor Hadrian's ban on circumcision was one of the factors leading up to the Jewish Bar Kokhba revolt in the second century CE.

<sup>19</sup> Andrew S. Jacobs, *Christ Circumcised: A Study in Early Christian History and Difference* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

<sup>20</sup> See Jeremiah 4:4 (heart) and 6:10 (uncircumcised ears) and Ezekiel 44:6-9, as well as Exodus 6:30 (uncircumcised lips), and Deuteronomy 10:16 and 30:6.

<sup>21</sup> Graham Ward, "On the Politics of Embodiment and the Mystery of All Flesh," in *The Sexual Theologian: Essays on Sex, God, and Politics*, edited by Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood (New York, London: T&T Clark, 2004), 78.

<sup>22</sup> This type of theology is also called "supersessionism," and a number of Christian denominations have begun to try to move away from it, for example the Roman Catholic

Church, which declared in the 1960s during the second Vatican council that the “old covenant” still holds. Centuries later, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther and others continued this kind of theological anti-Judaism, also bringing circumcision up in their discussions of Jewish inferiority. Aquinas wrote that Jesus's circumcision took “away from the Jews an excuse for not receiving Him” (*Summa Theologica*, 3, Question 37). Luther, in an essay called “On the Jews and Their Lies,” wrote: “[The Jews] brazenly strut before God, lie and boast about being God's only people by reason of their physical circumcision, unmindful of the circumcision of the heart. ... Subsequently, after they have scourged, crucified, spat upon, blasphemed, and cursed God in his word, as Isaiah 8 prophesies, they pretentiously trot out their circumcision and other vain, blasphemous, invented, and meaningless works” (1543).

<sup>23</sup> Andrew S. Jacobs, *Christ Circumcised*.

<sup>24</sup> Henry Abramson and Carrie Hannon, “Depicting the Ambiguous Wound: Circumcision in Medieval Art,” in *The Covenant of Circumcision: New Perspectives on an Ancient Jewish Rite*, edited by Elizabeth Wyner Mark (Hanover, N.H.: Brandeis University Press, published by University Press of New England, 2003).

<sup>25</sup> Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Graham Ward, “On the Politics of Embodiment and the Mystery of All Flesh,” in *The Sexual Theologian: Essays on Sex, God, and Politics*, edited by Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood (New York, London: T&T Clark, 2004); and Kwok Pui-Lan, “Touching the Taboo: On the Sexuality of Jesus,” in *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, edited by Marvin M. Ellison and Kelly Brown Douglas, 119-34, 2nd ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> Michael S. Kimmel, *The Gender of Desire: Essays on Male Sexuality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005) and *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Two excellent histories of this era include Robert Darby, *A Surgical Temptation: The Demonization of the Foreskin and the Rise of Circumcision in Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); and David Gollaher, *Circumcision: a History of the World's Most Controversial Surgery* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

<sup>27</sup> Nina E. Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 146-149.

<sup>28</sup> Edward Kessler, *Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Encounter* (London: SCM Press, 2013), 178.

<sup>29</sup> Jim D. Bigelow, “Evangelical Christianity and Its Relationship to Infant Male Circumcision,” in *Male and Female Circumcision: Medical, Legal, and Ethical Considerations in Pediatric Practice*, edited by Denniston, George C., Frederick Mansfield Hodges, and Marilyn Fayre Milos, 173-178 (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 1999), 174-175.

<sup>30</sup> This stands in stark contrast to the plethora of resolutions passed on numerous other issues relating to sexuality. These topics and their corresponding statements from many different denominations can be searched on the Religious Institute website. <[www.religiousinstitute.org](http://www.religiousinstitute.org)>

<sup>31</sup> For example, two Christian theologians have written positively about Jewish circumcision in their ethically and politically informed theologies about the sexuality of

Jesus: Kwok Pui Lan and Graham Ward. See Graham Ward, "On the Politics of Embodiment and the Mystery of All Flesh," in *The Sexual Theologian: Essays on Sex, God, and Politics*, edited by Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood (New York, London: T&T Clark, 2004); and Kwok Pui-Lan, "Touching the Taboo: On the Sexuality of Jesus," in *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, edited by Marvin M. Ellison and Kelly Brown Douglas, 119-34, 2nd ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).

<sup>32</sup> See for example, Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza quoted in Luise Schottroff, "Law Free Gentile Christianity—What About the Women? Feminist Analysis and Alternatives," in *A Feminist Companion to Paul*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2004); Tatha Wiley, *Paul and the Gentile Women: Reframing Galatians* (New York: Continuum, 2005); and Joseph Marchal, "Bodies Bound for Circumcision and Baptism: An Intersex Critique and the Interpretation of Galatians," *Theology & Sexuality* 16.2 (2010): 163-182.

<sup>33</sup> Jewish writings on circumcision are more likely to discuss circumcision as a physical practice on infants, perhaps because they are more accustomed to examining circumcision in light of the ethical tradition of Judaism. Even Jewish scholarship which focuses on the historical or social effects of circumcision rather than circumcision itself will often pause to consider the effects on the person.

<sup>34</sup> See Thomas Bohache, "To Cut or Not to Cut: Is Compulsory Heterosexuality a Prerequisite for Christianity?" in *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible*, edited by Mona West and Robert E. Goss (Pilgrim Press, 2000), 235; Patrick S. Cheng, "Galatians," in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, 624-29, edited by Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache (London: SCM Press, 2006); Karen Hernández-Granzen, "Multiculturalism or Cultural Circumcision?" in *Renewing the Vision* (Louisville, Ky: Geneva Press, 2000), 201-211; and Athena Gorospe, *Narrative and Identity: an Ethical Reading of Exodus 4* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2007).

<sup>35</sup> See Kathleen Biddick, *The Typological Imaginary: Circumcision, Technology, History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); Hugh S. Pyper, "Fleshing Out the Text," in *Sanctified Aggression: Legacies of Biblical and Post-biblical Vocabularies of Violence*, edited by Jonekke Bekkenkamp and Yvonne Sherwood, 44-59 (London: T&T Clark International, 2003); and Marcella Althaus-Reid, "Mutilations and Restorations," in *Controversies in Body Theology*, edited by Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood (London: SCM Press, 2008).

<sup>36</sup> For example, Hugh S. Pyper, "Fleshing Out the Text," in *Sanctified Aggression: Legacies of Biblical and Post-biblical Vocabularies of Violence*, edited by Jonekke Bekkenkamp and Yvonne Sherwood, 44-59, London: T&T Clark International, 2003.

<sup>37</sup> Bohache and Cheng both interpret Paul's rejection of Gentile circumcision as a repudiation of legalistic requirements for people of faith. However, according to the New Perspective on Paul, the teaching for gentiles not to become circumcised was not a breaking of Jewish law.

<sup>38</sup> I found only one Christian intactivist site that claims to be ecumenical; Christians for Wholeness writes, "The *Acts 15* website is produced by an informal network of Christians from all sides of the church. Our denominations, stories, and theological details vary widely, but our common concern is informing Christian parents about the realities of the circumcision decision. We include lay people and clergy; male and

female; Catholic & Protestant; Orthodox, fundamentalist, evangelical, and liberal; American, Canadian, and more!" However, neither this group nor any of the others I have found seem to have any visible members or representative writings from mainline Protestant denominations, progressive Anabaptist groups, or progressive Catholic groups in the United States. <http://acts15.net/>. Accessed December 17, 2013.

<sup>39</sup> James E. Peron, MS, EdD, "Christian Parents and the Circumcision Issue."

<sup>40</sup> Jacob Jervell, "The Circumcised Messiah," in *The Unknown Paul: Essays on Luke-Acts and Early Christian History*, 138-45, Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1984.

<sup>41</sup> <http://questioncircumcision.weebly.com/religion.html>. Accessed March 18, 2014.

<sup>42</sup> Rosemary Romberg, "Circumcision and the Christian Parent," in *Circumcision: The Painful Dilemma*, South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 1985.

[www.noharrrm.org/christianparent.htm](http://www.noharrrm.org/christianparent.htm). Accessed December 17, 2013.

<sup>43</sup> Christians Against Circumcision on Facebook claims in bold letters, "Jesus was an intactivist who spoke out against circumcision." It is hard to imagine how they think this is the case, when the gospels record one incidence of Jesus mentioning circumcision, and that in a neutral manner (John 7:23). Perhaps every word of the Bible is spoken by God/Jesus himself. Or perhaps they are referring to a verse from the book of Mormon (Moroni 8). <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Christians-Against-Circumcision-Jesus-Was-an-Intactivist/154559224605917>. Accessed December 17, 2013.

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.drmmomma.org/2009/06/information-on-circumcision-for.html>. Accessed March 18, 2014.

<sup>45</sup> Laura Jezek, "What the Bible Really Says about Routine Infant Circumcision," <http://www.stopcirc.com/christian.html>. Accessed December 17, 2013.

<sup>46</sup> Van Lewis, "Circumcision and Christianity: A Call to Christian Action," July 2000, [cirp.org/pages/cultural/lewis1](http://cirp.org/pages/cultural/lewis1). Accessed December 17, 2013.

<sup>47</sup> Dietzen, Fr. John, "The Morality of Circumcision," *Catholic News Service*, October 2004.

<sup>48</sup> These groups include the National Organization to Halt the Abuse and Routine Mutilation of Males (NOHARMM) and the Circumcision Information and Resource Project (CIRP). There is another prominent web-based intactivist group, Peaceful Parenting, that comes across as secular in most of the work on its three interconnected websites (DrMomma.org, IntactNetwork.org, and SavingSons.org), yet which seems to be run by a Christian mother and offers many explicitly Christian intactivist resources directed at Christian parents. For example, an anti-Judaic and even anti-Semitic essay written by a Christian is posted on the secular Circumcision Information and Resource Project website. Van Lewis, "Circumcision and Christianity: A Call to Christian Action," July 2000, [cirp.org/pages/cultural/lewis1](http://cirp.org/pages/cultural/lewis1). Accessed December 17, 2013.

<sup>49</sup> Eric Kline Silverman, *From Abraham to America*, 230. Silverman attributes male intactivist rage to a variety of social complaints about contemporary society and social change, not to circumcision harm itself.

<sup>50</sup> James E. Peron, MS, EdD, "Christian Parents and the Circumcision Issue," *Many Blessings*, vol. 3, Spring 2000.

<sup>51</sup> Rosemary Romberg. "Circumcision and the Christian Parent," in *Circumcision: The Painful Dilemma*, South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 1985.

[www.noharrrm.org/christianparent.htm](http://www.noharrrm.org/christianparent.htm). Accessed December 17, 2013.

<sup>52</sup> James E. Peron, MS, EdD, "Christian Parents and the Circumcision Issue."

<sup>53</sup> Rosemary Romberg, "Circumcision and the Christian Parent."

<sup>54</sup> My theological vision here is indebted to New Testament scholars Brigitte Kahl and Davina Lopez. See Brigitte Kahl, *Galatians Re-imagined: Reading with the Eyes of the Vanquished* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010); and Davina Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered: Reimagining Paul's Mission* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).

<sup>55</sup> Eric Kline Silverman, *From Abraham to America*, 230-237.

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