

Covenant Theology: Abraham II

Reading: COTC 9, Covenants 6&7

The Seal of the Abrahamic Covenant

A. The Original Significance of Circumcision (Gen. 17:9-14)

Circumcision was practiced in other cultures before it was given to Abraham. After the great covenant cutting ceremony of Genesis 15, Abraham fails in the flesh with Hagar in Genesis 16. Possibly it is because of this failure that a more permanent reminder of God's relationship with Abraham is instituted through circumcision. God reiterates the covenant in Genesis 17:1-8 and then inaugurates the covenant seal in 17:9-14.

1. Sign & Seal

- Seal: a guarantee of the fulfillment of the promises for those who believe (17:10).
- Sign: witness of the reality of the covenant bond; an outward symbol of the inward reality (17:11).

2. Community

- Circumcision is applied to Abraham & his descendants; it is applied to 8-day-old infants (emphasizing our helplessness and inability) (17:10,12a).
- Through circumcision one is externally added to the covenant community; it signifies a relationship with God.
- Circumcision is so closely identified with the covenant that it can be said that the seal *is* the covenant (17:13b).

3. Cleansing

- The hygienic removal of foreskin symbolized purification of an unholy people.
- Circumcision symbolized the actual process of cleaning that is needed. A holy God requires a purified, holy people.

4. Inner Purity

- Abraham was called by God to walk before Him and be blameless (17:1). Circumcision is thus given in the context of the command to live a holy life.
- Inner purity is symbolized by the outward cutting of part of the human body; circumcision is a judgment that purifies.
- While physical circumcision identifies one externally as a member of the covenant community, it is only by the Spirit of God that the spiritual realities of circumcision – inner purity, cleansing, and forgiveness of sins – can be realized.

5. Judgment

- Failure to bear the covenant sign meant expulsion (excommunication) from the covenant people – cut off the foreskin or be cut off from the community (17:14).
- Far from fostering presumption, the application of the covenant seal binds one to covenant faithfulness or otherwise judgment will fall.

6. Evangelistic

- From the beginning, Gentiles could be added to the covenant people by circumcision (17:12b). Circumcision is not a racial badge but a covenant sign.

7. The Seed

- Sin is not merely the matter of the individual, but of the race. God deals with families. It is only after Abraham circumcises the male organ of reproduction that the Promised Seed can come (Gen. 17:21), that the seed line can be propagated.

B. Circumcision in the Old Testament

1. Sign & Seal

- Circumcision is a covenantal sign between Israel and its God.
- The significance of circumcision as a sign and seal continues through the OT.

2. Community

- Circumcision persistently speaks to the question of a man's relationship with God.

3. Cleansing

- Joshua 5:9 – circumcision of Israel after crossing the Jordan results in cleansing – Gilgal means 'rolling away;' the reproach of Egypt has been removed.
- Concepts of uncleanness, defilement, and unworthiness are implied in the term 'uncircumcised' (1 Sam. 17:26; 2 Sam. 1:20).

4. Inner Purity

- God's intention from the beginning was to symbolize the inner purification necessary for the establishment of a proper relationship between the holy Creator and the unholy creature.
- Outward cleansing symbolized the inner purification necessary for a life of obedience and love to God (**Dt. 10:16; 30:6**).

5. Judgment

- Failure to live lives of inner purity would result in judgment (**Jer. 4:4, 9:25-27**).

6. Evangelistic

- Exodus 12:43-49 allows circumcised Gentiles to participate in Passover. The Old Testament is absolutely open to the incorporation of Gentiles into the community of Israel via circumcision.

7. The Seed

- Moses' failure to circumcise his son nearly has disastrous consequences for the redemption of God's people (Ex. 4:24-26). The Seed line must remain pure until Messiah comes.

C. New Testament Fulfillment of Circumcision

1. Jesus

Jesus submits to circumcision (Lk. 2:21) and baptism (Mk. 1:9). His cleansing is not for His own sake, but for the sake of the sinful people whom He is saving.

2. Romans 2:25-29; 4:9-13

- The symbol of circumcision under the Old Covenant is not the thing that makes man acceptable to God. Only the circumcision of the heart by the Spirit accomplishes the cleansing which is sufficient to make a man acceptable to God.
- Abraham's faith is what saved him (Gen. 15:6), which he had before he received the seal of circumcision (Gen. 17:9ff).

3. Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15)

a) Situation

- The Holy Spirit is dwelling in uncircumcised Gentiles.
- The reality of the New Covenant has come without circumcision.
- Jews and Gentiles become new creation by faith alone.

b) Conclusion

- The formal rite of circumcision is ended (*cp.* **Gal. 5:2**). No longer is it a sign and seal of the people of God. It is an Old Covenant sign, not a New Covenant one.
- Although the symbol has ceased, the reality still applies. Believers need to be cleansed and purified to be incorporated into the covenant community.

4. Seal

The Holy Spirit seals or guarantees the reality of the covenant to every believer (**2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:13; Eph. 4:30**).

D. Baptism as the Sign of the New Covenant

1. Baptism Replaces Circumcision

The cleansing rite of circumcision in the Old Covenant has been replaced by a cleansing rite in the New Covenant: baptism.

- We receive the cleansing reality of circumcision through Christ (Col. 2:11).
- Our baptism in Christ occurs simultaneously with our circumcision (**Col 2:11-12**).

2. Baptism Has the Same Function As Circumcision

a) Sign & Seal

- Baptism is an outward sign of membership in the organized community of the covenant – the church.

- Baptism seals the elect of God into the ultimate spiritual realities of the covenant through the Holy Spirit, including cleansing and forgiveness of sins.
- b) Community
- Baptism is to be applied to all believers and their children (Acts 2:38-39; 8:12; 8:38; 9:18; 10:2, 44, 48; 16:14-15; 16:31-34; 18:8; 19:5-7; 1 Cor. 1:14, 16). In these examples, just about every imaginable case of baptism is depicted: Jew and Gentile, young and old, single and married, men and women. The sign is no longer exclusively applied to males, but to females as well.
- c) Cleansing
- The symbolism of baptism clearly indicates cleansing via washing with water.
- d) Inner Purity
- Baptism points to the need for inner purity and cleansing. However, don't be superstitious. Don't think the seal of God's covenant itself has the power to save.
- e) Judgment
- Just like circumcision, baptism does not save. The baptized individual must be born again, receiving the inward reality of the covenant promises through the power of the Holy Spirit. Failure to live in purity results in judgment.
- f) Evangelistic
- In the Great Commission (Mt. 28:16-18), Jesus commands us to teach and baptize, not to teach and circumcise. Circumcision has been replaced with baptism, but the good news is that all who believe can be baptized and added into the kingdom of God.
- g) The Seed
- The Seed – Messiah – Jesus Christ has come. The covenant sign no longer points forward to the Seed, but indicates what He accomplishes – the washing of our sins.

3. Baptism is for Believing Families

- Infants are to be included too. In six of the examples above, household baptism is explicitly mentioned.
- God is concerned about the redemption of families, not just individuals. Our children are part of God's covenant community.
- Just as the sign and seal of circumcision was applied to infants, so we also apply baptism to children today.
- Baptism is also applied to believing adults from non-covenant families, incorporating them into the covenant community just as circumcision did for Gentiles.