In Search of Real Circumcision: Ritual Failure and Circumcision in Paul

Peter-Ben Smit
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam/Utrecht University, The Netherlands/
University of Pretoria, South Africa

Abstract
This article applies the theoretical framework of ‘ritual failure’, a sub-discipline of ritual criticism, to Paul’s discussion of circumcision in his letter to the Galatians, Philippians and Romans. It is argued that the application of this theoretical perspective clarifies the dynamics at stake and provides a new way of understanding the development in Paul’s position regarding circumcision. There is movement from an attitude of strong propagation, by way of indifference and a subsequent attitude of rejection, to one of modified reintegration into Paul’s thinking. At every turn of this development, ritual failure plays a pivotal role and functions as a catalyst for the development of Paul’s theology.

Keywords
Paul, circumcision, ritual criticism, Galatians, Philippians, Romans

1. Introduction
In this article, I discuss Paul’s remarks about the circumcision of the male fore-skin from the perspective of the study of ‘ritual failure’. This approach, which

1. That the issue of male circumcision is at stake automatically raises the question: Were men alone addressed in Paul’s discussion of circumcision? This seems unlikely, even if early Christian communities are conceptualized as being male dominated. The reason for this is that, in general, it is not circumcision as such which is at stake, but, as de Boer has argued for Gal. 5, the ‘possible adoption of the practice of circumcision … as a distinguishing mark of

Corresponding author:
Peter-Ben Smit, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, De Boelelaan 1105, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Email: p.b.a.smit@vu.nl
originates in the broader field of ritual studies and ritual criticism and which is slowly making an impact on the study of the New Testament, has not previously been used in relation to Paul’s statements about circumcision, even though these statements clearly discuss something – circumcision – that represents a flawed or deficient ritual for Paul. This article will argue that Paul does not so much abolish circumcision, as is often claimed, but argues for a different understanding of what constitutes real circumcision. This dynamic has its roots in early Judaism, which is yet another reason why the discussion of circumcision in Paul’s letters should be framed as an intra-Jewish debate. Paul is not advocating the abolition of circumcision, but arguing for a changed ritual praxis in the expression or establishment of individual and communal identity (e.g., Lieu 2004: 178-210). This identity continues to be carved into the flesh, albeit in a different way. As a result, the use of the language of ‘circumcision’ and ‘anti-circumcision’ parties in early Christianity should, as far as it concerns Paul’s letters and legacy, be more nuanced, and this also applies to the notion that Paul did not have much time for rituals. In developing this argument, I will first outline the theoretical framework to be adopted in this study, before turning to three core passages concerning Paul’s...

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2. See, e.g., Elliott 2003: 243, who draws attention to a discussion in Philo (Migr. Abr. 92-93) and to remarks by Josephus (Ant. 20.41-43), where the meaning of and adherence to circumcision are regarded as more important than actual physical circumcision. On the limited value of circumcision for eschatological salvation, see also Thorsteinsson 2003: 233-34.

3. See also Kahl 2010: 15-16 on the tendency to associate an emphasis on ‘foreskin, not circumcision’ with an anti-Jewish attitude.

4. With Kahl (2010: 79), one must underline the frequently overlooked importance of the body and of the inscription of identity in the body (even if it does not necessarily follow, as Kahl seems to argue [2010: 81], that a theologically focused reading of a text like Galatians is a misreading of it).

5. See, e.g., Kahl 2010: 226: Paul does advocate circumcision, but only a circumcision that is conceived along the lines as he understands it.

6. As rightly emphasized by Elliott (2003: 12-13), circumcision is the real issue (in Galatians, in her case). Emphasis on the non-ritual character of Paul’s faith and practice seems to stem, on the one hand, from post-Reformation polemics and, on the other hand, from classical modernity, in which rituals were considered to be of less value than concepts. Attention to the ‘real’, that is, material, physical ritual is in line with the ‘material turn’ in the study of religion; see, e.g., Meyer 2012.
understanding of circumcision (Gal. 5.1-15; Phil. 3.2-6; Rom. 2.25-29). As I have elsewhere argued for the appropriateness of using ritual approaches to the study of the New Testament, I will not dwell extensively on that subject here, but rather address, in a somewhat condensed fashion, the theory concerning ritual failure that is the key to my approach in this article.

2. Ritual Failure and Ritual Negotiation

Ritual failure refers to cases in which a ritual is imperfectly performed, giving rise to its evaluation and (re)negotiation in relation to a community’s developing identity (= ‘ritual negotiation’; see Hüsken and Neubert 2012). This is a fledgling field, whose approach to rituals, especially as understood in this article, is yet to be used by others in New Testament scholarship.

Rituals may fail for a number of reasons, all of which are related to the ‘grammar’ of the ritual, including expectations about its procedure, the persons and items involved, and the outcome of the ritual. A classification of ritual failure has been proposed by Ronald Grimes, who is widely regarded as one of the most influential theorists in the field of ritual studies. His proposed typology distinguishes between several kinds of failures that are not (mutually) exclusive; a ritual can be successful on one level for some people but is a failure on another level for others (e.g., a fertility ritual may fail to produce fertility, but it does.

7. See Smit 2013a. The fact that one is dealing with texts, not the rituals themselves, need not pose a problem; see Strecker’s outline of the six ways in which text and ritual are, or can be, connected (1999: 78-80). DeMaris (2008: 5-6) follows Strecker, rightly noting that whoever studies the world ‘behind’ the text of the New Testament has to deal with the analysis of ritual. On the possibilities and limitations of social-scientific methods for New Testament exegesis in general, see the succinct reflections by Barton 1997: 277-89.

8. According to Michaels (1999: 29-39), rituals are understood to have the following five characteristics: (1) they always relate to change and liminality (causa transitionis); (2) they are always intentional, in that some kind of ritual intention must be present and expressed (solemnis intentio); (3) they are characterized by certain actions that are stereotypical, formalized, repetitive, public, irrevocable and often liminal (actiones formaliter riterorum); (4) they are always modal in character (actiones modaliter ritorum); (5) they relate to a change in identity, status, role or competency (transition vitae). This approach can be justified because of the lack of one current ‘grand unified theory’ for the exploration of ritual in the New Testament world. In addition: ‘Theoretical and methodological problems in the study of early Christian ritual can be best addressed by a piecemeal approach in which different aspects of early Christian behavior, as reflected in our sources, are examined in view of the insights and knowledge gained from ritual and cognate studies’ (Uro 2010: 234).

9. On this helpful notion, see the following observations by Michaels (2012: 11): ‘Ritual behaviour is structured and … many of these structures can be represented in such a formalised way that general rules surface. The description and analysis of these structures and rules are nothing else than a grammar, the grammar of rituals …’.
contribute to group cohesion). According to Grimes, the following cases of ritual failure can be noted.

1. Misfire (act purported but void)
   1.1 Misinvocation (act disallowed)
      a. Nonplay (lack of accepted conventional procedure)
      b. Misapplication (inappropriate persons or circumstances)
   1.2 Misexecution (act vitiated)
      a. Flaw (incorrect, vague, or inexplicit formula)
      b. Hitch (incomplete procedure)
2. Abuse (act professed but hollow)
   2.1 Insincerity (lack of requisite feelings, thoughts, or intentions)
   2.2 Breach (failure to follow through)
   2.3 Gloss (procedures used to cover up problems)
   2.4 Flop (failure to produce appropriate mood or atmosphere)
3. Ineffectuality (act fails to precipitate anticipated empirical change)
4. Violation (act is effective but demeaning)
5. Contagion (act leaps beyond proper boundaries)
6. Opacity (act is unrecognizable or unintelligible)
7. Defeat (act discredits or invalidates others)
8. Omission (act not performed)
9. Misframe (genre or act misconstrued)

This classification provides a useful starting-point for analysing the failure of the ritual of circumcision in Galatians, Philippians and Romans. Before doing so, some further observations must be made with respect to the nature of ritual failure.

With regard to the process of analysing ritual failure, it is important to note that the evaluation of rituals belongs inherently to the communities performing those rituals. According to Hüsken, ‘Evaluation is an intersubjective process, executed by groups or individuals. It is based on certain sets of values which might stem from canons which the participants themselves have not created, but it might equally be based on the expectations, intentions and agenda of individual participants …’ (2007: 339). Or, as Grimes has noted: ‘Ritual criticism goes on informally all the time, and its contexts are various – both popular and scholarly. Criticism is not restricted to scholars. Ritual criticism is implicit in the normal course of conserving, transmitting, enculturating, and adapting rites’

10. See Grimes 1990: 205-207. See also the theoretical considerations outlined by Ing 2012: 38-56.
11. Typology quoted from Grimes 1990: 204-205. The ritual theory followed here is indebted to Hüsken (2007: 337-66), for which Grimes (1990) forms an important background.
(2004, quoted by Hüsken 2007: 339). In other words, the attribution of failure or success to a ritual is not an extraneous scholarly classification, but is inherent to the ritual and its performance. Nevertheless, a ritual can fail in some ways for outsiders, either, for example, because it is unintelligible to them (category 6: ‘opacity’) or because it constitutes a violation (category 4), which may not be the case for those actually engaged in the ritual. ‘Misframing’ (category 9) is particularly relevant for outsiders who are evaluating a ritual, but, once again, this category is not limited to outsiders. A ritual can fail and be successful at the same time, depending on the criteria used to evaluate the ritual.

Furthermore, cases of rituals going awry contribute much to the discovery of the meaning of a ritual for a community and to the further development of that ritual. Hüsken comments in this regard:

[P]articipants and spectators alike learn more about the ‘correct’ performance of a ritual by deviating from, rather than by adhering to the rules. One might even say that solely the definitions and examples of ‘ritual failure’ and ‘error’ – and how they are coped with – prove the existence of decisive norms for ritual actions, even when the former are imagined deviations from imagined norms … ‘Failed ritual’ directs our attention to ‘what really matters’ to the performers and participants and others in one way or another involved in a ritual (2007: 337).

Another significant aspect of the dynamics involved in the detection and discussion of ritual mistakes or failures is the ritual competence that performers of rituals and/or its critics have (or claim) and/or deny for others. Only ‘ritual specialists’ may be seen to have the right to deviate from ritual norms; others may be regarded as lacking this specific authority (Hüsken 2007: 344-46, 361). As Hüsken has emphasized,

Frequently, if not always, the social and political standing of individuals and groups beyond the ritual context are negotiated through the evaluation of ritual. Not only the ritual process, but also the authority and authenticity of the ritual experts, and hierarchies among the participants (or the groups which are represented by them) are evaluated and, eventually, reorganized. Moreover, whose definition of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ has a lasting impact on a ritual tradition reveals how the power relations in the wider socio-cultural field are structured. This close connection of ritual and its [social] context accounts for the fact that deviations from a prescribed ritual procedure are often purposely employed in order to challenge the form of the rituals and through it the prevalent power relations as well (2007: 361-62).

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12. See Hüsken 2007: 338-41, following Grimes 2004.
13. See further Hüsken 2007: 353-61.
Finally, the ‘creative power of deviations’ needs to be taken into account.14 This is an important aspect of the dynamic of ‘ritual failure’, given that ‘breaches of [ritual] rules can – and frequently do – instantiate the creation of new ritual rules in practice’ (Hüsken 2007: 346). Of interest is Hüsken’s remark that the creation of new ritual rules frequently takes place ‘under the pretext of ‘returning to older (severer) rules’ (2007: 346). Thus, the breaking and correction of ritual rules can also be seen as a creative process, in which new ritual forms are created or new meaning is given to rituals. This creative aspect of ritual failure is closely related to a second important aspect of ritual studies, namely ritual negotiation.

Hüsken and Neubert describe ‘ritual negotiation’ as the process of ‘interaction during which differing positions are debated and/or acted out’ in relation to a particular ritual and the community performing it, noting that ‘a central feature of ritual is its embeddedness in negotiation processes, and that life beyond the ritual frame often is negotiated in the field of rituals’ (2012: 1). These insights further develop three aspects of what has already been highlighted in the study of ritual failure:

a. the importance of rituals as the focus for the (re)negotiation of the life of a community or group;

b. the significance of power relations with regard to the performance and criticism of ritual;

c. the importance of (perceived) failure and disagreement for triggering critical thinking and reflection (Hüsken and Neubert 2012: 1-4). It goes without saying that such (re)negotiation of rituals also points to the often masked, but fundamental, instability and fluidity of rituals and their performance. Initial explorations in the field of ‘ritual negotiation’ have led to the identification of three main themes that are associated with it:

1. questions of participation, both in the ritual as well as in processes of negotiation, are often of central importance;

2. questions relating to the ‘subversion of ritual prescriptions, ritual roles, and the power relations surrounding the ritual performances’ (Hüsken and Neubert 2012: 4) often seem to act as the trigger for processes of ritual negotiation;

3. questions concerning the context of a ritual, specifically the web of social (power) relations within which it has a place and the kind of differences it negotiates, move more to the foreground when processes of ritual negotiation are taken into account.

14. For this and for what follows, see Hüsken 2007: 346-47.
3. Circumcision in Paul’s Letters

On the basis of the above, the selected Pauline texts (Galatians, focusing on 5.1-15; Philippians, concentrating on 3.2-6; and Romans, particularly 2.25-29) can now be analysed. The assumption made in this study is that the three letters have been written in the sequence in which they are discussed. While this is relatively self-explanatory in the case of Philippians and Romans (since Romans is generally dated as Paul’s last letter), a good case can also be made for dating Galatians before the other two letters. 1 Corinthians 7.18-19 will not be discussed independently, because the issues at stake there are also of crucial significance in Galatians, Romans and Philippians; treating 1 Cor. 7.18-19 independently would only cause repetition; furthermore, due to their generalized character and brevity, Paul’s remarks in that part of 1 Corinthians do not warrant detailed analysis from the perspective of ritual criticism. Generally speaking, Paul only chooses to discuss circumcision at any significant length when he is confronted with attempts to (re)introduce it, or when he feels that he has to address ‘radically Jewish’ tendencies in a community.

3.1 Galatians 5.1-15

As becomes evident even from a cursory reading of Paul’s letter to the Galatians, Paul is forcefully combating those who represent and accept a ‘different gospel’, which, in his view, is no gospel at all (Gal. 1.6-7). The identity of this group is widely debated, although it is clear that, for them, Gentiles can become part of the people of God through circumcision, which probably implies the keeping of a number of other commandments as well, and possibly the entire law (see Gal. 2.12, and the association of those ἐκ περιτομῆς with the observance of dietary laws). Paul takes a different position, one which he has reached, during the course of his career, as a result of his reflection on the significance of Christ in relation to justification and inclusion into the people of God (Gal. 1.16; 2.16). According to Paul, being circumcised or not was of no consequence, in the sense that it did not help one to achieve salvation. At worst, it was an impediment to salvation and, in general, subordinate to something else (see further Gal. 3.28 and 6.15; cf. also 1 Cor. 7.18-19). He is now confronted with a group of

15. See Smit 2013b: 52-55.
16. On the dating of Galatians, see the overview and convincing arguments of de Boer 2011: 5-11.
17. See also Thiselton 2000: 550-52; as suggested by Thiselton, the likely date of 1 Corinthians is 54 ce, which would place its composition at roughly the same time as Philippians.
18. On various interpretations of ‘the entire law’, see Konradt 2006: 129-52, as well as other contributions in the same volume.
19. On this, see Neutel 2015: 100-102.
Christian missionaries who are seeking to adjust the circumcision practices of the Galatian Christian community. As de Boer has noted, their position vis-à-vis Gentile converts to Christ may be summarized as follows: ‘You believe in Christ – fine; but you must now also observe the law, beginning with the rite of circumcision’ (2011: 60). While Paul mentions the issue of circumcision fairly extensively in ch. 2, noting that he had been commissioned to work among the uncircumcised and that even the Gentile Titus ("Ἕλλην ὤν") had not been forced to accept circumcision (Gal. 2.3), he addresses the issue head-on in ch. 5, which will now be analysed from the perspective of ritual criticism and ritual failure.

In Gal. 5 the issue of circumcision and its value in relation to the law and Christ is once again at stake, resurfacing for the first time since the reference to τοὺς ἐκ περιτομῆς in 2.12 (see de Boer 2011: 310). Paul argues that the ritual of circumcision has two effects: the one who undergoes circumcision is obliged to keep the entire law, and it cuts someone off from Christ. Two principles of justification are contrasted with one another: justification is achieved either through reliance on circumcision and (hence) adherence to the law, or through the Spirit, by faith in Christ, without any regard for circumcision (2.6). In Christ, it is not circumcision or non-circumcision that matters, but faith working through love (compare, with variations, Gal. 6.15 and 1 Cor. 7.19). Paul’s comments could (again) be interpreted as referring to the ineffectuality of a ritual; instead of producing righteousness, the ritual of circumcision – understood as an ongoing communal practice – in fact prevents one from achieving righteousness. And while a case of misframing is certainly in place (from Paul’s perspective: by his opponents; from the opponents view, undoubtedly: by Paul), it is also interesting to note what Paul describes here as a case of ritual failure due to ‘defeat’. That is to say, it can be seen as a case of ritual failure due to the cancelling out of one ritual by another. Viewing Gal. 5 from the perspective of this kind

20. See Neutel 2015: 92 n. 45, and also Martyn 1998: 13-34. Schnelle (2003: 299) proposes that Paul’s competitors in Galatia thought along the following lines: ‘Zwar gibt es kein jüdisches Beschneidungsgebot für Heiden, durch ihren Eintritt in die christliche Gemeinde gehörten aber auch die ehemaligen Heiden zum Volk Gottes, womit sich aus der Sicht der Gegner (sc. Pauli) unter anderem die Beschneidungsfrage stellte’.

21. This, in fact, leaves open the question of whether or not Titus was circumcised voluntarily.

22. See, e.g., de Boer 2011: 312: ‘The Galatians will no longer be “in Christ” (3.28): their identity will no longer be determined by their incorporation into Christ but by their observation of the law’.

23. See, e.g., Elliott 2003: 249.

24. See also de Boer 2011: 315: ‘Paul has no difficulty with the condition of being circumcised or even with the observance of the law as such; the difficulty arises when circumcision and observance of the law are understood to be prerequisites for justification’.

25. See, e.g., Martyn 1998: 473.

26. See, e.g., de Boer 2011: 313.

27. As Martyn (1998: 469) rightly emphasizes: ‘the stakes could not be higher’.
of ritual failure, Paul states that adhering to the ritual of circumcision in order to achieve righteousness is, in fact, defeated by what can be understood as the ritual of adhering to Christ (which, in turn, is undone by returning to the law and circumcision; see the reference to the perverting of the gospel in Gal. 1.7 (μεταστρέψαι τὸ εὐαγγέλιον)). The result in this instance is that Paul, unlike in Phil. 3 (on which, see 3.2 below), does not claim and reinterpret the notion of circumcision as a ritual, but rather rejects it entirely, in line with the notion of a ritual that has been defeated and, when performed, leads to the opposite of that to which it should lead (ineffectuality). Of course, Paul must argue along these lines, because his own overarching picture of how righteousness is achieved, or accessed, has changed considerably.

As in Phil. 3, Paul runs the risk of losing his grip on the Galatian community, which has come under the influence of other missionaries; thus, he warns against imminent ritual failure, or rather, against the backfiring of a wrongly performed (since wrongly understood) ritual. In doing so, Paul (further) discredits the competing early Christian leaders at work in Galatia, by noting that they do not understand the ritual at stake (i.e. what real circumcision is in relation to the law and to Christ), but also that the ritual practice promoted by them endangers not only the bodies (v. 12), but the very souls of the Galatians – if this anachronistic mode of expressing the situation is permissible. It may well be the case that Paul strengthens his point in a way that is particularly fitting in Galatia, where the cult of the Great Mother, Cybele, involved (or used to involve) the ritual castration of male devotees and priests. If, as seems likely, the reference to κατατομή also evokes this Galatian cult – a Γάλλος is, after all, a priest of Cybele as well as a

28. One is left to wonder why, in Galatians, Paul does not make positive use of the term ‘circumcision’; a possible answer would be the vehemence of his rhetoric, as this might leave little room for a nuanced reinterpretation of a concept.
29. See de Boer 2011: 311 for the view that the Galatians have not yet begun circumcising; he convincingly finds support for this view in the conditional clause ἐὰν περιτέμνησθε (Gal. 5.2).
30. Kahl 2010: 226: ‘In the controversy Paul claims to be the voice of “proper” Judaism and law-observance, in contrast to the circumcision part’. Cf. Wiley 2005: 19: ‘the Jewishness of the alternatives proposed’.
31. See de Boer 2011: 325-26, and the more extensive argument provided by Edwards (2011: 319-37), as well as Elliott 2003. While I would concede that the Cybele context is relevant, I would not go so far as to argue that it is the primary issue for Paul (see, e.g., Elliott 2003: 13) However, if a link with the cult of Cybele is assumed, then Paul can be regarded as intentionally misframing circumcision as a kind of castration. This might serve to jolt the Galatians into thinking about the course of action they are pursuing with regard to circumcision. Without using the language of ritual criticism, Martyn (1998: 478) notes: “He would then say, in effect: “I wish the Teachers would join the priests in the cult of Cybele by castrating themselves, thus showing what they really are, nothing more than men who place their trust in religion rather than in the God of the crucified Christ”.”
eunuch\textsuperscript{32} – then this evocation of ritual castration may serve to elucidate the failure of the (Jewish) ritual of circumcision and the extent of its consequences. A polemic against the Great Mother was probably not Paul's primary concern, but it attests a kind of ‘double language’, the evocation of a textual reality and even of suggestive language.\textsuperscript{33}

While Paul's argument in Gal. 5 clearly demonstrates the importance of rituals ‘as the focus for the (re)negotiation of the life of a community or group’ (see above, a) and that it is obvious that questions of power and influence (cf. Gal. 1) are very much in the background of it all (see above, b), Paul also fights for his place at the table when it comes to discussing these matters, indicating the centrality of issues of participation in the process of ritual negotiation (see above, c.1). It may also seem, as is the case in Philippians, that the \textit{de facto} subversion of the ‘Pauline’ ritual practice in Galatia triggers him to produce renewed, and more intense, reflection on the subject. That is to say: due to the fact that Paul’s position on circumcision is being threatened, he has to think it through again and provide (additional) arguments in support of his position. This may have been all the more necessary, because Gal. 5.11 hints at the Galatians’ knowledge of Paul’s earlier position when he still preached circumcision (de Boer 2011: 322-23). One gains the impression that Paul, having once preached circumcision and is now regarded by some as continuing to do so (a possible implication of Gal. 5.11), has not only changed his preaching and practice on the question of circumcision, but is confronted with those continuing its practice, possibly on the basis of his own earlier preaching. He is therefore forced to substantiate further his new point of view. Apparently, he had not done so, or at least not fully, while in Galatia. When confronted with people propagating (and practising) male circumcision for Gentile converts (and not just for Jewish adherents), Paul frames it as a rather unsalutary practice with dire consequences for the community members engaging in it.

My observations in the previous paragraph demonstrate that the threat of ritual failure forces Paul to redevelop his argument concerning (non-)circumcision and to outline how (the) circumcision (of Gentile converts to the cult of Christ) relates to keeping the law, and how both relate to justification (in the sense of a restored covenantal relationship with YHWH). Paul provides this interpretation in Gal. 5. It may well have been new to the Galatians, or at least new in this form, and delivered with such vehemence. When contextualizing all of this historically, and taking into account various contemporaneous views regarding the salvation of Gentiles and their adoption or non-adoptions of Jewish ethnicity (a

\textsuperscript{32} If Paul did indeed assume, or know, that the Galatian Christians rejected the ritual as pagan and as something that cut off a person from the God of Israel.

\textsuperscript{33} I am indebted to the Rev. Ari Troost for this observation.
prominent sign of which would be physical circumcision) as part of this process.\textsuperscript{34} Paul does make a rather striking move in Gal. 5. Instead of opting for the relatively conventional model of salvation for the Gentiles that does not involve circumcision – because, \textit{for Gentiles}, inclusion into the Jewish \textit{ethnos} was not a requirement for salvation – he goes substantially further:

On the basis of the expectations concerning gentile eschatological salvation, we might expect Paul to say to gentiles: do not circumcise, because you are gentiles, not Jews. In effect what Paul says is, do not circumcise, because circumcision is meaningless. His position thus appears to turn into something of a critique on circumcision as such. Since circumcision no longer distinguishes those who belong to God from those who do not, the corollary seems to be that it no longer has value or meaning (Neutel 2015: 100).

When taking all of these factors into account, Paul’s views can be seen to have developed significantly regarding the meaning and appropriate practice of the ritual of circumcision. He moves from a position in which circumcision was essential for all (men) desiring a proper covenantal relationship with YHWH (his Pharisaic past), to thinking that it was still a good thing (possibly also for Gentile converts), a position held after his calling and during his initial years as a missionary (assuming that Gal. 5.11 points to this), and then to a position of indifference (see, e.g., Gal. 3.28), which may have been what he had taught the Galatians, in order to arrive finally at the view that the circumcision of Gentiles upon their conversion to the God of Israel, in the Spirit and through Christ, in fact undoes the positive effects of this conversion. As I indicated above, all of these aspects can be conceptualized with the aid of tools provided by ritual criticism, specifically by the study of ritual failure; they draw attention to the creative potential that is set free by ritual failure, leading to ritual negotiation and innovation, but also to the questions of authority and power involved in the process of renegotiating rituals and, with that, a community’s identity.

\textbf{3.2 Philippians 3.2-6}

In Philippians, the issue of circumcision is at stake most emphatically in ch. 3, where Paul takes issue with the position of those whom he describes as \textit{κύνες}, at once insulting them and identifying them as unclean.\textsuperscript{35} It is likely that ‘the dogs’,

\textsuperscript{34} Against Paula Fredriksen’s argument (1991) that the Gentiles remain Gentiles before God but are saved as such, I maintain – with Neutel and others – that Gentiles are viewed as included into the (one) people of God (see Neutel 2015: 96-99).

\textsuperscript{35} On the historical and conceptual background of Phil. 3.2, see especially Schreiber 2001: 187-89, whose conclusions are largely in agreement with the position adopted here (see also Smit 2013b: 121-34). Another option would be to view \textit{κύνες} as a reference to Isaiah’s ‘dumb dogs’
the ‘evil workers’ and ‘those who mutilate’ (or ‘castrate’) mentioned in v. 2 are three designations for the same group of people; these designations stand in contrast to Paul’s threefold designation for his own group in v. 3. In his subsequent autobiographical statement, his emphatic reference to the same three topics underlines the close relationship between his group and his own identity and their shared opposition to those mentioned in v. 2. There is a connection between Paul’s references to circumcision, confidence in the flesh, and relating to God in Christ and the Spirit in v. 2 and the recurrence of these topics in vv. 3-15, where Paul unpacks their meaning for him, using his own biography as a tool for this.

It is possible that the ‘evil workers’ attacked here by Paul denote other early Christian missionaries, given that the term ἔργατης used by Paul to describe them can be employed to designate such ‘workers’. These other missionaries may well have been competing with Paul, a situation which can easily be imagined given the diversity of early Christianity. Further aspects of the identity of this group remain debated. In general, it is assumed that Paul’s opponents are (representatives of) a group who regarded more elements of Jewish (ritual) Torah as binding for Christians than was the case for Paul. How ‘Jewish’ was this group may be an anachronistic question; still, from a modern perspective, the descriptor ‘radical Jewish Christians’ probably fits best. The exact issue(s) at stake is (are) not very clear, although if Paul’s language is precise (see κατατομή in 3.2, περιτομή in 3.3 and 3.5; cf. Gal. 5.12; furthermore, κοιλία and αἰσχύνη were used as euphemisms for the male reproductive organ in the LXX), then circumcision (κύνες ἐνεοί; 56.10-12), which would either denote Jewish leaders or untrustworthy leaders. If the Isaianic κύνες is combined with the role of the κυνάρια in Mk 7.28 and Mt. 15.26-27 (non-Jews/Gentiles who came later to the law and/or Jesus), then Paul’s attack on Jewish or Judaizing leaders, whom he considers to be untrustworthy or false (‘castration’ not ‘circumcision’), stands out even more – not least because of the association of dogs with impurity rather than purity.

See, e.g., Mt. 9.37-38/Lk. 10.2; Mt. 10.10/Lk. 10.7; Lk. 13.27; 2 Cor. 11.13; 1 Tim. 5.18; 2 Tim. 2.15; Did. 13.2. See further Fowl 1990 and Reumann 2008: 472.

See, e.g., Fowl 1990: 99.

The term ‘early Christianity’ may lead one to imagine that early Christian communities were more monolithic and less diverse than they actually were. See further Horrell 2008.

This is not, in the last place, due to the methodological problems issuing from a ‘mirror-reading’ of these passages, as required when seeking to reconstruct the identity of Paul’s opponents from Paul’s less than friendly statements about them. See, e.g., Niebuhr 1992: 88, and the extensive account provided by Barclay (1987: 73-93) of the inherent difficulties of this method with reference to Galatians. See also Berger 1980. However, the problems involved in mirror-reading are not such that it becomes plausible to argue that Phil. 3.2-21 does not deal with specific opponents, but is a deutero-Pauline text with a very general character (Doughty 1995).

See, e.g., Dodd 1999: 175-76.

See, e.g., Mearns 1987, especially 198-200.
was probably a dominant issue. By addressing these competitors as ‘dogs’, Paul uses a pejorative term commonly reserved for Gentiles, that is, for those who are outside the people of God (even if they seem to be part of it, as in Isa. 56), in order to attack ‘radical Jewish Christian’ opponents. Paul’s rhetorical approach is well suited to his use of this particular insult: his entire argument is developed in the context of the question of the identity of the people of God and how belonging to the covenant people is accomplished, that is, through what kind of reliance on the law and on Christ respectively. Having outlined this situation, it is now possible to consider the question of circumcision in Phil. 3 from the perspective of ritual criticism, in particular by viewing it as a case of ritual failure.

In Phil. 3.2, as I have noted, Paul addresses the Philippians as follows: βλέπετε τὴν κατατομὴν. The word κατατομὴ – an obvious reference to περιτομή – has negative connotations and is associated with (unidentified) ‘others’. The real and true περιτομή is claimed for Paul’s own group (v. 3: ἡμεῖς γὰρ ἐσμεν ἡ περιτομὴ). The designation περιτομὴ therefore functions as a pars pro toto; the group is identified through reference to one of its characteristics: circumcision. It is a characteristic of the (real) circumcision, that is, Paul’s own group, the members of which are described further as οἱ πνεύματι θεοῦ λατρεύοντες καὶ καυχώμενοι ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ καὶ οὐκ ἐν σαρκὶ πεποιθότες (v. 3). The latter description (‘confidence in the flesh’) may be seen to characterize the people with whom Paul here disagrees (which he explores in the following verses) and whom he has already designated as ‘dogs’ and ‘evil workers’ (v. 2). Confidence in the flesh concerns adherence to a form of righteousness that derives from the law (see especially v. 9) rather than a righteousness deriving from faith in Christ (v. 9). An element of Jewish ritual, that is, circumcision, therefore plays a pivotal role in Paul’s statements here. It is regarded as so central to the compared and contrasted identities that both can be described primarily with reference to this ritual (i.e. as κατατομὴ and περιτομὴ). Clearly, something is thought to be wrong with some performances of this ritual but not with others. Paul can be seen to engage with the evaluation of two different performances of a ritual (which, as such, stand for

42. See, e.g., Dodd 1999: 174 and Niebuhr 1992: 88 (noting that this is all that one can be reasonably certain about regarding the opponents).
43. See Martin 1989: 125; Dodd 1999: 175; and for a critical perspective on this idea, see, e.g., Niebuhr 1992: 89.
44. E.g., Dunn 2008.
45. See also Dunn’s remarks on the significance of circumcision, which explains why it is such a suitable item upon which to focus in a pars pro toto figure: ‘In short, whatever else the covenant required of its members, Paul’s Jewish interlocutor could be in no doubt that circumcision was obligatory and fundamental, the single clearest distinguishing feature of the covenant people, the most obvious boundary line which divided Jew from Gentile, those within the covenant from those without’ (1988: 120, 125-26).
a whole way of life) and, accordingly, he engages – both positively and negatively – with different group identities. Even if one were to argue that Paul uses the term περιτομή metaphorically for his own ‘party’, it still implies the expression of a particular identity and ritual practice which, for Paul, is aptly described with the aid of a ritual term.

The question that therefore arises is this: can ritual criticism, specifically the analysis of ritual failure, shed further light on Paul’s thinking in Phil. 3? This would indeed seem to be the case, especially when one draws on Grimes’s categories of ‘ineffectuality’ and ‘misframing’. The first category describes ritual acts that fail to precipitate the anticipated empirical change even though they are executed correctly; for example, a healing ritual that is performed according to all the rules of the ritual and yet fails to produce healing because the patient dies.46 The second category describes the establishment of ritual failure because a ritual is interpreted according to a different framework from its own, thereby resulting in a mismatch (hence ‘misframing’, with the brief definition of ‘genre or act misconstrued’). By using these two categories, it appears that Paul understands the ‘dogs’ and ‘evil workers’ to be performing a ritual act (circumcision) as pars pro toto for achieving righteousness; they seek to belong to the people of God through the ‘performance’ of the law, and yet it does not produce the desired effect, that is, righteousness. One effect of the language used by Paul in these verses is that it characterizes those who advocate adherence to (more of) the ritual precepts of the Torah (than Paul) as being outside the covenant.47 Paul specifically achieves this identification by calling his opponents ‘dogs’, which implies ritual impurity by Jewish standards, and by referring to them as part of the κατατομή.48 This evidently constitutes a contrast with the claims made by Paul for himself and for those who are in agreement with him.49

In all likelihood, Paul suggests in v. 19 that the eventual effect of the ritual performance of physical circumcision is eschatological destruction. The reason for its ineffectuality is, as Paul indicates, the misunderstanding about the correct interpretation and performance of circumcision, that is, the belief that it leads to righteousness. ‘Literal’ circumcision, the removal of the foreskin, as an expression of adherence to the literal law, is not the way that leads to righteousness; it is not περιτομή, but κατατομή. Real περιτομή is performed differently: by

46. See above, Section 2. The category of ‘violation’ (act as effective, but demeaning) might also seem to be appropriate, but given that Paul does not consider the ritual to be effective to begin with, the category might not apply directly.
47. It should be taken into account that Paul may well have held a very similar position earlier on in his career; see, e.g., Campbell 2011.
48. See, e.g., the argument of Williams 2002: 156-59.
49. It should be maintained that the use of the description ‘evil workers’ (3.2) has a(n inverse) counterpart in Paul’s description of Epaphroditus as συνεργός (Phil. 2.25) and that of Clement and others as συνεργοί (4.3).
'worshipping in the Spirit of God and glorying in Christ Jesus' (Phil. 3.3). This ritual leads to righteousness through faith in Christ. Paul indicates that the performance of this ritual is certainly effective; he claims that the promises of salvation for Israel find fulfillment in his own community – a community with the correct ritual practice. Therefore, with reference to Grimes’s terminology, it can be claimed that Paul argues that the ‘dogs’ misframe the ritual of circumcision and that this leads to an ineffective practice, whereas his correct framing of the ritual brings about a different performance and different results. The ‘dogs’ will undoubtedly have returned this compliment.

What happens, with reference to ritual failure and ritual renegotiation/renewal, can be described as follows: Paul retains the notion of circumcision as a ritual denoting a particular practice related to gaining righteousness; it is a pars pro toto for that practice. However, because Paul has revised how righteousness can be acquired – that is, through faith in Christ rather than through the law – the meaning of the ritual practice of circumcision and its concrete ritual shape need to be reconsidered. Circumcision obtains a ‘new shape’: ‘worshipping in the Spirit of God and glorying in Christ Jesus’ (Phil. 3.3). In the light of this renegotiation, other forms of circumcision appear inappropriate and ineffective. A shift in Paul’s view about the appropriate performance of the law (i.e. its non-performance) thus leads to a revision of that part of the ritual regarded as an expression of reliance on the law par excellence: circumcision. This, once again, relates to its non-performance as far as its former shape is concerned, but to new content with regard to its function as the identity marker of the new group. In other words, the ritual practice remains, but in a (heavily) revised form, and this is prompted by a change in the overall interpretation and evaluation of the ritual performance of the law in its entirety.

Furthermore, in the light of my earlier remarks about the interrelationship of ritual criticism and the negotiation of power within groups, it seems evident that Paul’s criticism of a particular ritual practice in Phil. 3 (because its true meaning is misunderstood) also serves to discredit those (the ‘dogs’) who apparently make claims about the correct interpretation of tradition and its ritual performance in early Christian Philippi. That there is conflict about, or competition for, leadership in Philippi is widely recognized by scholars, but not the close connection between the discussion in question and ritual criticism (because of perceived ritual failure, or the risk of it). Paul discredits his competitors and their

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50. See, e.g., Niebuhr 1992: 98.
51. If the reference to the ‘dogs’ is indeed a reference to the Isaianic canes muti, and hence to leaders, this aspect stands out even more strongly.
52. It seems likely, in this respect, that the ‘dogs’ are not in Philippi, or at least not yet among the Philippian community; see Smit 2013b: 74-76, 121-34, which forms the basis of the remainder of the discussion of Phil. 3.
ritual practice, from Phil. 3.4 onwards, by outlining his familiarity with his opponents’ viewpoint, even to the extent that he claims to have once followed a similar way of life and ritual practice, albeit in a superior manner. Taking up the language he used at the end of Phil. 3.3 (‘no confidence in the flesh’), Paul, arguing *a minore ad maius*, claims to have been superior ‘in the flesh’ to all his opponents, irrespective of what they may think. Notably, he is ‘of the circumcision’, from the Israelite tribe of Benjamin; this may be aimed at circumcised Gentile Christians in that Paul is a circumcised Israelite. He was even a Pharisee in terms of his adherence to the law, and, as to righteousness, he was blameless. His zeal for the law was also evidenced by his persecution of the church. Whatever his adversaries might claim, Paul’s basic line in Phil. 3.4-6 is that he can lay claim to the same and indeed to more. These considerations are in line with the observation made earlier in this article that, when it comes to ritual failure, ritual criticism or ritual negotiation, power relations are of central importance, whereas the rituals themselves are a key issue in the renegotiation of the life of a community or group.

One must, of course, tread carefully when using ritual failure as an analytical category in relation to circumcision, not least because ‘failure’ terminology can be misleading with reference to Paul and the law. It stands to reason that Paul’s view of circumcision can be interpreted as a *pars pro toto* for observing the law as a ritual (i.e. as a regulated and performed identity, not in the sense that the law is ‘merely’ a ritual). However, it seems that his rethinking about the significance of the law (and therefore circumcision) – in the light of faith in Christ as a means (or rather: the means) of justification before God – has led him also to reconsider the significance of circumcision. Continued ritual praxis of circumcision and adherence to the law among the early Christian communities brought about a renewed understanding of both rituals. The ‘literal’ practice of circumcision prompted Paul to develop his thinking on the identity of early Christians (‘real’ circumcision), on the content/form of true circumcision, and on the place of the law in early Christian thought. Clearly, Paul’s new understanding of the significance of Christ also marked a change in ritual practice (see above, c.2) in that he discovered a new way of expressing the identity of those belonging to the

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53. Paul’s extensive treatment of his own background in Pharisaism is unusual and most likely inspired by the situation that he addresses. See, e.g., Niebuhr 1992: 103.
54. See Dodd 1999: 183, who notes that the shift to the first-person singular in Phil. 3.4 already suggests a contrastive characterization of Paul and the ‘dogs’. For the following, see, e.g., Hollaway 2011: 136-42 and Walter 1998: 77-78.
55. In Phil. 3.4, δοκέω carries the meaning ‘to opine’; for similar occurrences, see Mt. 3.9; Lk. 24.37; 1 Cor. 7.40; and cf. O’Brien 1991: 368.
56. See, e.g., Williams 2002: 172.
57. In relation to Gal. 5 with regard to this point, see de Boer 2011: 313.
covenant community, which is by being justified through Christ. At the same time, the threat of ritual failure for the Philippian community may have encouraged Paul to set out his case against physical male circumcision as a sign of keeping the law, possibly with the aid of new arguments. Different from his argument in Galatians, Paul overtly reclaims circumcision for his own purposes in Philippians, and he will continue to do so in Romans.

3.3 Romans 2.25-29

Romans 2.25-29 is part of a longer section which starts in 2.17 and contains a long diatribe that, as noted by Jewett, concerns ‘questions of Jewish exceptionalism and … assertion of superiority’. The issue at stake is the advantage brought by circumcision and adherence to the law, especially when it comes to being part of the covenant community (hence, salvation).

In this particular context, the focus is upon the ritual of circumcision as an identity marker and on the correct interpretation and performance of what can be termed real circumcision. A number of Grimes’s categories of ritual failure seem to be applicable in this respect. First, in v. 25, Paul argues that being a transgressor of the law is tantamount to undoing one’s circumcision (ἐὰν δὲ παραβάτης νόμου ᾖς, ἡ περιτομή σου ἀκροβυστία γέγονεν). This could be understood as a case of ‘misapplication’ (category 1.1.b): a ritual fails because it is performed by an inappropriate person (one who transgresses the law). At the same time, it could, more appropriately, be described as a case of ‘defeat’ (category 7): one ritual is defeated by another. That is to say: when conceptualizing the transgression of the law as the performance of a ritual – which is certainly

59. That ‘Gott rettet auch die Heiden durch den Glauben an Jesus Christus’ can be called the ‘theologische Grundposition’ of Paul (Schnelle 2003: 300).
60. Jewett (2007: 231) notes that, when using such formulations, it should of course be borne in mind that the debate in which Paul engages here is in every way an intra-Jewish debate, not a Christian–Jewish one.
61. See, e.g., Jewett 2007: 231.
62. This is fitting in a letter addressed to a city in which circumcision was viewed by many as the Jewish identity marker; see, e.g., Kahl 2010: 213 (especially on Tacitus, Hist. 5.5) and Dunn 1988: 119-20. Circumcision was viewed as the Jewish identity marker par excellence, even if it was well known that other, non-Jewish people also practised male circumcision. For a brief overview of Jewish disgust for the uncircumcised, see, e.g., Jewett 2007: 231-32; and the overview in Blaschke 1998.
63. Literally, the circumcision becomes foreskin. In other words, by transgressing the Law, a Jew becomes no better than a Gentile (see, e.g., Moo 1996: 169). Paul’s choice of words here suggests the use of nicknames (see, e.g., Dunn 1988: 120), thus employing the figure of the abstractum pro concreto (Schlier 1977: 88). See in general the argument of Marcus 1989. Should Paul’s choice of words have evoked the notion of epispasm (as Marcus suggests), the horror expressed by his audience is not to be underestimated. See also Jewett 2007: 232-33.
possible given that adherence to the law can be viewed as a ritual practice expressing identity – not keeping the law defeats the ritual of circumcision.\(^{64}\) Secondly, when focusing on vv. 27-29, there is another category which, from the perspective of ritual criticism, seems more apposite to describe what is argued by Paul (category 3, ineffectuality). Paul points out in v. 27 that the one who is both circumcised and keeps the law will judge the one who is circumcised and does not keep the law,\(^{65}\) and, in v. 28, that someone is not a Jew on the basis of outward characteristics (οὐ γὰρ ὁ ἐν τῷ φανερῷ Ἰουδαῖός ἐστιν). In fact, he states that (physical) circumcision is a ritual that does not produce what it should, because it does not enhance one’s Jewish identity.\(^{66}\) Rather, the act that makes someone a Jew is inward not outward circumcision (v. 28b), or, more specifically, circumcision of the heart (v. 29). In doing so, Paul, as it were, replaces one ritual with another; in line with other Jewish traditions,\(^{67}\) circumcision of the male foreskin is replaced with that of the heart. With regard to physical circumcision, Paul does indeed seem to argue that it is an ineffectual ritual (category 3; a ‘flop’, in Grimesian terminology [2.4], might also be a way of describing Paul’s view of physical circumcision).

\(^{64}\) This is a rather radical notion, given that failure to observe the law, in many if not most early Jewish sources, would not automatically lead to losing one’s place in the covenant, but rather to repentance or a stricter practice of the law. See, e.g., Dunn 1988: 121. See also the formulation used by Dunn, which supports the idea of ritual defeat in Rom. 2: ‘Circumcision in and of itself makes no difference; circumcision will not be sufficient to secure the salvation of anyone who is a transgressor of the law’ (1988: 126). Along similar lines see, e.g., Jewett 2007: 234. Lohse (2003: 113) refers to Paul’s rejection of the salvific effect of circumcision \(\textit{ex opere operato}\) (which seems to be a slight misapplication of the term: the notion of the efficacy of Christian sacraments in particular was to ensure that the validity of a sacrament did not depend on the worthiness of the one administering it; the question of the effect upon the recipient, which is at stake in Rom. 2, was not directly in view. In this context Schmithals (1988: 99) uses both the terms \(\textit{ex opere operato}\) and \(\textit{character indelebilis}\); however, the use of both terms has a stronger pedigree in Protestant–Catholic polemic rather than in early Judaism). See, e.g., Légasse 2002: 208-209.

\(^{65}\) As Lohse (2003: 113) rightly notes, Paul here takes up a notion that also appears in Mt. 12.41-42 and Lk. 11.31-32, as well as 1 Cor. 6.2: humans will judge one another at the (last) judgment. See also Schlier (1977: 88-89) who notes, like Lohse, that such a role in judgment probably means that the ones who judge are used as a measure for others. See also Wilckens 1989: 155-56.

\(^{66}\) Paul is evidently addressing Gentile converts here rather than circumcised Jews, as would be strongly suggested by Rom. 3.1-2. There seems to be considerable merit in the argument of Thorsteinsson (2003: 221-31, esp. 226), which involves the notion that circumcision, for the Gentile, is not the appropriate path towards salvation, even though it remains relevant for the Jew.

\(^{67}\) See, e.g., Schlier 1977: 89-90; Moo 1996: 174; Jewett 2007: 236; Neutel 2015: 102, and cf., e.g., Deut. 10.16; 30.6; Lev. 26.41; \textit{Jub.} 1.23. Dunn (1988: 126; followed by Jewett 2007: 233) overstates his case when he says that Paul’s line of argument ‘would appal most devout Jews’.
All the while, Paul also denies the detrimental consequences of another kind of ritual failure (failing to perform a ritual), that is, the ‘literal’ keeping of the law which includes physical circumcision. He denies that a certain kind of behaviour – not circumcising – would qualify as ritual failure. Paul’s subsequent reinterpretation of what real circumcision (of the inner variety) entails is a good example of what ritual theory has identified as ‘the importance of (perceived) failure and disagreement for triggering critical thinking and reflection’. As a background to all this remains Paul’s conviction – as in Galatians and Philippians – that, for Gentiles to join the people of the covenant, it is no longer necessary to become part of the Jewish ethos with its own ritual law. In fact, to retain a view of the law that would make this necessary, and to equate membership of the Jewish ethos with membership of the covenant community, would, in Paul’s view, amount to a failed expression of identity, and hence to ritual failure.

Paul also argues in Romans against (real or imaginary) competitors. This is well in line with the general observation that ritual criticism and the identification of ritual failure are virtually always related to a struggle for power, status and influence. This dynamic has already been discussed in detail with reference to Philippians and Galatians; however, since its structure remains the same in Romans, it only needs to be mentioned here in passing. Nevertheless, it is still worthwhile to underline the ritual aspect of Paul’s argument in Rom. 2, because discussion of ritual is an integral part of Paul’s argument, that is, circumcision as the ritual performance of a particular understanding of circumcision and, consequently, of the law and how it should be kept. Paul’s concern is about an embodied and performed identity – a lived reality – rather than about circumcision as a theological concept or even a symbol. This realization changes one’s perspective on early Christian ‘theology’ and its function: it appears less as an intellectual exercise (even if intellectual prowess is involved) than as the renegotiation of embodied and performed group identity. A major concern for Paul in Romans is that Israel consists of both Jews and Gentiles, which is played out through the reinterpretation and renegotiation of a ritual (see above, a). What is clear in Rom. 2.25-29 is the interrelationship of ritual failure and ritual negotiation. Paul has come to a new understanding of the role of the law as a result of the Christ event. He also re-evaluates and renegotiates the meaning of circumcision; physical circumcision is, as a result, replaced with a circumcision of the

68. See the argument of Dunn 1988: 126.
69. See, e.g., Dunn 1988: 128: ‘Paul is attacking a concept of law-keeping which was tightly tied to membership of the Jewish nation (what we can properly call ‘national righteousness’) … Paul will not allow this false understanding of God’s covenant righteousness to retain even the title “Jew”’.
70. See, e.g., Lohse 2003: 114, who refers to circumcision as the ‘Bundeszeichen’.
71. See, e.g., Dunn 1988: 120-21.
heart. This, to be sure, is the major difference between his own position and that of those whom he addresses in Rom. 2.25-29. Paul and his interlocutors would agree on the principle that circumcision is required, just as it is necessary to keep the law in an appropriate way. However, because of the Christ event, Paul differs from his dialogue partners as to the precise shape of circumcision. As Dunn puts it: ‘the difference is that in Paul’s view the interpretation of that commandment (c.q., of male circumcision) made necessary by the circumstances of the new age calls for a practice of the law (including circumcision) that need not include the outward rite’ (Dunn 1988: 121, 127).

Before proceeding to the conclusions of this study, one important matter needs to be clarified, and this is most effectively done with reference to Rom. 2.25-29: does not Paul interpret circumcision in such metaphorical terms that ritual studies lose their usefulness as an analytical tool? This is a very valid question, but the answer must be a negative one. By following Michaels’s five characteristics of a ritual (1999: 29-30, see n. 8 above), this response can be substantiated by noting that the (seemingly) spiritualized ritual of circumcision to which Paul refers in Rom. 2.29 (of the heart) is not just a figure of speech, but denotes a real and personal transformation. It is intentional and leads to a new direction in life, namely, her/his ‘performance’ of her/his identity, which can be understood along ritual lines. This is even more so when it pertains to law observance; it provides a person with a ‘grammar’ for living in a particular way, and doing justice to its content, as is the case in Rom. 2.25-29. Even ‘circumcision of the heart’ can be understood in ritual terms or, more precisely, as a particularly effective way of performing the ritual that embodies a person’s identification with the law and the following of its precepts.

4. Conclusions: Ritual Identity and Ritual Failure as a Catalyst

A number of concluding observations can be made in the light of this discussion of Paul’s treatment of (physical) circumcision. First, as this study has sought to demonstrate – and as should become clear even from a cursory reading of Paul’s texts in sequence – Paul’s thinking does not develop in the direction of the abolition of circumcision (and this despite Gal. 5, which should nevertheless be read

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72. In fact, it seems likely that most Jewish readers or hearers of Rom. 2.25 would be rather surprised to hear that observance of the law (of which circumcision was generally regarded as an integral part) and circumcision were being contrasted with each other here by Paul. See, e.g., Dunn 1988: 126. However, as demonstrated by the sources to which Jewett (2007: 232) makes reference, some distinction could be – and was – made between circumcision and keeping the law, even by authors advocating the necessity of both for Gentile converts (see, e.g., Josephus, Ant. 13.257, 318-19, and cf. Ant. 20.44).
in the context of Paul’s remarks in Phil. 3 and Rom. 2). Rather, he argues for the ineffectiveness of a particular way of performing circumcision, that is, the physical method of removing part of a male’s foreskin, either because its intended result is cancelled out by the behaviour of the believer (non-observance of the law; Rom. 2.25) or because the same result can be achieved by keeping the law (2.26) or, most importantly, because superior kinds of circumcision are available: the circumcision of the heart (2.29) or through the worship of God in the Spirit (Phil. 3.3). In three separate texts (Phil. 3.2-6; Gal. 5.1-15; Rom. 2.25-29) Paul sets out his argument with different emphases. However, the language of ritual continues to be used, at least in Phil. 3 and Rom. 2. Stated slightly differently, Paul concentrates on the ritual aspect of the law in order to articulate a particular kind of adherence to the law (which is much broader than the removal of a foreskin), when he discusses new group identity in the light of the Christ event. Paul does not spiritualize the law or the ritual; he rather applies it in a new way.

Secondly, rather than engaging in the project of abolishing circumcision, Paul is occupied with its reinterpretation, and for this he draws as much on (his interpretation of) the Christ event as he does on resources—prior to that event—from Judaism. His reference to circumcision of the heart, which draws on Old

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73. As Dunn rightly notes about the contrast between inner and outer circumcision in Rom. 2.25-29: ‘These contrasts should not be read merely as pleas for inwardness in religion … nor as an attack on ritual(ism) … nor as a championing of morality against legality’. Rather, the boundary-marking rituals of Judaism should be adapted in the light of the eschatological breakthrough in Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit (1988: 125; in relation to the covenant and inclusion into it, see also Moo 1996: 171).

74. Paul does not offer a ritual alternative in Galatians, but is mainly concerned with alerting ‘them to the fact that the practice of circumcision, once adopted by the Galatians, has dire consequences’ (de Boer 2011: 312).

75. This is not the place to offer a comprehensive review of this topic, but Barclay’s formulation seems apt: ‘a whirlwind of events and experiences (the death, resurrection and revelation of Jesus, the Gentile mission and the experience of the Spirit) … have reshuffled all of Paul’s Jewish convictions’ (1998: 555).

76. As attested in a long tradition of exegesis, including Thomas Aquinas, Luther and Calvin (e.g., in their commentaries on Rom. 2.25-29). For a brief and critical overview, see Wilckens 1989: 158-60.

77. See again Barclay 1998: 556: ‘His outrageously novel applications of biblical terms and categories to a new multi-ethnic community which had yet to position itself on the intellectual landscape’. See also Neutel 2015: 103: ‘He still claims the term circumcision to denote close-ness to God, but applies it to people who are not physically circumcised’. Among modern commentators, it seems that Légaesse (2002: 211) comes closest to offering a spiritualizing or interiorizing interpretation.

78. When Moo (1996: 175) refers to the fact that ‘no outward rite can bring a person into relationship with God’, he might have added that Paul retains the language of ritual to express the way in which a person does enter into such a relationship.
Testament/Hebrew Bible traditions, is a case in point. Philippians 3.3 is another good example of how he reinterprets circumcision – and its ritual practice – in the light of Christ: ἡμεῖς γάρ ἐσμεν ἡ περιτομή, οἱ πνεύματι θεοῦ λατρεύοντες καὶ καυχώμενοι ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ καὶ οὐκ ἐν σαρκὶ πεποιθότες. What Paul has in view are competing ritual practices, not ritual and non-ritual ways of expressing identity. This aligns well with the earlier observation about ‘the importance of rituals as a focus for the (re)negotiation of the life of a community or group’. More specifically, a dynamic interaction can be observed between the redefinition of a boundary-marking ritual (circumcision) and the redefinition of the group. Pressing this further, it could be proposed that Paul embarks upon the reinterpretation and renegotiation of a ritual – one that marks membership in the people of God and adherence to the law as a means of justification – after he recognized, in the light of the Christ event, the failure of the particular variant of the ritual with which he was familiar. Reinterpretation and renegotiation take place with reference to Christ, as well as to texts from Paul’s own tradition (and of his audience) which support his new vision of real circumcision. Consequently, the apparent paradox resulting from Paul’s attitude, or rather his ‘flexibility’, with regard to circumcision can be resolved by understanding it through the lens of ritual criticism and ritual negotiation. It is not circumcision as such that is rejected, but a specific kind of circumcision belonging to a particular kind of understanding of the role of the law and that of Christ (at least as presented in Paul’s critique of circumcision). Paul replaces it with another kind of circumcision (notably, not with baptism) as a way of expressing and performing membership of the people of God. This is overtly presented as ἡ περιτομή (Phil. 3.2), which suits the relationship between Christ and the law, as Paul sees it. Indeed, as Neutel has noted: ‘Circumcision is still a worthwhile identity to claim, but … Paul transforms its meaning. It now excludes those Jewish Christians who argue for circumcision, but includes gentiles who share Paul’s faith in Christ’ (Neutel 2015: 96).

Thirdly, Paul’s approach to different kinds of circumcision – the physical variety and the kind that suits adherence to Christ, expressed through a particular way of life and worship rather than through ethnic identity markers – leads to competition between different kinds of rituals and their evaluation. This competition can result in the challenging of the legitimacy of Paul’s competitors: if

79. Neutel 2015: 103-104: ‘For Paul, circumcision was not only of no value to gentiles, it had also lost certain aspects of its meaning in general, since for the first time, in the messianic age, it no longer distinguished those who belonged to God’s people from those who did not. Paul’s language and thought show a degree of flexibility; in spite of his negative remarks about circumcision for gentiles, he can still use circumcision as a category of privileged identity. Paul can claim to be the circumcision and intend the term as positive reference to God’s people, both Jews and non-Jews’. See also Tomson 1990: especially 63, 65.
their ritual practice can be shown to be flawed or even void, this also applies to
their interpretation of early Christian and Jewish tradition, thereby undermining
their status. The discussion about ritual, that is, ritual criticism and the
identification of ritual failure, is therefore closely related to the struggle for
power and influence within the early Christian communities. Paul has a very
clear view of the ritual practice of his competitors insofar as it concerns physical
circumcision: at best it is ineffective, at worst it is demeaning and contrary to the
gospel. Paul’s argument also implies that they are not authentic or trustworthy
leaders (in line with the description of leaders as ‘dogs’ in Isa. 56.10-12). By
contrast, his own understanding of circumcision in terms of ‘worshipping in the
Spirit of God and glorying in Christ Jesus while putting no confidence in the
flesh’ (Phil. 3.3) amounts to a ritual practice which conforms with the gospel and,
accordingly, with the performance of authentic identity in Christ. His leadership,
or apostleship to be precise, is also validated. The debate as to what amounts to
authentic early Christian or, at this stage, early Jewish identity was as much a
matter of ritual negotiation among Christ-worshipping Jews as it was a matter of
‘doctrine’. It was as much concerned with power and influence as it was with
physical aesthetics. This dynamic is particularly apparent in Philippians and
Galatians, but it can also be found in Romans, where Paul is busy establishing
his own credentials and leadership.

Finally, ritual failure, ritual negotiation and innovation play a role of consid-
erable importance in the texts in question. In fact, a process of multiple stages
of ritual failure, ritual negotiation and innovation can be discerned, or at least
hypothesized, with regard to Paul and circumcision. (1) Obviously, and as Paul
is himself keenly aware, he started out as one belonging to the ‘circumcision’,
attaching high value to a particular way of keeping the law, especially with a
view to being a member of the people of God. (2) In the light of his encounter
with Christ and subsequent events, Paul revised his view about the significance
of such a ritual practice (although he probably retained many parts of it, includ-
ing circumcision). However, this expression of identity became subordinate to
the performance of identity in Christ (in the same way as circumcision could
be subordinated to many other elements in Jewish tradition). (3) When con-
fronted with those within his communities who wished to (re)introduce cir-
cumcision of the male foreskin, specifically those who attached soteriological
significance to this ritual (see Eisenbraun 2009), Paul reacts vehemently by no
longer regarding circumcision as an *adiaphoron*, but, at the very least for
Gentile believers, as a denial of salvation through Christ. This reaction reaches
its height in Paul’s letter to the Galatians. (4) In later letters, notably Philippians
and Romans but also 1 Corinthians, Paul returns, at least to some extent, to his
earlier position, namely that circumcision is not a significant matter, but all the
while retaining the position he first voiced in Galatians: a particular kind of
physical circumcision of (at least) Gentile believers is detrimental to salvation.
He now begins to reclaim the concept of circumcision for his own group, using it to denote the performance of being ‘in Christ’ which accords with the significance of Christ.

It seems that Paul can eventually accept two kinds of circumcision: for Jewish believers, the continued practice of circumcision which expresses or ‘performs’ their sense of belonging to the Jewish ethnos, and, for Gentile believers, the circumcision of the heart which consists of ‘worshipping in the Spirit of God and glorying in Christ Jesus while putting no confidence in the flesh’ (Phil. 3.3). It has become clear that Paul’s vision of ‘identity in Christ’ is one that is embodied and ritually performed: by doing certain things and by not doing them, and also by understanding the things that are being done (e.g., circumcision) in a particular way, specifically in relation to the activity of Christ in the Spirit. Ritual failure, initially sparked by Paul’s encounter with Christ in the Spirit, and which gave rise to ritual negotiation and innovation, became the catalyst for the development of Paul’s embodied theology, and for what he perceives to be the theologically and ritually appropriate way of performing identity in Christ. Paul’s theologizing qua ritual criticism is therefore a way of operating theologically that emanates from, and returns to, ‘real’ embodied life.80

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