

Biblical Notes — Philippians 3:3

"In response we note first of all that the apostle himself does not identify the church with Israel in this passage and context. On the contrary, he uses the term "Israel" only two verses later in the historical sense of the ethnic people; he identifies himself as being "of the people of Israel" (Php 3:5). There is no indication that this "Israel" is now an "old Israel" whose promises have somehow been transferred to a "new Israel." Beyond this, however, the strong metaphorical meaning of circumcision in both the Old and New Testaments coupled with the point of controversy between Paul and his foes in Philippi suggests that such a change in the meaning of "Israel" is in no way a necessary conclusion to this teaching on circumcision. Paul's purpose in Philippians 3 is clearly to rebuke those who were relying on physical circumcision in their relationship to God. Their confidence for righteousness was "in the flesh" (v. 3) as opposed to the true righteousness, "which is through faith in Christ" (v. 9). In opposing a confidence in bodily circumcision, Paul was building on the teaching of the Old Testament that called for a "spiritual circumcision" in the face of a similar reliance on the physical rite. Such a spiritual circumcision is usually said to be "of the heart" (cf. Lev 26:41; Dt 10:16; 30:6; Jer 9:25-26; Eze 44:7), but it could also be applied to the ears (Jer 6:10; cf. Ac 7:51) and lips (Ex 6:12, 30). Paul's antagonists at Philippi were much like the people addressed by the prophets. The issue was one of obtaining righteousness before God—in other words, salvation. Even under the Mosaic covenant, wherein physical circumcision was prescribed for Israel, it was not the physical rite, but the spiritual reality of humble submission to God in faith that effected justification—i.e., spiritual circumcision of the heart."

— Robert Saucy, *Israel and the Church: A Case for Discontinuity, in Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments* (Westchester: Crossway Books), 210-211.