

# Understanding Infant Baptism

*An Explanation based on  
a Study of Genesis 17*

A  
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*Teaching Series*

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# Understanding Infant Baptism

## *An Explanation based on Genesis 17*

### I. An Introduction to the Text

*A) The CONTEXT of the Passage:* We're told in the first verse of Genesis 17 that Abram is now 99 years old, which means that it had been nearly a full 25 years since he left Haran for the land of Canaan. We're also told in the last verse of Genesis 16 that 13 years had passed between Chapter 16 and Chapter 17. What happened in Genesis 16? Abram had listened to his wife Sarah to take her maid Hagar as another wife. God had promised to make Abram into a great nation, but over 10 years later, he still had no children, and he wasn't getting any younger. So at the suggestion of his wife, Abram tries to force God's timing by taking things into his own hands. He takes Hagar as another wife and she bears Ishmael to him. And from that point on, there's nothing but trouble. When Hagar conceives, she looks down on Sarah; then Sarah retaliates by getting violent with Hagar. Scripture doesn't tell us anything else about those 13 years, but judging from Sarah's words later in 21:9-10, it seems that the family unrest continues. What does this teach us? *Unbelief only leaves us empty.* Abram had given into unbelief; he had failed to trust in the Lord; and his sin had brought real consequences not just to himself, but to his whole family. *But that wasn't the end of the story. . .*

In Genesis 17, God comes once again to Abram to comfort and revive him. And the way God does this is by reminding him of two things: His *character* and His *covenant*. God reminds Abram both of *who He is* and of *what He has promised*. So, God says, "I am God Almighty. . ." (v1). This is His *character*; this is who God is. He is God *Almighty*; the Living God who does the impossible (like cause a 100 year old man and his 90 year old wife to bear children). He is the Sovereign King who rules the earth. God also reminds Abram of His *covenant*: ". . . My covenant is with you" (v4). God is confirming the covenant He had made with Abram so long ago. In fact, God is here basically reiterating the same covenant promises He had made to Abram back in Genesis 12.<sup>1</sup> Now, why would God do that? Why would God tell Abraham in Genesis 17 the same stuff He already told him back in Genesis 12? Because 25 years had passed since Genesis 12. And if you've been a believer for 25 years, you have a much more realistic view of yourself than when God first saved you. If you've been a believer for 25 years, you've been confronted with the depths of your weaknesses, your failures, your sin. And so, God coming to Abram in Genesis 17 to reiterate the same promises He had made 25 years earlier is really the sweetest thing in the world. Because it means that 25 years of Abram's worst sin and failure couldn't mess up the promises God had made to him. Abram had failed God, but God would never fail him. God's promises after 25 years were just as true as ever.

*B) The NATURE, IMPORTANCE and PURPOSE of Covenant Signs:* After the promises of verses 1-8, the Lord gives to Abraham circumcision as the sign of His covenant with him. We've talked about covenant signs before: The *rainbow* was the covenant sign given to Noah; *circumcision* is the covenant sign given here to Abraham; *the Sabbath* would be the covenant sign given to Israel later through Moses. And, as we mentioned before, "covenant signs declare covenant promises to covenant people."<sup>2</sup> *A covenant sign was a tangible picture of God's eternal promises to His people.*

We've seen that *covenant signs are the foundation for our understanding of the sacraments* (baptism and the Lord's Supper). What this means is that we need to have a right understanding of covenant signs if we want to have a right understanding of the sacraments. And this is so important, because so

<sup>1</sup> There are minor differences: For instance, in 12:2, God promises to make him a great nation, whereas in 17:4-5 the Lord expands on this, promising to make Abram a multitude of nations. And, Chapter 12 focuses on blessing whereas Chapter 17 focuses on multiplication and fruitfulness. But though there are minor differences, the main thrust of the content is the same.

<sup>2</sup> Alec Motyer, *Covenant and Promise*.

much false teaching has resulted from a lack of understanding of covenant signs and how they relate to the covenant. This is why, for instance, there are denominations that teach that you can't be saved unless you're baptized.<sup>3</sup> It's because they have failed to understand the nature of covenant signs.

In particular, *covenant signs are given for the purpose of assuring God's people of His promises.* That's what they're for. Covenant signs were never given as some kind of ritual to save unbelievers. Covenant signs aren't given to unbelievers at all—they're given to those who already do believe. God was already in a relationship with Abraham long before Genesis 17. God didn't give Abraham circumcision to save him—Abraham had been walking with God for 25 years! No, it was in order to encourage and strengthen him in God's promises. And to do that, God gives Abraham a very tangible reminder of what He had promised. God marks Abraham's body with the covenant sign of circumcision, so that he would never forget the reality of the promises that God had made to him.<sup>4</sup>

*A question might arise here:* Why did Abraham need this kind of tangible sign, and why is it that we need tangible pictures like baptism and the Lord's Supper to strengthen our faith? Shouldn't God's Word be enough? Why can't we just preach? The short answer is that if God has given us covenant signs (or sacraments) and commanded us to take part in them, then we need them—whether we think we do or not. The truth is, we are a weak people who need to be reminded of God's promises. And so, we are strengthened when we hold the bread with our hands, and smell the wine, and taste them both; to remember that just as real as this bread and wine, are the promises God has made to us.<sup>5</sup>

## II. The Heart of the Issue

*A) The MEANING of Circumcision:* So, how are we to understand the covenant sign of circumcision? 1) Circumcision was NOT an ETHNIC sign: it was not a sign to mark Jewish ethnicity (the physical offspring of Abraham). We know this, first of all, because Abraham is commanded not only to circumcise his children, but to circumcise all the household servants that lived with him, who were not of his offspring, but foreigners (vv12-13). If Abraham is here commanded to circumcise those who are ethnically non-Jewish, then circumcision cannot be an *ethnic* sign.<sup>6</sup> 2) Circumcision was also NOT a NATIONAL sign: Some people argue that circumcision in the Old Testament was merely a mark to identify the members of the nation of Israel.<sup>7</sup> They would grant that Gentiles were indeed, at times, circumcised just as the Jews were (as in the case of Abraham's servants), but they maintain it was a badge of *national* allegiance, not *spiritual* allegiance. According to them, it was given, not to mark *the people of God*, but the members of *the nation of Israel*. In other words, they say that circumcision had no *spiritual* significance—it was merely a sign of *national* identity. Scripture teaches us, however, that circumcision was never given as a *national* sign; but as a *spiritual* one.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> IE, the Church of Christ.

<sup>4</sup> Alec Motyer puts it this way: "Every time Abraham therefore observed the mark of circumcision in his own body, he would declare, 'I am the man to whom God has made promises.'" (*Covenant and Promise*). In light of God's command to Abram in verse 1, Motyer also notes: "Abraham cannot look at the mark of circumcision and glory in the promises without at the same time being reminded over and over again in his commitment to God — 'Walk before me and be thou perfect.'"

<sup>5</sup> Much of this section was gleaned from Ligon Duncan's *Covenant Theology* course.

<sup>6</sup> We could also think of Genesis 34, where Jacob's sons tell the Hivites that they must be circumcised in order to marry into the family. Another example is in Esther 8:17, where for fear of the Jews, many among the peoples of the land "became Jews," which must be speaking of a religious change rather than an ethnic change, for no one can change their ethnicity, but we can change our religious allegiance. Exodus 12:43-49 is also a very important passage we'll deal with more in depth later.

<sup>7</sup> Many Baptists make this argument. "Baptists are intent on making this dispensation [the Old Testament] terminate in what is external. What God established with Israel was a national covenant, nothing more. This national covenant had national covenantal seals, a national continuation in the line of natural propagation. . . The significance of circumcision accords with all that. But in the New Testament, it has become completely different. Now, what is external and national has ceased to be valid. Something spiritual and universal has come in its place. . . This is the Baptist position." (Vos, Volume 5, pp161-62).

<sup>8</sup> I should warn you that we're about to launch into controversial waters. This section gives the Scriptural foundation for the historical Presbyterian understanding of covenant children and how they relate to the church, and specifically the practice of infant baptism. I've done my best to be neither too laborious on the one hand nor too brief on the other as I explain these things from the Scriptures, but my best is very imperfect. I deeply respect my Reformed Baptist brothers and want to affirm that though we have different convictions from the Scriptures on this particular issue—and though those Scriptural convictions are important—still, at the end of the day, the far more important issue at stake is not what we believe about this particular issue—but whether or not we are enthralled with Christ, and whether or not that is affecting everything about how we live.

1) *Circumcision was a spiritual SIGN because the covenant was a spiritual COVENANT.* The best way to properly understand the *sign* of God's covenant with Abraham is to understand the *nature* of God's covenant with Abraham. After all, the whole point of a *sign* is to point us to *the reality* that it represents. The whole purpose of a wedding ring—the sign of the marriage covenant—is to point us back to the marriage covenant that it represents. In the same way, the best way to understand the *covenant sign* of circumcision is to understand the *actual covenant* that God is making with Abraham. And Genesis 17:7 tells us one thing in particular that's absolutely vital in understanding this covenant. Here in verse 7, God says to Abraham: “I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, *to be God to you and to your descendants after you.*” What does this tell us? The covenant God is making with Abraham is *about salvation in the fullest sense.* We've seen this over and over and we see it again here.<sup>9</sup> God says to Abraham: “*I will. . . be God to you and to your descendants after you.*” This is the very heart of God's covenant with Abraham. It's about God owning a people for himself in the fullest sense—it's about salvation; it's a thoroughly *spiritual* covenant. And circumcision is given as *the sign of that covenant.* As God tells Abraham in Genesis 17:11: “And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be *the sign of the covenant* between Me and you.” If God's *covenant* with Abraham is about salvation, then *the sign of that covenant* has to be about salvation.<sup>10</sup> Again, that's the whole point of covenant signs: the sign is given as a picture of what's being promised; the whole purpose of the sign is point to what's being signified.<sup>11</sup> So, if God's *covenant* with Abraham is about salvation, then *the sign of that covenant* must also be about salvation (rather than national identity).<sup>12</sup>

2) *Circumcision was a spiritual SIGN because Scripture explicitly TELLS US so.* Scripture actually tells us quite plainly that circumcision was a sign—not of *national* identity—but of *spiritual* identity; in two ways: **FIRST**, Scripture tells us that circumcision signified *JUSTIFICATION by faith.* Outward circumcision was given as a sign of inward saving faith. We see this in Romans 4:11, where we read: “and [Abraham] received the sign of circumcision, *a seal of the righteousness of the faith* which he had while uncircumcised. . .” This passage is incredibly significant. Paul is here explicitly telling us what circumcision was all about: Circumcision was given as the sign, or mark, or badge *of Abraham's faith.* This passage of Scripture couldn't be more clear: Abraham's circumcision was not a sign of national identity; rather, it was one of spiritual identity. It was given to Abraham as a sign and seal of his *justification by faith.*<sup>13</sup> **SECONDLY**, Scripture teaches us that circumcision was given to signify *REGENERATION by the Spirit.* Outward circumcision was given in order to point to the inward regeneration—the new birth—that takes place when God circumcises a man's heart. God would later warn His people through the prophet Jeremiah: “Circumcise yourselves to the Lord and remove the foreskins of your heart” (Jeremiah 4:4).<sup>14</sup> *Outwardly* God's people were circumcised, but many of them in Jeremiah's day lacked *the reality* of what the sign pointed to—the *circumcision of the heart.*<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See especially Section 3 above, “The Promises of the Covenant of Grace,” which deals with this at length.

<sup>10</sup> This is all the more so in light of the fact that the sign of God's covenant with Abraham is so intimately bound together with the covenant, that God actually calls circumcision the covenant itself (rather than the sign of the covenant) in Genesis 17:9-10. This need not alarm us, as if the sacraments have saving power. Ball explains, “Sacramental phrases, wherein the name of the thing signified is given to the sign, are ancient and familiar; as circumcision is called the covenant, and the rock Christ.” (p91).

<sup>11</sup> We learned this with Noah in Genesis 9. God's covenant promise to Noah and all those who came out of the ark with him, was that He would never again destroy the earth with a flood. That was *the essence of the covenant.* And the rainbow was given as a sign (a picture) and a seal (a pledge) *of that promise* to never again cut off all flesh with the waters of the flood.

<sup>12</sup> We could add further from this same passage that the covenant God made with Abraham is “an everlasting covenant” (v7). So then: it's not a temporary (national) arrangement that's going to be replaced later in the New Testament. The covenant with Abraham won't be replaced at all. That's why in Romans 11:17-24, Paul refers to New Testament Gentile believers as being branches that have been ingrafted into the olive tree of Abraham. There's not two trees—an Old Testament “national” tree and a New Testament “spiritual” tree—there's just one tree. And New Testament believers have been ingrafted into *that same* tree. Both these truths—that God's covenant with Abraham is about salvation and that it is everlasting—are confirmed in Acts 2:39: “For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.” Now, Acts 2:39 is not a proof-text for infant baptism *in and of itself.* But at the very least, it shows us exactly the two truths mentioned above: 1) God's covenant with Abraham is *about salvation:* in that the forgiveness of sins and the receiving of the Holy Spirit is inseparably linked to God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17:7. And, 2) God's covenant with Abraham is *everlasting:* the promise God had made to Abraham was the same promise now being declared at Pentecost.

<sup>13</sup> “Paul tells us expressly that circumcision was ‘a sign and seal of the righteousness of faith’ (Rom.4:11).” (Vos, V5, p114).

<sup>14</sup> See also Jeremiah 9:26; Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Colossians 1:11 and Romans 2:25-29.

<sup>15</sup> Another reason that circumcision can't be a national sign is the fact that the nation of Israel didn't actually even begin to

So, according to Scripture, circumcision *wasn't* a sign of ethnic identity or a sign of national identity—it *was a sign of spiritual identity*. It was a sign of *salvation*. And it was given to Abraham to mark him as one who belonged wholly to God. In circumcision, God's *covenant sign* is given to mark God's *covenant man* as an heir of God's *covenant promises*. That's what circumcision is all about. Further, the sign of circumcision wasn't just given to mark Abraham as a believer. From this point onward, it would be the outward sign that would mark *all* the Old Testament people of God.

Now, what is the sign that marks God's people now? It's *baptism*. Baptism functions now for us in exactly the same way that circumcision functioned for God's people in the Old Testament: *Circumcision* was the outward sign of justification by faith in the Old Testament; *baptism* is the outward sign of justification by faith now.<sup>16</sup> *Circumcision* symbolized the new birth (regeneration) in the Old Testament; *baptism* symbolizes the new birth now.<sup>17</sup> *Circumcision* was the sign given to mark God's people in the Old Testament; *baptism* is the sign given to mark God's people now. This is why Paul links circumcision and baptism together in Colossians 2:11-12, when he says, “in [Christ] you [New Testament believers] were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism. . .” Paul is telling us that baptism functions now in exactly the same way that circumcision functioned then: Baptism has replaced circumcision as the outward sign of God's covenant people.<sup>18</sup>

HOW NEW TESTAMENT BAPTISM SIGNIFIES THE SAME THINGS AS OLD TESTAMENT CIRCUMCISION

THE INWARD REALITY THAT HAPPENED TO YOU	THE OUTWARD SIGN THAT MARKED YOU	
	IN THE OLD TESTAMENT	IN THE NEW TESTAMENT
Justification by Faith	CIRCUMCISION	BAPTISM
Regeneration by the Spirit		
Becoming a member of God's People		

*B) The RECIPIENTS of Circumcision:* So, again, *circumcision* was given in order to mark the community of believers in the Old Testament in the same way that *baptism* has been given to mark the community of believers now in the New Testament. The two signs point to the same reality.

Now, in the Old Testament, circumcision was to be given to two groups of people in particular: *First*, to **ADULT CONVERTS**: non-Jewish, Gentile outsiders who forsake their pagan heritage to embrace

exist until the time of Moses. Vos draws this out when he says: “[Circumcision] was instituted when God formally founded His covenant of grace with Abraham. That was a long time before the covenant people were organized as a theocratic state at Sinai. According to the Baptist view being contested here, circumcision should have come at Sinai, and not already with Abraham. But now, it does not come from Moses but from the patriarchs, as the Lord says (John 7:22).” (Volume 5, p163).

<sup>16</sup> See Mark 1:4; Acts 2:38; 8:12-13; 22:16; Colossians 2:12; 1 Peter 3:20-22 with Romans 4:11.

<sup>17</sup> See Romans 6:1-7; Colossians 2:11-12; Titus 3:5 with Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4; 9:26.

<sup>18</sup> Calvin makes this comment on Colossians 2:11-12: “What do these words mean, except that the fulfillment and truth of baptism are also the truth and fulfillment of circumcision, since they signify one and the same thing? For [Paul] is striving to demonstrate that baptism is for the Christians what circumcision previously was for the Jews.” (Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.16.11). As Bavinck says: “According to Colossians 2:11-12 this circumcision was replaced by baptism. . .Through the death of Christ, which was a complete putting off of sin and victory over sin and hence fully realized the idea of circumcision, that circumcision has been rendered obsolete and came to its antitypical fulfillment in baptism. Baptism, therefore, is more than circumcision, not in essence but in degree. Circumcision pointed forward to the death of Christ; baptism points back to it.” (V4, pp526-27). We could also note here that baptism and circumcision don't just function as covenant signs, but as pictures of the truths contained in the covenant. And, in fact, baptism and circumcision picture the same truths. The water of baptism pictures 1) our need for cleansing; 2) God's provision of that cleansing in the atoning blood that washes away all our sins; 3) and the new heart that is given in the washing of regeneration by the Spirit. And circumcision pictures the same three truths: 1) *ruin* by the fall; 2) *redemption* in Christ; and 3) *regeneration* by the Spirit. **FIRST**, *ruin by the fall*: the corrupt and depraved condition into which we were born is often likened in Scripture to the foreskin of the heart—something we're born with and yet something that must be cut off if we are to live eternally (Deuteronomy 10:16; Jeremiah 4:4; 9:26). **SECOND**, *redemption in Christ*: the Messiah, who would accomplish redemption for His people (Genesis 3:15), would come forth through Abraham's loins (Genesis 12:3; 22:18; Galatians 3:13-14). Further, Christ would accomplish this redemption by being cut off from God's presence in order that we might be reconciled to God (Isaiah 53:8). **THIRD**, *regeneration by the Spirit*: if the foreskin of our hearts represents our natural corrupt and depraved condition, then to circumcise your heart was to have that natural corruption and depravity decisively cut off—it was to be born again (regeneration); this is something that God commanded of His people (Deuteronomy 10:16) and yet at the same time something only God could do for His people (Deuteronomy 30:6).

the Living God and join themselves to His people. This is how it was for Abraham; God called him as *an adult*. And we see this happen throughout the Old Testament Scriptures. We read of Gentiles forsaking their pagan heritage to take refuge in the Lord and join themselves to the people of God.<sup>19</sup> Now, if this foreigner was a male, he was to be circumcised to signify his faith in the Lord and his entrance into the covenant community.<sup>20</sup> So, for *adult converts* like Abraham, circumcision marked spiritual realities that had *already taken place*. Romans 4:11 tells us that circumcision was given to Abraham as a sign (*a picture*) and a seal (*a pledge*) of *the faith he already had* while uncircumcised.

This is why we baptize adult converts only *after* they profess faith in Christ. We baptize them to signify what God has done—that God has called this person to himself—that God has *washed away* all their sins in the blood of Jesus and given them *a new heart* that loves Him and wants to follow Him.

But this sign was *also* to be applied to COVENANT CHILDREN: And this is what Genesis 17:9-14 focuses on. God is telling Abraham to apply that same sign—the sign that was only given to him *after* he had believed—he was to apply that same sign *to every male in his household*. In Genesis 17:10, the Lord says to Abraham, “This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: *every male among you* shall be circumcised. . .” This included both *sons* and *servants*—everyone who belonged to Abraham's household and lived under his authority (vv10-13). And not only was Abraham to circumcise every male in his household, he was to do so from this point onward *when they were just 8 days old*: “And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations. . .” (17:12).<sup>21</sup> So, in verses 23-27 we read of Abraham circumcising all of his servants, as well as his son Ishmael (who is 13 years old at this point). Later, after Isaac is born, we read in Genesis 21:4, “Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him.” So, this is what is vital for us to understand: *the same sign of salvation that was given to Abraham only after he had already believed in the Lord, God then commands that same sign to be applied to his 8-day old children far before belief in the Lord is ever possible*. It was *adult-circumcision* for Abraham. But it was *infant-circumcision* for his children.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> We see this with *Rahab*, who confesses before the Israelite spies that, “the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath” (Joshua 2:11). We see it with *Ruth*, who tells her mother-in-law Naomi, “Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God” (Ruth 1:16; cf. 2:12). We see it with *Naaman*, who testifies to Elisha, “Behold now, I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel. . . your servant will no longer offer burnt offering nor will he sacrifice to other gods, but to the Lord” (2 Kings 5:15,17). There were several Gentiles who joined themselves to David (such as Ittai the Gittite, the Cherethites and Pelethites, and some of David's mighty men, including Uriah the Hittite). Just a few examples among many.

<sup>20</sup> We can see this in Exodus 12:42-49, in the context of the Lord describing for Moses and Aaron the rightful partakers of the Passover Meal, from which we glean the following truths: 1) Passover was a spiritual feast celebrating God's work of redemption for His people (v42); 2) Partaking of the Passover was thus to be limited to the community of God's people—outsiders were forbidden from partaking (vv43,45,47); 3) However, outsiders who were circumcised could then partake of the Passover and were considered from then on to be equal members of God's people (vv48-49); 4) Thus, circumcision was the badge of membership in the covenant community—it bestowed free access to all the privileges enjoyed by members of the covenant community. Once you received the covenant *mark*, you were free to enjoy the covenant *meal*. Circumcision was necessary to celebrate the Passover in the Old Testament in the same way that baptism is necessary to celebrate the Lord's Supper now in the New Testament. If anyone objects that there is nothing in this passage that explicitly requires the faith of these Gentiles wanting to celebrate the Passover, we would refer to Ezekiel 44:7-9, wherein the Lord, speaking in particular of Gentiles, rebukes Israelite leaders for allowing foreigners both uncircumcised in flesh *and* uncircumcised in heart into the sanctuary. Thus, we see that the Gentiles who were to be given access to the Lord's sanctuary were not only to be circumcised in flesh—but *in heart*. Besides, Exodus 12:49 tells us that it was to be the same rule for Gentiles who joined God's people as it was for the Jews. So, if the Lord was so disturbed over the fact that many in Israel were outwardly circumcised but they lacked the true circumcision of the heart (Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4, 9:25-26, etc), how could that be okay for Gentiles?

<sup>21</sup> Why didn't the daughters also receive the covenant sign? “God could have instituted a sacrament which might have agreed to both sexes, but of his infinite wisdom, he made choice of that which could have being in the males only; but the female was accounted as circumcised in the male; and therefore faithful women were the daughters of Abraham (Luke 13:16), and the common promise, that God would be the God of Abraham and his seed, did pertain to each sex of his posterity.” (Ball, p90).

<sup>22</sup> It's important to note here that this same command—to circumcise the entire household—is not only given to Abraham or ethnic Jews, but also to adult Gentile converts. Goodwin notes: “And let me add this further observation, that in Abraham's family his servants that were Gentiles, if they had children, those children were circumcised [Genesis 17:12-13], as fore-running pledges and types that both we and our children, who are Gentiles and strangers, were engrafted into this covenant, it held forth this our privilege to come, that in Abraham the Gentiles' seed (as well as Abraham's own) should be blessed in him.” (*Works*, V9, p433). We see this same principle in the passage we noted in the above footnote (Exodus 12:42-49), where the Lord says in Exodus 12:48: “But if a stranger sojourns with you, and celebrates the Passover to the Lord, *let all his*

C) *The IMPLICATIONS for Household Baptism:* And this is exactly why we baptize the children of believers as well as adult converts:<sup>23</sup> the covenant sign isn't just for believers—it's for their children. Just like circumcision—baptism isn't just for ingrafted foreigners—it's also for our covenant children:<sup>24</sup>

WHAT IS THE COVENANT SIGN		WHO RECEIVES THE COVENANT SIGN	WHEN THE COVENANT SIGN IS GIVEN
OLD TESTAMENT	NEW TESTAMENT		
CIRCUMCISION	BAPTISM	ADULT CONVERTS	Only after profession of faith in the Lord
		COVENANT CHILDREN	At infancy before faith in the Lord is possible

So, Abraham was to mark his infant children with the same covenant sign that he had received only *after* believing. But why? Well, *first of all*, he was to do so simply because God had commanded him to. Maybe Abraham would have had objections: “But Lord, this is the sign you gave to me only *after* I had believed. Are you sure I should give this same sign to my infant sons? Shouldn't I wait for my sons to believe, just as I did, before I circumcise them?” Maybe Abraham didn't understand why God was commanding this; still, God had spoken; God had given the command; and Abraham's duty was simply to obey the voice of the Lord. *But there was also another reason* why Abraham was to mark his sons with the covenant sign. In Genesis 17:7, the Lord said to Abraham: “I will establish My covenant between Me and you *and your descendants after you* throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you *and to your descendants after you.*” What is God telling Abraham? He's telling Abraham that the *promises of the covenant* weren't just for him—they were for his children. And therefore, the *sign of the covenant* wasn't just for him, but also for his children. Scripture is teaching us that the Covenant of Grace extends not only to believers, but also to their children. Abraham was to mark his offspring with the covenant *sign* because God was extending to them His covenant *promises*. Now, this *doesn't* mean that all of Abraham's children (or ours) will be saved—we'll get to that.<sup>25</sup> But God is pledging here not just to redeem an individual—but an entire household—and not only an entire household, but an entire covenant line for generations to come.<sup>26</sup>

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*males be circumcised*, and then let him come near to celebrate it; and he shall be like a native of the land.” He alone believed—but it was his whole household that was to be circumcised. When a Gentile outsider was converted, he was just as bound as the ethnic Jew to pass on the covenant sign of circumcision to all the males in his household. Incidentally, another thing we learn here is that even though all his males were circumcised, it was he alone who partook of the Passover; for it doesn't say, “then let *them* come. . .” but: “let *him* come. . .” It seems that even in the Old Testament, not everyone who was circumcised was given access to the Passover. There must be a personal profession of faith prior to partaking of the covenant meal.

<sup>23</sup> Not primarily because of Abraham's example—but because of *God's command*. God commanded Abraham to mark not only himself—but his infant sons—with the covenant sign. Further, the Lord told Abraham in Genesis 17:12, “And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised *throughout your generations.* . .” In other words, the application of the covenant sign wasn't just a temporary arrangement—it was to be administered both to believers and their children as long as God's covenant itself was in effect (compare with 17:7). So, we ask: If the sign of salvation in the Old Testament was to be applied both to believers and to their children, then why should the sign of salvation in the New Testament be applied to believers but *not* to their children? If infants in the Old Testament could only be saved the same way we are now (IE through faith in Christ)—and yet God still commanded that they receive the sign of the covenant well before that faith was ever possible—then why should it be that *our* infants are denied the sign of the covenant (on the basis that faith isn't possible for them)?

<sup>24</sup> Calvin writes: “Why, in Abraham's case, does the sacrament follow faith, but in Isaac, his son, precede all understanding? Because it is fair that he who is a grown man is received into the fellowship of the covenant to which he had been till then a stranger should learn its conditions beforehand, but it is not the same with his infant son. . .The whole matter, unless I am mistaken, can be clearly disclosed in this brief statement. Those who embrace faith in Christ as grown men, since they were previously strangers to the covenant, are not to be given the badge of baptism unless they first have faith and repentance, which alone can give access to the society of the covenant. But those infants who derive their origin from Christians, as they have been born directly into the inheritance of the covenant, and are expected by God, are thus to be received into baptism.” (*Institutes 4.16.24*). Roberts says: “So great account God made of Abraham and his seed; that both he and his seed must be installed and initiated by circumcision. Yea every male child of theirs of eight days old must be circumcised. The infant babes must have this covenant badge, they being in covenant with their parents. This honor and favor God put upon Abraham's seed. And both his Jewish, and Christian seed, and with them their infants share therein. As Abraham's Jewish seed and their infants were to be circumcised, so Abraham's Christian seed and their infants are to be baptized.” (Roberts, p317).

<sup>25</sup> See Sections F (*A Vital Clarification*) and G (*The Mystery in the Covenant*) below.

<sup>26</sup> The promise wasn't just made to Abraham's children but to his descendants “throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant.” Psalm 105:8 says: “He has remembered His covenant forever, the word which He commanded to a thousand generations.” It is confirmed to Isaac, then Jacob, then generations later to Israel (vv9-10). Romans 11:1-5 tells us that God's covenant with Abraham is still being upheld even today to a remnant among his physical descendants. Further, that this promise isn't limited only to ethnic Jews but extends also to believing Gentiles—those of the faith of Abraham—is evident from Scriptures such as Deuteronomy 7:9, “Know therefore that the Lord you God, He is God, the faithful God, who keeps His

This is God's way; it's how He's commanded us to apply the sign of the covenant: For adult converts like Abraham, the *covenant reality*—faith in the Lord—must come first; and only then is the *covenant sign* to be applied. But for the children of believers, the Lord has commanded that the *covenant sign* be given first, far before the *covenant reality* of faith in the Lord is ever possible. For adult converts, then, the *reality* is to precede the *sign*; but for covenant children, the *sign* is to precede the *reality*.<sup>27</sup>

	INITIAL ENTRANCE INTO THE COVENANT	WHICH IS EXPECTED TO BE FOLLOWED BY
ADULT CONVERTS	The Reality: Inward Covenant Faith	The Rite: Outward Covenant Sign
COVENANT CHILDREN	The Rite: Outward Covenant Sign	The Reality: Inward Covenant Faith

### III. The Message of the New Testament

We see this clearly in Genesis. And here is what is so important: God nowhere nullifies or reverses or changes this principle when we get to the New Testament. God never says, “We're going to do it differently from now on. The covenant promise isn't going to include covenant children anymore, so

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covenant and His lovingkindness to a thousandth generation with those who love Him and keep His commandments.” Calvin says: “And in very deed it behoved the people always to come back to this saying: 'I am thy God and the God of thine offspring after thee.' And against unto this, 'I am the Lord which shows mercy to a thousand generations' as we shall see hereafter. Now, this was not said for that one time only, it must be accomplished nowadays also. Then let us consider that God having once platted [?] that warrant of our salvation, will have it go forward daily, so as we should know that he calls us to the possessing of His kingdom, and that in us He calls them that are to come after us; in so much that those children which come of Christians, are already chosen of God to be His stock and of His household, and God has taken them to himself already, even before they come out of their mothers womb.” (*Sermons on Deuteronomy*, p9). And again: “When God has once planted his word, He continues that grace, not only till the decease of those to whom He speaks, but also to their children and their offspring.” (Calvin, *Ibid*, p317). Ball writes: “God will be as good a God to Abraham's seed, as he is to Abraham himself, and that whatsoever right by the covenant was invested upon Abraham, should descend as from a parent under this covenant, to all his seed by virtue of this covenant made with him.” (p50). Roberts also affirms: “God's covenant is very comprehensive. It comprises both root, and branches; takes in, both parents, and children. God's lovingkindness, and fatherly care is exceeding extensive and diffusive, not only to Abraham's person, but to his posterity also. . .” (p409). Vos says: “God maintains His covenant of grace with the believer. *But when He gives the promises of the covenant to that believer who is brought into the covenant as an adult, these promises are not only 'for you!' but they are also 'for your seed after you.'* Involved here is a link between the natural relationship between parents and children, on the one hand, and the benefits of the covenant of grace, on the other. This link is not such that it works as a natural law. Grace is not an inheritance that one receives without exception because one has been born of parents who are members of the covenant. In His election God always remains free. But nevertheless the rule remains that He has His covenant continue in history, builds the church from the seed of the church. Thus there is not a founding of a new covenant again and again, but the one covenant is administered throughout the ages and generations. . .God does not reckon solely with individual persons in an atomistic manner. His covenant is established with the children and their children into distant generations.” (*Volume 5*, p165). And in summarizing the grounds for infant baptism, Bavinck likewise attests: “The Reformed. . . returned to Scripture and in defending infant baptism unitedly took their position in the covenant of grace, which, according to God's promise, embraces not only believers but also their descendants. Not regeneration, faith, or repentance, much less our assumptions pertaining to them, but only the covenant of grace gave people, both adults and children, the right to baptism. This covenant was the sure, scriptural, objective ground upon which all the Reformed, together and without distinction, based the right to infant baptism.” (*Volume 4*, p525).

<sup>27</sup> “One enters into [God's] covenant in two ways: [1] by freely acceding to and accepting its condition, or by being born into it. In the former case, the inclination to live in the covenant is of course to be assumed. Applied to the covenant of grace, this leads us to the conclusion that an adult hitherto standing outside the covenant relationship can only enter it by faith. By his entering into the covenant, he shows that he will live in and according to the covenant, and this he cannot rightly do without faith. It is thus to be assumed that here entrance into covenant relationship and entrance into covenant fellowship coincide. The first exercise of faith leads, of itself, to both. . . [2] In the second case, where one is born into the covenant, the covenant relationship precedes, in the expectation that covenant fellowship will follow later, so far as conscious life is concerned. . . Only in this way do we obtain an organic connection between being under-the-covenant and being in-the-covenant, between bond and fellowship. The former is, as it were, the shadow that the latter casts. The covenant relationship into which a child enters already at birth is the image of the covenant fellowship in which it is expected to live later. And on the basis of that expectation or, more accurately, on the basis of the promise of God that entitles us to that expectation, such a child receives baptism as a seal of the covenant. The child is regarded as being in the covenant. As it matures, it is again and again pointed out how it lives under the promises and how the reasonable expectation is that it will live in the covenant. The attestations of the covenant precede the substance of the covenant. These promises and this requirement as they apply to the child are precisely the means appointed by God as the way to be traveled, along which the communion of the covenant, the being 'in' in a spiritual sense, is reached. Being under-the-covenant not only precedes, but it is also instrumental.” (Vos, V2, pp106-110).

stop marking them with the covenant sign.” God never says that. Rather, the New Testament *re-emphasizes* everything God had told Abraham in Genesis 17: that His promises still extend to our covenant children, and that we are to continue to mark them with the New Testament covenant sign.

A) *So at Pentecost*, Peter referred back to Genesis 17:7 when he said, “For the promise is for you and your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself” (Acts 2:39). Now, if Peter was wanting to emphasize that covenant children were no longer going to be included in the Covenant of Grace, the worst thing he could have said was that “the promise is for you *and your children*.”<sup>28</sup> Here in Acts 2, at the very inauguration of the New Covenant age, Peter is harkening back to Genesis 17 and telling his Jewish audience that in the New Covenant, the promise still extends to covenant children in the same way that it did in the covenant with Abraham.<sup>29</sup>

B) *And then we have the household baptisms* in Acts and Corinthians. Someone believes in Christ and then you see his whole household being baptized. The argument isn't that mathematically there was probably infants in some of those households. The argument is that this sounds exactly like what was happening in Genesis 17, where Abraham believed, and *his whole household* was baptized. God is using the same pattern of dealing with families in the New Testament as He did in the Old.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Insight from Ligon Duncan's *Covenant Theology* course.

<sup>29</sup> In particular, the promise extends to both elect covenant children and Gentile foreigners in the same way that it did with Abraham. The promise of Genesis 17 was 1) to Abraham; 2) to his descendants; and 3) to the foreign Gentile slaves from distant nations who became part of his household. Peter was addressing a Jewish audience—the descendants of Abraham—to whom promise #2 (above) was made—and declaring to them that the promise God had made 1) to Abraham was 2) also to them (as being his descendants), as well as *their* children (remember—it is an everlasting covenant—it didn't stop with one generation—see Psalm 105:8-10); as well as 3) to all who are far off—that is—foreign Gentiles in distant nations. Thus, the promise of the New Covenant extends to both Gentile foreigners and covenant children in the same way as did the promises to Abraham. It may be objected, how does this verse argue infant baptism? Well, remember, the whole reason Abraham was to give his sons the *covenant sign* was that God had extended to them the *covenant promise*. And Peter is affirming at Pentecost that God's covenant promise still extended to children of believers now in the same way that it did for Abraham. Spurgeon puts forth this objection: “have you ever heard this text quoted as far as this, 'For the promise is unto you and to your children'? And then a full stop is put in, to prove, not that an infant ought to be baptized, but that an infant ought to be sprinkled? The argument used by many ministers is that the blessings of the covenant are for believers and their children. . . [but]. . .this passage. . .teaches nothing of the sort. . .Suppose that I were to try and argue thus: 'The promise is unto you, and to your children, therefore your children ought to be baptized.' Go on with the text: 'and to all that are afar off,' therefore all that are afar off ought to be baptized. That would be the same kind of reasoning; but it would be the drivel of an idiot, with no reasoning in it.” (*A Far Reaching Promise*, Acts 2:39). I love Spurgeon, but here he misses the significance of this passage. *First*, Peter uses the word “promise”, rather than “offer”. Peter isn't saying that salvation is *offered* to everyone, whether it be the children of believers or pagan foreigners in remote places of the earth. His point is that salvation is *promised* to the elect, including the elect among our children as well as those now darkness; to “as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.” So then, *secondly*, if this is true, Spurgeon is actually right: We *should* baptize the second group in verse 39; namely: the elect who come to Christ among far off nations. Ultimately, though, this passage is not about *baptism* at all, but about the *covenant*. It's not describing *who* we baptize, or *when* we baptize (or, for that matter, *how* we baptize!), but simply *why* it is that we baptize: Because of the promise of God. The point is that, as we've seen, the whole reason infants received the covenant *sign* in the Old Testament was on the grounds of God's covenant *promise* in Genesis 17:7. Infants received the covenant sign *because of the covenant promise* which God had made especially to them. That's the point. So: If the covenant *promise* of salvation is likewise made to children of believers in the new covenant, what's to keep them from receiving the covenant sign?

<sup>30</sup> See Acts 16:14-15, 33-34; 18:8 (also 10:47-48 with 11:14) and I Corinthians 1:16. We could say a lot about these accounts of household baptisms. But one question is, why even use the word “household”? If baptism in the New Testament is only for individuals and not for entire families, why even use the word? Why not say something like: “So Lydia believed, and so did her sister Mary-Sue and her big brother Rex; so they were all baptized”? For those who would be steeped in the language of the Old Testament, the mere usage of the word would call to mind the language and imagery of Genesis 17. Further, we also find this household principle not only in Acts and Corinthians, but, as many point out, in *the gospels* as well. It is the account of Zaccheus, in Luke 19:9. Following the notable change that had taken place in him, the Lord said to him: “Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham.” (Luke 19:9). The older writers noted the precise nature of the Lord's words here. Christ doesn't say: “salvation has come to this man, because he. . .is a son of Abraham”; nor: “salvation has come to this household, because they are sons of Abraham”, but rather: “salvation has come to this house, because he. . .is a son of Abraham.” The Greek word here for house (oikos), though commonly used for a literal house, was also commonly used for posterity and lineage, as in Luke 1:69, “the house of David”; but even more noteworthy, this word was often used in the New Testament (and in Luke's two-volume account in particular) for “household” (Luke 12:52; 16:27; Acts 7:10; 10:2; 11:14; 16:15, 31; 18:8). The context determines the meaning. But surely, no one in their right mind would claim that the Savior is referring to Zaccheus' physical house in this statement; to claim that a house can be saved! Jesus is speaking of Zaccheus' family; He's referring to his household: “Today salvation has come to this household. . .” Now again: it is Zaccheus alone who the Lord credits as being a “son of Abraham”; and yet the benefits of salvation are imputed to his entire household: “Today salvation has come to this house[hold], because he, too, is a son of Abraham.” How can we understand

C) Paul also says in 1 Corinthians 7:14 that God considers the children of even one believing parent to be holy: “for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy.” This word “holy” is the same word used in the New Testament for professing adult believers (“saints”). Now, this doesn't mean that every covenant child is inwardly or actually holy. But it does mean that covenant children are *externally* and *covenantally* holy: God sees covenant children differently than pagan children. Children of believers are set apart from other children as being part of the covenant community.<sup>31</sup>

D) Even the Old Testament prophecies of the new covenant—which announce the days of the New Testament church—speak of God extending His promises to covenant children. For example, in the context of Israel's restoration from exile and the ensuing glory of the new covenant church, Moses foretells: “Moreover, the Lord your God will circumcise your heart *and the heart of your descendants*, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live” (Deuteronomy 30:6). Another example is Isaiah 59:21, where the Lord declares, “As for Me, this is My covenant with them,” says the Lord: ‘My Spirit which is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your offspring, nor from the mouth of your offspring's offspring,’ says the Lord, ‘from now and forever.’ Not only does the New Testament clearly not revoke the promises made to the children of believers, but the Old Testament clearly prophecies that those promises will continue to be upheld in the new covenant.<sup>32</sup>

We saw earlier that Abraham was to mark his children with the covenant sign *because* God was also extending to them His covenant promises. The whole reason he was to mark them with the *sign* was that they were heirs of the *promises*. So, we ask: If the children of believers are still the heirs of *the covenant promises*, why should we stop marking them with *covenant sign*? Further, if God gave us a clear command to mark our infants with the covenant sign, why would we stop? Baptists ask: Where did God command us to mark our children with the covenant sign? We reply: Genesis 17. Our question to them is: Where did God command us to *stop* marking them with the covenant sign?<sup>33</sup>

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this but as an outworking of the principle of Genesis 17:7-8, that God's promise to Abraham to be God to him and his seed is not limited to him, but also extended to us? That, just like Abraham, God also promises salvation to our seed? Goodwin writes: “when Zaccheus was thus converted, Christ enlarges his covenant to Zaccheus' family also, 'This day is salvation come to this house, inasmuch as he is also the son of Abraham,' (verse 9). Now if Christ's intent had been in this answer given, to show that he . . . though a great sinner, yet was converted as being a son of Abraham (as some expound it), he would have made it the reason but of this only, why Zaccheus was saved himself personally; but he makes it the reason why his house should be saved also, and so the covenant stuck with them of his family likewise, because he the father of the family was now a believer. . . so now being converted, [he] is therefore called a 'son of Abraham' and withal had this privilege of Abraham, as being his son. . . to have his house brought into the covenant, even of that of salvation, in conformity to his father Abraham. . . Thus in like manner, when the apostles came to preach the gospel to a Gentile householder, master or father of a family, they carried the offer of it in this tenor, and in the way of this privilege, as a motive to conversion. So when Paul preached to the jailor, Acts 16, he asking, 'What shall I do to be saved?' (verse 30), Paul answers, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus and thou shalt be saved;' and then adds, 'thou and thine house.’” (*Works*, V9, pp430-31). And Vos says: “When Zacchaeus is called, then the Savior says: 'Today salvation has come to this house, since he too is a son of Abraham' (Luke 19:9). This call is based on the promise given for Abraham's seed, and from it flow further blessings for Zacchaeus' seed too.” (V5, p165).

<sup>31</sup> Calvin remarks: “the children of the Jews also, because they had been made heirs of his covenant and distinguished from the children of the impious, were called a holy seed (Ezra 9:2; Isaiah 6:13). For this same reason, the children of Christians are considered holy; and even though born with only one believing parent, by the apostle's testimony they differ from the unclean seed of idolators (1Cor.7:14).” (*Institutes 4.16.6*). Thomas Vincent writes, “As the Jews are called in Scripture a holy nation, because by circumcision they were made visible Church members; so the infants of Christians, as well as themselves, are called holy; that is, federally holy, as they are by baptism made visible Church members” (*Shorter Catechism*, p.252). And Ball says: “Your children are holy’, says the Apostle, 1 Corinthians 7:14. Holy by covenant, though by nature sinful.” (p52).

<sup>32</sup> See also Isaiah 54:10,13; 61:8-9; Jeremiah 32:38-40; Ezekiel 37:25-26. Insight gleaned from G.I. Williamson.

<sup>33</sup> G.I. Williamson, in responding to why there is no explicit command to baptize infants in the New Testament, writes: “The reason is that there was no need to give a new command for something that God had already made clear. From the beginning God had included children with their believing parents. It was, from the beginning, God's will that children receive the sign and seal of the covenant along with their parents. Since there was no change in this fact (but only in the form of the sign and seal), there was no need for any specific commandment concerning the children being recipients. To the Baptists who say: 'Show us where God ever put children in the Church,' we say—it is recorded in Genesis 17. To the Baptists we therefore say: 'Now please show us where God ever put the children of believers out!'” (*Shorter Catechism*, pp300-01). In another place, he expands on this further: “we agree, of course, that the New Testament does not contain a specific command to baptize infants. Neither does the New Testament contain a specific command that women are to receive the Lord's Supper. But this is not the same as saying that the Bible contains no such command. The New Testament does not always repeat specific commands which are already recorded in the Old Testament Scriptures. . . God, at the beginning of patriarchal history, commanded that

## IV. The Realm versus the Reality

*A Vital CLARIFICATION about Baptism:* Now, having said all that, there's something really important that we need to clarify. We baptize our covenant children because God commands us—but that baptism doesn't save them. Water baptism never saved anyone.<sup>34</sup> The baptism that saves is the baptism of the heart—the new birth—that only comes about through faith in Christ. Our covenant children must repent of their sins and put their faith in Christ if they would be saved. Baptism is the *outward sign* that God has given to signify membership in the *external* covenant community. But—and this is so vital—the *outward sign* isn't the same thing as the *inward reality*. In other words, there's a difference between being *in the covenant* and being *of the covenant*. All professing believers and their children are considered to be *in the covenant*—but that's not the same thing as saying that they are all *of the covenant*.<sup>35</sup> The fact is, there are some covenant children who never truly embrace the covenant from the heart.<sup>36</sup> We might think of it this way: All the children of believers are born into

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the sign and seal of the covenant of grace be given to the children of believers (Gen. 17:1-14). Furthermore, it was explicitly stated that this was an everlasting requirement. It is not true, then, that God has given no commandment with respect to the baptism of children. The Baptist contention is that children may not be baptized without a New Testament commandment. But the need is rather for the Baptists to produce the 'New Testament command' that excludes what God previously commanded. . . Our argument is this: 1) God commanded believers to give the sign and seal of the covenant to their children; 2) baptism is now the sign and seal of that covenant concerning which God gave this command (Gal. 3:16-17); 3) God changed the form of the sign and seal but not the everlasting covenant; he did not revoke his command to give the sign and seal to the children of believers; and 4) the New Testament evidence confirms this position." (*Westminster Confession*, p274).

<sup>34</sup> Baptism never automatically imparts saving grace. This is absolutely vital. As Calvin notes: "The schools of the Sophists have taught with remarkable agreement that the sacraments of the new law (those now used in the Christian church) justify and confer grace, provided we do not set up a barrier of mortal sin. How deadly and pestilential this notion is cannot be expressed. . . Of a certainty it is diabolical. For in promising a righteousness apart from faith, it hurls souls headlong to destruction. . . But what is a sacrament received apart from faith but the most certain ruin of the church? For nothing ought to be expected from it apart from the promise but the promise no less threatens wrath to unbelievers than offers grace to believers. Hence, any man is deceived who thinks anything more is conferred upon him through the sacraments than what is offered by God's Word and received by him in true faith. . . the Lord's morsel was poison to Judas. . ." (*Institutes*, 4.16.14-15). Bavinck writes: "The Council of Trent decreed that the New Testament sacraments contain grace in themselves and impart it to all who place no obstacle in its path, so that in baptism also the children receive grace and the virtues *ex opere operato* (by the act performed) and though they are not believers beforehand, they become believers by baptism. . . Also a number of Reformed theologians (Pareus, Baronius, Forbes a' Corse, Davenant, Ward, de Brais in Saumur, et al.) taught that in baptism all children received a certain grace of forgiveness and regeneration that, if they died young, was sufficient for salvation. . . And corresponding to this is the doctrine of the High Churchmen (in the Anglican Church) who believe in baptismal regeneration. This doctrine too is open to many objections. . . Baptism is robbed of its scriptural character when it is detached from faith and the Word, ceases to be a sign and seal of God's promises, becomes an independent self-operative means of grace, and even takes first place among the means of grace. . . The Reformed therefore returned to Scripture and in defending infant baptism unitedly took their position in the covenant of grace, which, according to God's promise, embraces not only believers but also their descendants. Not regeneration, faith, or repentance, much less our assumptions pertaining to them, but only the covenant of grace gave people, both adults and children, the right to baptism. . . The basis for baptism is not the assumption that someone is regenerate, nor even that (there is) regeneration itself, but only the covenant of God. . . Although baptism, like the external calling, still produces many a blessing even for unbelievers, its true fruit and full power can only be enjoyed by believers. . . God remains true to himself and bestows salvation on everyone who believes. But faith is not everyone's possession. Ultimately the fruit of baptism is only enjoyed by those who are elect and therefore come to faith in God's time." (V4, pp524-25, 531-32). And Vos says: "Here and there in some Reformed theologians a conception intrudes that appears to function at the boundary of the orthodox system, so that one may doubt that it may still be called Reformed. There have been those who posit a kind of justification and regeneration at baptism, signified and conveyed to all the children of covenant members, without exception, but then not necessarily connected to salvation, since it can be lost through the fault of the children in growing up. . . We can clearly discover in this outlook the endeavor to give a real, tangible content to baptism. But it is, as Witsius observes, a failed endeavor. . . the view mentioned is not tenable for one who is Reformed." (V5, pp171-73).

<sup>35</sup> We could also put it this way: All children of believers are in the covenant, but we cannot say with certainty that the covenant is in all of them: covenant children are not all children of promise. This distinction between being *in* and *of* the covenant is the language of Bavinck. He says: "Certainly, there are bad branches on the vine, and there is chaff among the wheat; and in a large house, there are vessels of gold as well as vessels of earthenware. . . But we do not have the right and the power to separate the two: in the day of the harvest, God himself will do this. . . Though not *of* the covenant, they are *in* the covenant and will someday be judged accordingly." (*Reformed Dogmatics*, V3, p232). Vos at times points to the same truth by using slightly different language. Posing the question, "Who is in the covenant?", Vos at first gives a two-fold answer: "on the one side: All the members of the visible church are in; on the other side: Only they who have saving faith are in. Both of these are true, but in a different sense." (Volume 2, p105). He goes on to explain what he means, and distinguishes between being "under" the covenant (outwardly and formally) versus being "in" the covenant (inwardly and truly) (V2, pp105-111).

<sup>36</sup> We say *covenant children* here in particular because we're talking about infant baptism. But this truth isn't limited to those

the *realm of the covenant*, and for this reason we are to mark them all with *the rite (or sign) of the covenant*, but this by no means guarantees that they are all possessors of the *reality of the covenant*.

UNDER THE COVENANT REALM VERSUS POSSESSING THE COVENANT REALITY

	BELONG TO THE COVENANT OF GRACE		MARKED BY	MEMBERS OF
THOSE MERELY UNDER THE <i>REALM</i> OF THE COVENANT	As only under its Administration	Only Externally; Only Outwardly	Only the Covenant Sign	Only the Visible Church
THOSE TRULY POSSESSING THE <i>REALITY</i> OF THE COVENANT	As true partakers of its Essence	Externally <i>and</i> Internally; Outwardly <i>and</i> Inwardly	The Sign <i>and</i> the Reality	The Visible <i>and</i> the Invisible Church

This is exactly what we see in the Old Testament with circumcision. Abraham was commanded to circumcise both Ishmael and Isaac; but Romans tells us that it was only Isaac who was the true child of promise. Likewise Isaac was commanded to circumcise both his sons, Jacob and Esau; but Scripture tells us that Esau was never saved: “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated” (Romans 9:13). Esau was circumcised *outwardly*, but he was never circumcised *inwardly*.<sup>37</sup> Esau was a covenant child; but he rejected the God of the covenant.<sup>38</sup> This is why Paul warns us in Romans 2:28-29, “For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit. . .”<sup>39</sup> Circumcision never saved anybody. There were *great privileges* that came along with circumcision and being part of the covenant community (Romans 3:1-2). But it never guaranteed your salvation. For, while it was true that Gentile outsiders could be *grafted into* the covenant promises by faith, it was also true that circumcised covenant children who refused to embrace the God of the covenant would be *cut off from* the covenant promises. Old Testament covenant children could be either covenant *keepers* or covenant *breakers*—those who embraced the covenant from the heart by faith, or those who didn't.<sup>40</sup>

who are baptized as infants. There are adults too, who profess faith and are baptized, who later walk away from the faith.

<sup>37</sup> Not only was Esau never saved, but God declares specifically of him that he was never elect. This means that even before Esau was born, though God had specifically testified that He hadn't chosen him (Romans 9:13), yet still, according to God's command (cf. Genesis 17), Esau was still to be circumcised. G.I. Williamson draws out the significance of this truth in his commentary on the *Westminster Confession*: “[Esau] was circumcised by divine command. Yet it was certain (even before he was born) that he would never have union with Christ (Rom. 9:11-13). In this instance it cannot be argued that Esau was improperly circumcised. Neither can it be argued that Esau was circumcised because it was presumed that he was, or would be, in union with Christ. It can be argued only that God commanded believers to give the sign and seal of the covenant to their children even though it could not be presumed that they were, or would be, in union with Christ.” (Williamson, p278).

<sup>38</sup> This is described for us most vividly, not only in the New Testament, but in the Genesis narrative as well. Genesis 36:1-8 recounts the tragic day that Esau walked away from the faith, bringing his household with him (and not only his immediate household, but his offspring for generations to come, vv9-43). Here, we're told: “Then Esau took his wives and his sons and his daughters and all his household, and his livestock and all his cattle and all his goods which he had acquired in the land of Canaan, and went to another land away from his brother Jacob.” (v6). We've seen that the land of Canaan represented so much more than a physical place; it was the Church. So this was not simply a neutral move to a different location. When Esau left the land, it wasn't just a *geographical* move, it was a *spiritual* one; Esau was making the decision to leave the Church.

<sup>39</sup> Alec Motyer draws out three practical inferences from Romans 2:25-29: 1) The outward sign conveys no [eternal] benefit inevitably attached to it (verse 28): *IE, circumcision and baptism never guaranteed salvation* (cf. Esau and Simon in Acts 8:13); 2) The outward sign conveys no [eternal] benefit which cannot be had without it (verse 26): *IE, circumcision and baptism were never necessary for salvation* (cf. Paul's argument about Abraham in Romans 4:9-12 and the dying thief in Luke 23:33,43); and 3) The enjoyment [or appropriation] of the spiritual reality which God has associated with the outward sign depends on the relation of the heart towards God (verse 29): *IE, Circumcision and baptism signify salvation—but that salvation is itself only obtained through faith in Christ.* (Taken from *The Anglican Evangelical Doctrine of Infant Baptism*, pp37-40).

<sup>40</sup> David repeats over and over in Psalm 37 the warning that the wicked would be *cut off* (vv9,22,28,34,38). The allusion to circumcision here is striking; it's meant to warn those who bear the covenant sign. At times *cutting off* took place through the OT equivalent of excommunication (Genesis 17:14; cf. 1Cor.5:13); but the prophets were constantly warning that many among the covenant community would be cut off in the sifting that took place at the final judgment (cf. Romans 11:17-22). Witsius puts it this way: “as the inheritance of the land of Canaan was a type of the heavenly inheritance, and the national covenant included the spiritual covenant of grace; so also the exclusion from the national covenant and typical inheritance, was a sign of the exclusion from the covenant of grace and the heavenly inheritance.” (V2, p153). As also O Palmer Robertson notes: “First of all, the *'grafting' principle* must be remembered. . . 'Israel' cannot be restricted in its essence to an ethnic community. Israel must include the proselyte who does not belong to 'Israel' according to the flesh, but is absorbed into Israel by process of ingrafting. The New Testament displays an awareness of this principle when it speaks of the 'ingrafting' of the Gentiles (Rom. 11:17,19). . . By the process of 'ingrafting,' the Gentile becomes an 'Israelite' in the fullest possible sense (cf. Gal. 3:29). From the point of ingrafting, his subsequent seed becomes heir to the promises given to Abraham. His line now stands as legitimate heir to the genealogical promises given to the patriarch. Secondly. . . *the 'pruning' principle* must be noted. Not only is it possible for a new branch to be grafted into genealogical relation to Abraham. It is also possible for a natural seed of

And the same is true of baptism in the New Testament church. *In Matthew 13*, Jesus tells a parable about a dragnet. The net represents the kingdom of heaven. It's cast into the sea and is filled with fish. It doesn't capture all the fish in the sea—just a small portion. But when the net is filled, they drag it up to the beach, and they begin to sort out the good fish from the bad fish. There's both good and bad fish in the net; and it's sorted out at the judgment. And that's the way it is in the church. There's good fish and bad fish, and Jesus is going to sort it out at the judgment.<sup>41</sup> Or, think about *John 15:2*, where Jesus says, “Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit.” Who are the branches that are *in Jesus* but not bearing any fruit, that are later (in verse 6) cast into the fire? They're members of the visible church—but they've never been born again. They're members of the covenant community, but they've never truly embraced the covenant from the heart by faith. They've got a baptismal certificate up on the wall, but they've never experienced the baptism of the heart. Don't let that happen to you.

You see, being a part of the covenant community is a *wonderful* thing—but it's also a *dangerous* thing. It was a wonderful thing to be a part of the Old Testament covenant community—but once you were part of that community—if you turned your back on the Lord—do you know what happened? You were put to death for covenantal treason.<sup>42</sup> Because circumcision was a sign of salvation, but it was also a sign of judgment. And so is baptism. Baptism is a sign of salvation—the waters of regeneration. But it's also a sign of judgment—the waters of Noah. It's a wonderful thing to be a part of the New Testament covenant community; but it's also a dangerous thing, because covenant breakers will be judged even more severely than unbelievers.<sup>43</sup> And so we teach these things to our children. We admonish them, we warn them, we plead with them to embrace the God of the covenant by faith.<sup>44</sup>

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Abraham to be removed from its position of privilege. This principle also may be traced back into the earliest experience of the line of promise. To demonstrate the sovereignty of God in the electing process, it was said, 'Jacob have I loved, and Esau have I hated' (Rom. 9:13; cf. Mal. 1:2,3; Gen. 25:23). This concept of pruning also must be given full weight in the definition of 'Israel.' Again, 'Israel' cannot be identified merely as ethnic descendants of Abraham, for 'they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel' (Rom. 9:6). It is those who, in addition to being related to Abraham by natural descendency, also relate to him by faith, plus those Gentiles who are ingrafted by faith, that constitute the true Israel.” (Palmer Robertson, p40).

<sup>41</sup> Insight gratefully gleaned from Aaron Myers, Providence PCA, in his baptism sermon.

<sup>42</sup> See Deuteronomy 17:2-7 for just one example. This truth as well as its application for us is exactly the point of the author of Hebrews when he writes: “Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?” (10:28-29).

<sup>43</sup> As Vos says: “If one is under the covenant relationship[;] and covenant fellowship, the essence of the covenant, is missing, one is nevertheless treated as a covenant member in the sense that nonobservance of the covenant incurs guilt and causes covenant-breaking. This explains how there is covenant-breaking and yet no apostasy of the saints. Note carefully, not merely temporary covenant-breaking is in view—for in believers that is compatible with perseverance—but final covenant-breaking. Everyone who is under the covenant is treated as though he lived in the covenant. It is so with the covenant of works, and is so with the covenant of grace. And therefore, one does not have the right to say that the nonelect are in no way in the covenant. For them there is no true covenant fellowship, but their accountability is determined according to the covenant relationship. *This accountability is greater than that which an ordinary person outside the covenant has in relation to the gospel.* Being in-the-covenant may never be diminished to a life under the offer of the gospel. It is more than that.” (V2, p107). Duncan says: “The covenantal relationship may be fulfilled in either blessing or curse. If the person who has received the sign of the covenant rejects the covenant, by not being a person who believes and repents, by refusing to truly embrace the covenant in the heart, then that person, by the sign of the covenant, by the sign of circumcision, is sealed to a double curse. Not only is that person cursed unto the Covenant of Works, they're cursed for a false application of the Covenant of Grace.”

<sup>44</sup> Calvin made use of the example of the Jews to warn his hearers: “But the chief point is, that we must learn to be the true children of Abraham. Seeing we be grafted into his stock through faith let us take heed that we be not cut off from this body by our unbelief. For the prophets who were the true expounders of the law, do well declare what the thing is which God aims at in this place, when they say: 'Come you of the stock of Abraham? No you are the children of a harlot every one of you. Get you hence you harlot brats, appear here in your likeness, come forth and let men know you, you children of a strumpet (says the prophet Isaiah; 57:3). And the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel speak in like sort: 'What have you like unto Abraham whose name you bear? Was not your father an Amorite and your mother a whore?' To whom spoke they thus? Spoke they to children of harlots and unto bastards concerning the flesh? No. But unto lawful born children. And why then calls he them strumpets children, as if they were begotten in some brothel-house? Because they were corrupted and followed not the faith of Abraham. For the true parentage is spiritual (as St. Paul says). They which descended from the stock of Abraham concerning the flesh, are not therefore accounting the lineage of Abraham. . . So then let us note that when Moses forbade that bastards should enter into the temple, it was not only for this shameful note which is in respect of the world, when children are not begotten in lawful wedlock; it was rather to show that the Jews were not worthy to have any access unto God, to call upon his name, or to company with His congregation, except they held fast this spiritual kindred of Abraham, that is to say, except

## V. Reviewing our Study

*A Brief SUMMARY:* Let's try to summarize briefly what we've learned so far:

- 1) The covenant promises to Abraham were about salvation in the fullest sense.
- 2) The covenant promises were made not only to Abraham *but also* to his offspring.
- 3) The covenant sign of circumcision was given to Abraham as a sign of that salvation:
  - a) Abraham was marked with circumcision to signify his faith only *after* he believed.
  - b) Yet he was then to apply that same sign to his infant sons *before* belief was possible.
- 4) New Testament believers have entered into the same covenant promises made to Abraham.
- 5) The Scriptures teach that those covenant promises still extend to our children.
- 6) Thus, our infant children should continue to be marked with the covenant sign.
- 7) This doesn't mean that all Abraham's children (or ours) will be saved: this is by faith alone.
- 8) But it does mean that our children are included in the covenant and should receive the sign.<sup>45</sup>

## VI. One Remaining Question

*The MYSTERY in the Covenant:* There's one question that still remains. We've seen that the essence of God's covenant with Abraham was about salvation in the fullest sense: The Lord was promising to be Abraham's God. And further, in Genesis 17, we find that God promised not only to be the God of Abraham, but to be the God of his descendants after him (vv7-8). We've seen that this is the whole reason Abraham was to circumcise his children: God commanded Abraham to give his children the *sign* of the promise (in Genesis 17:9-14) because God had declared them also to be the *heirs* of the promise (in Genesis 17:7-8). But, there is a significant question we have to answer at this point: If God was actually promising salvation to Abraham's descendants, how could it ever be that there were any of his descendants (like Esau) who were never saved? And, in the same way, if God is making the same promises to us and our children that He did to Abraham and his children, how is it that any of our children come short of salvation? Do you see the tension? *If God's promise was of salvation, and that promise extends to our children, then what do we make of the countless instances (both in the Old and New Testament church) of covenant children who walk away from the Lord?* This is an extremely important question, which traditionally, has been answered in two different ways:

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they followed his faith, and except they continued in that pure covenant of God." (*Sermons on Deuteronomy*, pp796-97).

<sup>45</sup> We could also summarize this in four points as G.I. Williamson has (quoted earlier): 1) God commanded believers to give the sign and seal of the covenant to their children; 2) baptism is now the sign and seal of that covenant concerning which God gave this command; 3) God changed the form of the sign and seal but not the everlasting covenant; he did not revoke his command to give the sign and seal to the children of believers; and 4) the New Testament evidence confirms this position (*The Westminster Confession of Faith For Study Classes*; p274). Ligon Duncan asks three questions: 1) Is baptism a covenant sign? 2) Are children of believing parents part of the covenant now (in the New Covenant) in the same way that they were under the Old Covenant? 3) If God gave promises and a sign of His promises to believers and their children in the Old Testament (and He did), should we give the sign of the promises that He makes to believers and their children in the New Testament to both believers and their children? (from his *Covenant Theology* course). Hodge argues for infant baptism in this way: "1) The Visible Church is a divine institution; 2) The Visible Church does not consist exclusively of the regenerate; 3) The commonwealth of Israel was the Church; 4) The Church under the new dispensation is identical with that under the old; 5) The terms of admission into the Church before the Advent were the same that are required for admission into the Christian Church; 6) Infants were members of the Church under the Old Testament economy; 7) There is nothing in the New Testament which justifies the exclusion of the children of believers from membership in the Church; 8) Children need, and are capable of receiving the benefits of redemption." (V3, pp546-58). And Roberts argues thus: "1) The new covenant under which Abraham's Christian seed are, is for substance one and the same with this covenant under, which Abraham's Jewish seed were. . . 2) The infants of Abraham's Christian seed are in covenant with their parents now; as well as the infants of Abraham's Jewish seed were in covenant with their parents then. . . 3) This sacramental inauguration of the infants of Abraham's seed God established and commanded under the Old Testament, and hath never forbidden it under the New Testament. . . 4) Baptism has succeeded in the room and stead of circumcision, as the Apostle clearly testifies [in Colossians 2:10-12]. . . 5) The federal grace and privileges of Abraham's Christian seed under the New Testament are as large and larger then those of Abraham's Jewish seed under the Old Testament; therefore if the infants of his Jewish seed were circumcised then, much more the infants of his Christian seed should be baptized now. . . 6) The infants of Abraham's Christian seed now, are every way as capable of baptism, as the infants of Abraham's Jewish seed then, could be capable of circumcision. . . 7) No objection can be made against the baptizing of the infants of Abraham's Christian seed; but the same objections will militate and may be urged as strongly every way against the circumcising of the infants of Abraham's Jewish seed." (pp317-18).

A) *Some view God's promise in Genesis 17:7 to be more of a CONDITIONAL OFFER.* God isn't actually promising salvation to our children—He's offering it to them. Those who hold this view say that God is not making an absolute promise to the children of believers to be their God; He's merely making them a conditional offer. What is the offer? God will be their God if they indeed put their faith in Him. God will be their God as long as the covenant child indeed takes Him to be his God. In other words, God isn't truly making an absolute promise; He's only extending to covenant children a conditional offer. He's putting an offer on the table. But at the end of the day, it's all contingent on the response of the covenant child. Salvation is offered. But it can be either accepted or rejected.<sup>46</sup>

The first problem with this view is that an offer is something very different than a promise. When we read Genesis 17:7, we don't find the Lord *offering* to be the God of Abraham's descendants—rather, we find the Lord *promising* Abraham that He will be their God. He tells him: “I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to you descendants after you.” This is more than just *an offer*—this is *a promise* God is making to Abraham. And when God makes promises, He keeps His promises. Further, if we believe what Scripture says about our inherent depravity—that naturally, every single one of us is not only *not able* to come to Christ, but *not willing* to come to Him—then it doesn't make any sense for God to give this kind of offer to our children. Truth is, if God offers us salvation—and that's all He does—none of us would ever be saved. The whole reason God's covenant grace is so awesome is that He does so much more than just *offer* these things to us. He doesn't just call us—He *chooses* us. He doesn't just invite us to come—He *draws* us. He doesn't just offer us life—He *raises us from the dead*. He doesn't just point out the way—He actually picks us up, puts us on His shoulders, and carries us back home (Ephesians 2:1-5). This is our God. Praise be to Him.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Hoeskema describes this “conditional offer” view in this way: “According to this view, the promise is for all who are born under the covenant, for all the children of believing parents, for all who are baptized. In the promise God bequeaths all the blessings of the covenant upon all who are baptized. He gives all the right to those blessings. . . However, this promise must necessarily be presented as conditional. It is contingent for its fulfillment upon the faith of those who are baptized. They are obliged to believe the promise, to fulfill their covenant obligation, their part of the covenant of God. If they fail in this, the blessings of the covenant do not actually come into their possession.” (Hoeskema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, V2, p377). It seems that there are several distinguishable sub-views under this larger category of the “conditional offer” view. James Beeke categorizes two of them. The first he describes as technically offered to all covenant children but truly guaranteed to the elect among them. The second he describes as offered to all covenant children equally but not actually guaranteed to any of them (*Bible Doctrine for Teens and Young Adults*, pp357-60). The second of these is far more dangerous, as we will see.

<sup>47</sup> Of the first “conditional offer” view (see above footnote), James Beeke says: “This covenant division denies the eternalness and unbreakableness of the Covenant of Grace, for God's offer of salvation is neither eternal nor unbreakable. The Covenant of Grace is reduced to only a breakable offer and conditional promise.” Of the second “conditional offer” view, he says: “The essence of the Covenant promises can be confirmed by faith, or broken by rejection, in the lives of the baptized seed. This presentation of the covenants. . . denies the unbreakableness of the Covenant of Grace. . . Man can break all the promises of the Covenant through his unbelief.” (*Bible Doctrine for Teens and Young Adults*, James Beeke, pp359-360). Vos simply notes in his *Reformed Dogmatics*: “there is more in that sealing of baptism than a conditional offer of the covenant; there are positive promises of God.” (*Volume 5*, p185). And in another place he writes: “in a very special sense, the covenant of grace is presented in Scripture as an indissoluble covenant, in which God always keeps His promise. Mountains may depart and hills be removed; the covenant of His peace does not depart and is not removed (Isaiah 54:10). Now, one could suppose this is intended conditionally, namely, that God keeps His promise if we meet our obligation. But that would not be a specific mark of the covenant of grace; that could apply just as well to the covenant of works. And the covenant of grace is distinguished from the covenant of works precisely by the fact that it no longer depends on human willing or running but on the faithfulness of God.” (*Volume 2*, p99). A little later he continues: “We here face the difficulty that the covenant relationship appears powerless to bring covenant fellowship in its wake. We get a covenant that remains unfruitful. A barren, judicial relationship, an 'ought to be,' appears to take the place of the glorious realities that mention of the covenant brings to our minds. This is in fact the point where, by means of the covenant idea, the Pelagian error could gain access to Reformed doctrine. If the covenant idea is in fact the all-encompassing expression of life under and in grace, how then can it be that in this form it comes to us first of all as something that 'ought to be,' a relationship that still lacks realization? . . . It makes no sense that God enters into a covenant with man unable to help himself, yet in terms of which faith and repentance are expected of him, if absolutely no provision is made to cause the covenant to become reality. But the Lord does not establish a covenant of grace with believers and their seed only in order to obligate them from the heart and increase their responsibility toward the gospel. The covenant relationship must be more than a bond of obligation. . . in this covenant of grace, God in fact makes promises that enable the members of His covenant to really live in the covenant, to receive its essence, to make it a reality. . . And therefore, that seed is not merely under a conditional bond, but also under an absolute promise. For those who do not venture to accept this, the covenant concept must more and more lose its spiritual and gracious character. They make it an arid system of obligations, in which all comforting and enlivening power is lacking.” (Vos, *Volume 2*, pp107-08).

*B) The traditional way to view Genesis 17:7 has always been as an ABSOLUTE PROMISE.* God is not just offering to draw our children to himself; He's actually promising to do so. But the question remains: How do we reconcile this promise with what we know both from Scripture and from our own experience—that not all covenant children do indeed embrace the God of the covenant from the heart, by faith? How do we resolve this tension that on the one hand, God is actually promising to effectually draw our covenant children to himself, and yet we know that there are some among them that He actually doesn't draw in this way? There is a single answer that has been given in response to this question among those in the Reformed tradition: God *is* truly promising to effectually draw our covenant children to himself, *but* this doesn't mean that He's necessarily promising to draw each and every one of them. What do we mean by this? The promise is real. But it's not necessarily made to every covenant child without exception. It's made, rather, to *the elect among* our covenant children.

Think about what we see with the patriarchs. God promised Abraham that He would be the God of His descendants. But we come to learn as we continue to read Genesis that God was not actually promising to be God to every single one of them: He fulfilled this promise in Isaac, but He passed over Ishmael. It was the same with Isaac's children: the Lord was pleased to choose Jacob and draw him to himself, but He passed over Esau. The Lord was faithful to keep the promise He made to Abraham, to be not only his God, but the God of his children and grandchildren after him. But what we see is that God wasn't actually promising to be God to each and every child. He was promising to be God to the elect among them. This is the very thing Paul draws out for us in Romans 9. He tells us that God chose Isaac, but not Ishmael. He chose Jacob, but not Esau. Paul isn't just teaching us here about the doctrine of election *in general*—he's actually teaching us about election *as it relates to covenant families*. So, if we ask: How can God's promise be true that He will effectually draw our children to himself, when experience shows us that there are some among them that never believe? Paul gives the answer in Romans 9:6-8: "it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: through Isaac your descendants will be named.' That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants."<sup>48</sup>

<sup>48</sup> As Calvin explains from Genesis 17:7: "the promise by which the Lord had adopted them all as children, was common to all; and in that promise, it cannot be denied, that eternal salvation was offered to all. What, therefore, can be the meaning of Paul, when he denies that certain persons have any right to be reckoned among children, except that he is no longer reasoning about the externally offered grace, but about that of which only the elect effectually partake? Here, then, a twofold class of sons presents itself to us, in the Church; for since the whole body of the people is gathered together into the fold of God, by one and the same voice, all without exception, are in this respects accounted children; the name of the Church is applicable in common to them all; but in the innermost sanctuary of God, none others are reckoned the sons of God, than they in whom the promise is ratified by faith. And although this difference flows from the fountain of gratuitous election, whence also faith itself springs; yet, since the counsel of God is in itself hidden from us, we therefore distinguish the true from the spurious children, by the respective marks of faith and of unbelief." And again, Calvin writes: "For in calling Abraham, God extended the promise of salvation unto his whole lineage. He said unto Abraham, I will be the God of thy lineage after thee.' Here then is a general election (as they term it) of the whole people. . .And in very deed, the sign of circumcision was as a seal, to warrant all the offspring of that race, that God was their Savior; and so, that was such a grace as was common to all the children of Abraham. Howbeit, there is another second election or choosing, which is (as you would say) straighter; namely, that out of the same lineage God chooses whom He thinks good. . .So then, Jacob was chosen, and Esau refused. . .Herein we see that God having chosen a people in general, does notwithstanding reserve liberty to himself, to choose out of that people whomsoever he wishes, and to refuse the rest. And so as I have declared already, there is one election which God makes generally, and another (particularly) of those whom he vouchsafes to take for his children and heirs." (*Sermons on Deuteronomy*, pp315-16). Ball says simply: "In respect of the external administration of the covenant they were counted the seed; but they walked not in the steps of the faith of Abraham, and therefore in deed and truth they were not the seed." (p52). And Goodwin notes: "As election was free in choosing the Jews, and is free in the choice of those Jews who are to come, and yet God took in this respect too their fathers in it notwithstanding, so it is in ours, and so it goes not by birth as the moving cause, but as the subserving instrument or means to manifest that his love the more, both to the father and the child. And therefore. . .God oftentimes, if not usually, to show his grace takes not all the seed: 'Do you say wherein have I loved you; was not Esau Jacob's brother, yet I loved Jacob, and hated Esau?' (Malachi 1:2)." (*Works*, V9, p474). G.H. Kersten: "Those who teach a Covenant of Grace that only consists of an offer of God that He will give salvation on condition of faith and repentance, actually return to Rome. For Rome teaches that the Covenant of Grace does not give salvation, but only the possibility of being saved. Calvin opposed this doctrine with all his might, and with him and right-minded Reformed theologians. Not one of them separated the Covenant of Grace from election. . .this organic unity of the elect as the body of Christ and the spiritual offspring of Abraham, is fully revealed in the Covenant of Grace. Scripture refers to this when it speaks of the covenant established with Abraham and his seed. That was the great promise of the covenant: 'I will be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee,' not as if grace were transplanted from father to a son, but rather that God would bring

## VII. Closing Applications

*Final REFLECTIONS:* Scripture teaches us that the Lord chose Jacob, not Esau. This passage is hard enough already. A lot of people struggle to think that God would choose some people and not others. But the passage becomes even harder when we think about who these brothers were. Jacob and Esau weren't just any children. They were *covenant children*. As Christian parents, the thing we long for most in this world is for our children to come to know Christ. And the thing that terrifies us more than anything is the thought of that not happening. So these are hard truths for us as parents.

But this passage in Romans 9 isn't here in Scripture to make us think that God probably won't draw all our children to himself. That's not its purpose. This passage isn't here to discourage us. It's here, rather, to remind us of a truth we desperately need to hear; which is this: God is the One who must save our children. This is something that is exceedingly beyond us—this is something *God* must do.

A) *So, God invites us to PRAYER.* If the salvation of our children truly depends wholly upon God, then this should take us to our knees. God wants us to plead with him for the souls of our precious children. And He hears and answers those prayers. In Mark 10:13-16, we read of parents bringing their little children to Jesus, and of Him taking them in His arms and blessing them. These parents were helpless in and of themselves, but they could bring their children to Jesus—and *Jesus didn't turn them away*.<sup>49</sup> Nor did He just bless some of them. The children that were brought to Him were the children that He blessed. Some argue infant baptism from this passage. But whether it proves infant baptism or not, there's no doubt about one thing: *When we bring our children to Jesus for a blessing, He never turns us away.* So pray for your children (and with them). Bring them to Jesus in prayer.

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forth a spiritual seed out of Abraham, that is the children of promise as Isaac was. They form a spiritual offspring, one body, one church, chosen by the Father, purchased by the blood of Christ. Thus election and the covenant are not to be separated. . .The Lord excluded Ishmael, although he was circumcised and many temporal blessings were promised to him. . .Ishmael is sent away, and shall not be heir with the son of the free woman, although he also belonged to the natural seed of Abraham. The Lord established the covenant with Abraham and his spiritual seed, in other words, with the elect. They, and only they, are incorporated in the covenant. . .Peter indeed said, 'For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off,' but then he emphatically limits it by adding, 'even as many as the Lord our God shall call.' And those called by God are the elect." (*Reformed Dogmatics*, V1, pp246-47). Hoeksema: "it has pleased God to have His covenant upon earth run in the line of fleshly generations, while there are nevertheless those among the children of believers who were not elected. . .God, according to His own purpose, takes up into His covenant according to its outward form all the fleshly children, while nevertheless only a remnant is saved." (*Believers and their Seed*, p126). And Vos writes: "in this covenant of grace, God in fact makes promises that enable the members of His covenant to really live in the covenant, to receive its essence, to make it a reality. God, when He establishes the covenant of grace with a believer, appears as a giving, a gracious, and promising God, for He witnesses in the gospel that it is He Himself who has generated faith in the soul, whereby the covenant is sealed and received. He further assures such believers that He is not only their God, but also the God of their seed. And that if they raise up their seed for Him, He will grant the grace of regeneration, whereby the covenant will be perpetuated, and that not only as a bond but also as a real, spiritual covenant fellowship. God has pledged to the members of His covenant His promises of regenerating grace for their seed as well. From their seed, He will call believers to Himself. And therefore, that seed is not merely under a conditional bond, but also under an absolute promise. For those who do not venture to accept this, the covenant concept must more and more lose its spiritual and gracious character. They make it an arid system of obligations, in which all comforting and enlivening power is lacking. Because God has thus established in the parents the covenant with the children, He has also given the promise that He will bestow the operations of His grace in the line of the covenant. He can also work outside that line and does so frequently. But then it is a free action, not to be explained further for us. It is an establishing of the covenant anew. In accordance with His sovereignty, He can also make exceptions within the sphere of the covenant. However, if experience later shows such exceptions, we may not seize on them to say, 'God's covenant was powerless; His word has failed.' In such a case, we must always follow the rule of Paul in Romans 9:6-8: 'But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: "through Isaac your descendants will be named." That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants.' The presumption is always that the children of the covenant, who are under the covenant bond, will also be led into covenant fellowship. Election is free, but it is not on that account arbitrary. Therefore, we say: Of those born under the covenant, not only is it required with double force that they believe and repent, but it is likewise expected and prayed for with a double confidence that they will be regenerated in order to be able to believe and repent." (*Reformed Dogmatics*, V2, pp108-09).

<sup>49</sup> I absolutely love what Alec Motyer says about this passage: "Either the Lord Jesus was perpetrating a spiritual hoax for the sentimental satisfaction of doting mothers, or else he saw babies as proper recipients of divine blessing, and proceeded to bestow such a blessing upon them." (From his book, *The Anglican Evangelical Doctrine of Infant Baptism*, p46).

*B) God calls us to NURTURE.* It's true that God must save our children. But it's also true that He does so as we make use of the particular means that He's given to us. One of those means is prayer. Another means that He's given us is nurturing our children. *Part of this is teaching them.* In Genesis 18:19, the Lord declares this about Abraham: "For I have chosen him, so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him." We learn several things here,<sup>50</sup> but maybe the most important is that God uses appointed *means* to bring about His promised *ends*. The Lord would fulfill His promises to Abraham about his children as Abraham taught them to keep the way of the Lord.<sup>51</sup> This was *the means* that God would use. And so, God draws our children to himself as we open up His Word to them and instruct them in His ways; as we admonish them, and charge them—even command them to follow the Lord.<sup>52</sup> So, part of nurturing is teaching. *But it also involves other things:* loving our children, cherishing them, being patient with them, being compassionate towards them—setting before them an example of gospel-living every day. Now, this doesn't mean being perfect. Actually, it means acknowledging to them just how imperfect you are. It means modeling repentance, which includes asking even their forgiveness when you sin against them.

So, we plead for our children—we bring them to Jesus asking for a blessing. We call upon Him to do in and for our children what we cannot. We wrestle for them like Jacob wrestled with God: "I will not let you go unless you bless *them*." We pray for them and we pray with them. We claim God's covenant promises for them. And we affectionately teach them and admonish them to keep the ways of the Lord. We teach them about sin and why it is we so badly need a Savior; and that Mommy and Daddy are sinners who need a Savior too, just as much as they do. We show them how precious and wonderful and sufficient Jesus is to wash away all of our sin and give us new hearts. And with God's help, we give them a living example of what it means to walk with God. And we do all these things with expectation, knowing that God has chosen us for the purpose of confirming His promises to our children (Genesis 18:19), and that God fulfills those promises as we lovingly nurture and admonish them; and as we bring them to Jesus in prayer, asking Him alone to do for them what we cannot.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Matthew Henry draws out several truths here, such as: 1) *WHO he was to teach:* Not just his wife, but his children, and all those under the authority of his household; and his instruction was not only for the benefit of those presently in his household, but for his household "after him"; that is, he taught with a view to unborn generations yet to come; 2) *WHAT he was to teach:* Not just instruction about the Lord (though never less than that), but how "to keep the way of the Lord"; that is, not just merely head knowledge about God but a wholly practical religion; as well as, 3) *HOW he was to teach:* Not just suggesting but actually commanding his children to follow the Lord: making them understand who they are as covenant children and their duty to embrace the covenant from the heart—to prove themselves covenant keepers by faith, rather than covenant breakers.

<sup>51</sup> The language here is intentional: God would fulfill His promises *as* Abraham did these things *not* if Abraham did these things. John Gill rightly draws out here that the final clause "so that" signifies *consequence* rather than *cause*. Abraham's instruction is *not* the *condition* which determined whether or not God would fulfill His promises; it's rather simply the *means* through which God would fulfill His promises. God is *not* saying: Abraham, *if* you do this right, *then* I will cause your children to walk in My ways. Rather, God is saying: Abraham, teach your children to walk in My ways—*for it is in this way* that I will bring about all that I have promised to them. Abraham commanding his children to follow the Lord is *not the condition* of God fulfilling His promises to his children, but rather simply *the way* through which God would fulfill those promises.

<sup>52</sup> Notice the language in Genesis 18:19. This is echoed later in Joshua 24:15: "If it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

<sup>53</sup> Another question that may arise here is: *How should we view our covenant children?* Vos answers this question in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, Volume 5, pp173-188. In short, he says: "On this there are two views that have both had defenders, though not both equally. We first give, in some propositions, the most common view that on good grounds can be called the historic-Calvinistic view." (p177). He goes on to describe the view as: "e) Communion in this grace can only be made known to us from certain fruits and marks; f) No one, and so also the church, can judge with certainty who are those who share in this grace. . . Only believers themselves by the witness of the Holy Spirit have a direct assurance of that; g) The church, as ministers of God's covenant, has to observe certain external marks of the grace of God and to act thereon according to the judgment of charity, without concerning itself further with the question. . . ; h) This judgment of charity concerns all the members of the visible church, and only them. To these members belong not only the adults who profess Christ, and do not contradict this profession by their conduct, but also young children born of believing parents belong by virtue of the promise made to Abraham and his descendants and by which they, like their parents, are included in the covenant of God; i) Consequently, with regard to the judgment of the church, birth from believing parents (at least one) is the equivalent of what for the parents their profession of faith is; j) Therefore, according to the judgment of charity, salvation is ascribed to these children and they are regarded as elect, as their parents are regarded when they make profession of faith, and continue to be as long as they in fact do not give evidence to the contrary. . . n) This judgment of charity could nevertheless be mistaken according to the Word. They are not all Abraham's children because they are Abraham's seed, nor are they all Israel who are of the father of Israel [cf. Rom. 9:6-7]. . . With adults, too, the same thing appears repeatedly. There are those who upon profession of faith

In Genesis 17:7-8, God is promising to draw to himself a people from among our children. This isn't just: "I will save whoever chooses me from among your offspring." Rather, God is promising: "I will take it upon Myself to choose and save a people for Myself from among your offspring." The Lord is promising to call, and effectually draw, and save a people for himself from among our descendants. He will not only be our God; He has promised to be the God of our children also, and our children's children. And for how long does the covenant promise extend? Psalm 105:8-10 says, "to a thousand generations." The Lord is promising to preserve our covenant line—not only to our grand-children or great grand-children, but even to *a thousand generations*. Now if we tried to literally calculate this, and estimated a generation at a low twenty years, this would come out to 20,000 years! But of course this isn't a literal number of years being expressed here—it's a figure of speech implying an eternal covenant. We know this from Scriptures such as Isaiah 59:21, where we're told that God's covenant is confirmed not just to a thousand generations, but to 'your offspring's offspring. . . *from now and forever.*' The covenant is an *eternal* covenant. And it's not just eternal in the sense that it's never ending. The eternalness of the covenant isn't just speaking to the duration of the covenant, but to the *succession* of the covenant. It's not saying merely that God's covenant will continue in the world to thousands of generations—but that it will continue *to thousands of generations of those with whom He enters into covenant*. God's covenant won't just extend to a thousand generations in general—but to the untold generations still to come of those with whom He has entered into covenant—with their children, and children's children, forever: "*Never will the line of the faithful be cut off completely.*"<sup>54</sup>

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are received into the congregation, whom one thus has to regard as fellow citizens of the saints and of the household of God. . . who nevertheless later fall away. . ." (pp173-75). Vos calls this view the *main* historical Calvinistic Reformed view. Having said that, Vos goes on to say: "there is a large objection to the first view if it teaches that all children are to be held to be regenerated and to possess the principle of faith until the opposite is apparent. . . one then cannot, with reason, pray for their regeneration as a thing that they must still receive or still need. The children themselves, in growing up, will be under the illusion that they possess regeneration, and the truth that without regeneration no one can see the kingdom of God will lose its force. It will gradually be seen in the congregation as something self-evident that whoever lies and dies within its circle is saved, since he has come into the world virtually as a regenerate person, is renewed and sanctified from his mother's womb. *This is extremely dangerous.*" (caps mine, p181). Then concluding on p187: "What is needed is more urging of the truth day by day, in the official cultivation of the children of the covenant as they grow up, and less pressing for a profession at a particular moment. But not only the requirement; the promise of God must also be pointed to. . . One can stress the obligations toward the covenant too much and overlook the giving side of the covenant too much. The one needs the other. Only presenting the obligations is deadening; only pointing to the promises causes indifference." (p187). So: 1) On the whole, we regard our children as elect until/if/when they prove otherwise, just as we do with adult members; we view with a judgment of charity; 2) But this in no way means that every single baptized infant covenant child is actually definitely regenerated; 3) Our children need both the consolation of the promises as well as exhortations; not either/or but both/and. They need to hear God has made promises to Mommy and Daddy's children too; they are part of the Covenant. But they need to be exhorted too: Embrace the covenant from the heart. Prove yourself a covenant keeper by faith. Embrace the God of your parents.

<sup>54</sup> The last line is a quote from O Palmer Robertson; but the whole section starting with Psalm 105 is a paraphrase of his material from his audio lectures on Covenant Theology (*The Unity of the Divine Covenants*, 46:14ff). Lastly, we need to clarify that there is still great mystery here. There are Christians who will never marry; there are Christian couples who will never have children; there are Christian parents whose only child or children have walked away from the Lord. So, if God is promising believers that He will save a portion of their physical offspring to a thousand generations, then how do we explain these things? In short, I believe Scripture teaches that the Lord will fulfill this promise mystically where He doesn't physically. Let's think back upon the Old Testament Scriptures. Barrenness, for instance was a common occurrence for them at that time, as it is today. And for the Old Testament believer, this was an absolutely terrible plight. Why was it so bad? I believe the primary reason had to do more with the implications of God's covenant promises failing to be brought to fulfillment than a cultural stigma or economic concerns. Well, it was for this very reason, it seems, that the Lord instituted the provision of the husband's brother. Deuteronomy 25:5-10 tells us that if a husband died who yet had no sons, his brother (or closest relative) was to marry his widow, and that the first-born whom she would bear would take on the name of his dead brother, "so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel." The concern wasn't the physical name. The concern was rather the covenant line in light of the promises God had made to believers and their children. We see this played out in Ruth. Boaz marries Ruth in order to raise up the name of her deceased husband Mahlon, "so that the name of the deceased will not be cut off" from Israel. Now, the firstborn son who is raised up is not physically named after Ruth's deceased husband Mahlon (he's named Obed). So again, the concern here wasn't the literal name; the concern was rather that the line of the deceased continue to be preserved with offspring *through a divinely provided, extra-ordinary means*. So even for those who had not been able to bear children, God provides a way for His promise to continue; God provides children in another way. God made a way for the line of the covenant to continue. What about for singles? Well, we could think of Scriptures like Isaiah 56:3-5, "Let not the . . . eunuch say, 'Behold, I am a dry tree.' For thus says the Lord, 'To the eunuchs who keep My sabbaths, and choose what pleases Me, and hold fast My covenant, to them I will give in My house and within My walls a memorial, and a name better than that of sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name which will not be cut off.'" God will keep His promise, though it may at times be different than the norm, or how we might naturally think. He is able to raise up children of Abraham from these stones. He is able to keep this His promise—to be God not only to us but also to our children after us. Whether it be through normal or exceptional and mystical means, He will keep His promise; and for that we can praise Him.