

# God of Promise

*The Beauty of Covenant Theology*

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## The Covenant Signs

Formal covenants were sealed with formal ceremonies and accompanying seals.

Covenant documents were typically sealed with a wax or clay seal bearing the insignia of the one with authority over the agreement. The divine covenants were sealed with visible signs. More specifically, God sealed the Noahic, Abrahamic, and new covenant with visible signs which pointed to the significance of God's work in the covenant relationship. Indeed, there is a spiritual connection between the sign and that which is signified in the divine covenants. It is sometimes debated as to whether the covenant of works and covenants with Moses and David were accompanied with a visible sign. I would argue that in those cases there is no sign specified in the biblical text.

- The Noahic Covenant (Gen 8:20-9:17) – Rainbow
- The Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 12, 15, 17) – Circumcision
- The Mosaic Covenant (Exodus 19-24) – None specified
- The Davidic Covenant (2 Sam 7) – None specified
- The New Covenant – Baptism



## *The birth of the church*

The Abrahamic Covenant marked the beginning of the organized church. “What we see in Abraham and his family and the beginnings of the church as a visible covenant community of believers and their children.”<sup>1</sup> Too often we imagine the church to be the *ekklesia* (literally “called out ones,” but commonly “gathering”) beginning at Pentecost. However, the Apostle Paul makes clear that Gentile Christians are grafted in to something already in existence, the namely the covenant community of Abraham (**Romans 11**).

God does not have two different people: Israel and the church. Neither has the church “replaced” Israel. Rather, God has always had one people. A people first promised in Genesis 3:15 and further sealed in the covenant with Abraham. This one people find their ultimate fulfillment in the church of Jesus Christ; Jews and Gentiles from all the nations waiting not on a piece of land on the Mediterranean but on the heavenly Jerusalem in the age to come. This is why the Westminster Confession of Faith refers to Israel as the “Old Testament Church.” Israel under the older covenant administrations was the church in its infancy.

In solemnizing the covenant of grace, God led Abraham through a formal covenant ratification ceremony (**Genesis 15:1-20**). Normally in such ceremonies both parties would pass between the divided beasts to signify the curses which would befall the one who breaks the covenant. So the symbolism of God's passing through the slaughtered beasts alone is noteworthy. This unique

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Golding, *Covenant Theology*, (Scotland: Christian Focus, 2004), 154

variation from accepted practice signified that God accepted the potentiality of curse both for himself and Abraham. This does not mean, however, that Abraham was exempted from the requirement of faith. It means that when Abraham and his descendants in faith sinned there would be a sacrifice for their sin provided by God himself. It also meant that the perfect obedience required by the covenant would be provided by God himself.

In **Genesis 17:10** the sign of circumcision is referred to as “my covenant” by God. (See also **Deuteronomy 29:12** where “covenant” and “oath” are used as parallel terms.) The significance of this is that the symbol (circumcision) “which signified that a descendant of Abraham was part of the covenant God made with Abraham also symbolized the curse sanctions. The point here is significant. To bear the covenant sign and to be regarded as being a member of the covenant community was not an automatic guarantee of blessing. It represented potential curse or blessing.”<sup>2</sup>

### **We will see that the same is true with the covenant sign of baptism.**

Circumcision was a covenant sign demonstrating that God’s people had been set apart to be holy unto the Lord. It was a bloody ritual that harkened back to God’s covenant with Abraham and the dividing of the animals. Like all covenant signs, circumcision was no mere formality. There was a deep spiritual significance to it (**Romans 4:11**).

Of the many things circumcision symbolized for Abraham and the original readers of Genesis, one thing was particularly important. Namely, it signified their responsibility. It reminded them of the necessary response to God required by everyone who bore the sign. It is essential to understand that conditionality and grace are not mutually exclusive. Grace does not rule out expectations. The emphatic “Now as for you” (v. 9) is issued without robbing anything from the divine promises (vv. 6-8).

### **Conditional Grace?**

Many who are new to covenant theology stumble over the fact that God’s covenant of grace has conditions attached to it. In Genesis 17 God makes it clear that there are requirements if his people are to receive the covenant blessings. Following the announcement of the covenant (**Gen 12**) and its inauguration by ceremony (**Gen 15**) God said to Abraham:

As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you (**Genesis 17:9-11**).

How can grace have conditions? It seems incongruous that God would say of the covenant of *grace*, “You shall keep my covenant.” We have already seen in the inauguration ceremony described in chapter 15 that it is God who keeps the terms of the covenant; he has pledged himself to his people. Man has repeatedly proven to be incapable of keeping the covenant requirements.

Nevertheless, as J.I. Packer has written:

The God-given covenant carries, of course, obligations. The life of faith and repentance, and the obedience to which faith leads, constitute the covenant-keeping through which

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<sup>2</sup> Mike Glodo, <https://journal.rts.edu/article/covenant-sign-seal/>

God's people receive the fullness of God's covenant blessing. "I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now *if you obey me fully and keep my covenant*, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession" (**Exodus 19:4ff**). Covenant faithfulness is the condition and means of receiving covenant benefits, and there is nothing arbitrary in that; for the blessings flow from the relationship, and human rebelliousness and unfaithfulness stop the flow by disrupting the relationship. Israel's infidelity was constantly doing this throughout the Old Testament story, and the New Testament makes it plain that churches and Christians will lose blessings that would otherwise be theirs, should covenant fidelity be lacking in their lives.<sup>3</sup>

In **Genesis 17** God made it clear to Abraham that the covenant blessings were contingent upon circumcision. At first glance this seems downright weird, if not a bit painful. It may even seem arbitrary for God to require this. How can the covenant of grace be conditioned upon a rather crude and bloody procedure?

To understand what God is up to in this arrangement one must understand that circumcision was always intended to be a sign pointing beyond itself. Paul wrote that Abraham "received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised" (**Romans 4:11**). So, circumcision is not ultimately about flesh but faith. Just like the new covenant in Christ, the covenant with Abraham was conditioned upon faith. Abraham "believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (**Genesis 15:6**).

This then is the vital distinction between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. The former was contingent upon obedience to God's command while the later is conditioned upon faith in God's promise.

### ***A sign of belonging***

Receiving the sign pointed toward dual responsibilities: one to God and one toward the covenant community. By receiving the covenant sign one was made a descendent of Abraham, a member of the covenant community, responsible to all of its corresponding social obligations. The blessings attached to the covenant were available only to those within the covenant community. To belong to the Lord was to belong to his people. Thus it was necessary that all under the household covering of Abraham be marked in this way. We will see a similar practice in the Book of Acts with household baptisms. The blessings of God were not given to those outside the family even though the sign itself did not guarantee that the one marked would be blessed. The history of God's people has many examples of those who, having received the covenant sign, nevertheless rejected the faith of Abraham.

The circumcision sign also signified a vertical dimension of belonging. It meant that the circumcised person was under God's authority, subject to all his commands. Certainly, God offered his promises by grace and their value far exceeded the value of the obedience rendered. But the sign alone did not have the power to bring about the promised blessings. It signified God's reign first and foremost before it signified his grace.

While the Abrahamic covenant was unilaterally imposed and while God alone swore the self-imprecatory oath of the covenant, it would be incorrect to say that the Abrahamic covenant was unconditional. **Genesis 17:1** is a condition – "walk before me, and be blameless." "You shall keep my covenant" by circumcising every male eight days and older is a condition (vv 9-10). The casting

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<sup>3</sup> Packer's introduction to Witsius' *Economy of the Covenants*

away of those who refuse the sign is a clear condition (v 14). Later we are told that God gave to Abraham his “charge,” “commandments,” “statutes,” and “laws” (**Genesis 26:5**). The gracious and *monergistic* nature of the covenant of grace does not, therefore, preclude conditions as is evidenced by the blessing/curse motif.<sup>4</sup>

Derek Kidner observes: "The striking feature of the stipulations in this passage is their lack of detail. To be committed was everything. Circumcision was God's brand; the moral implications could be left unwritten until Sinai, for Abraham was pledged to a Master, and only secondarily to a way of life." In the covenant of grace sealed with the sign of circumcision God is calling Abraham to loyalty which is the nature of the covenant relationship.

### ***Circumcision and Baptism***

Having some background on the meaning of circumcision in its Old Testament, we now turn to consider the ways in which it corresponds to baptism. This correspondence between circumcision and baptism is first seen in that they are both signs of membership in the covenant community. One could not belong to the covenant people without the sign which corresponded to that particular time in redemptive history. To be considered a member of the household of Abraham one must have the sign of circumcision. Likewise, to be counted a member of the body of Christ one must be marked with the sign of baptism.

The legitimacy of this comparison is made by the Apostle Paul when he identifies baptism as the means of the believer's spiritual circumcision.

[11] In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, [12] having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. (**Colossians 2:11-12**)

How is it that circumcision is fulfilled by baptism? It has been said that a journey not well begun is a journey that is difficult to complete. Therefore, in considering whether it is proper for the church to baptize the children of believers we must begin with the right question. Often it is asked, “Where in the New Testament are we commanded to baptize children?” It is the “show me the verse” argument. Certainly, in and of itself, this question is far from improper. And there are many ways to support the Reformed practice of infant baptism directly from the Scriptures as we will see. But “What verse calls for infant baptism?” is the wrong question.

If we are correct that there is a fundamental continuity between the Old and New Testaments such that the covenant of grace as promised in Genesis 3, solemnized with Abraham, and administered through the various stages in redemptive history until the fullness of time in the coming of Jesus Christ, then the right question is, “Where does the New Testament command us to stop applying the covenant sign to children of believers?”

At no time does God command his people to stop giving their children the sign of covenant membership. While the ceremonial regulations like sacrifices, feast days, the priesthood, and dietary laws are all specifically abrogated in the New Testament, not once is the practice of placing the covenant sign upon the children of believers. Not once does the New Testament suggest that the finished work of Christ places the children of believers placed outside the covenant community.

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<sup>4</sup> Glodo, <https://journal.rts.edu/article/covenant-sign-seal/>

If the New Testament portrayed baptism as a *guarantee* of God's salvation blessing, then it would be possible to make a case on good and necessary consequence to withhold baptism from infants. But it seems clear from the New Testament that baptism functions in the same way as circumcision – a sign of potential cursing or blessing dependent upon whether God's promises are met with faith.

Recently, I read an illustration which may help. Suppose I invite you over for dinner at my home. You have never been to my house, so I give you directions. I make it sound easy; that there is no way to get lost. All you have to do is take one road until you reach my house. In that sense it is easy. If I were to drive from my house to yours, there is not a single turn in the road. However, what I did not explain to you is that on the way to my house from yours great care must be taken. The reason for this is because from your house to my house, the forks in the road may cause you confusion in keeping to the main road because those forks point in your direction. Leading away from my house, the forks in the road offer no distraction. But coming to my house, those same forks become a bit more challenging and can lead you in the wrong direction.

This is what it is like in general trying to read the Old Testament *starting* from the New Testament. Certainly, we are to read the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament. But we must remember that the New Testament is the completion of the story begun in the Old.

Professor Mike Glodo recounts a conversation he had with a couple who were considering a call to minister the gospel to Yemeni Bedouins:

Although they had not given the matter a full study, the husband said his leaning was toward believer's baptism. I asked whether he had given full missiological consideration to the prospect of telling those Muslim Bedouins that after nearly four thousand years, their children would no longer be administered the sign of God's covenant. It was that prospect which gave him the opportunity to reconsider. We rightly expect that the New Testament would give us at least one encounter in which Jesus or the apostles would tell Jews to take the children to the proverbial nursery, but we have only the opposite "bring them to me."<sup>5</sup>

The mistake is often made of treating circumcision as though it belongs to a world of legalistic formalism. Indeed, circumcision was instituted long before the ceremonies and regulations of the Mosaic covenant. Instead, we should understand circumcision as originating in the gospel promises given to Abraham. The Apostle Paul (no fan of requiring circumcision for Gentile converts!) nevertheless wrote of Abraham's faith which was counted as righteousness as the precursor of circumcision (**Romans 4:11**). That is, God commanded Abraham to circumcise himself only after he had made his promise of salvation by grace through faith.

Every male descendent of Abraham thereafter was to receive this sign "of the righteousness which is by faith" at eight days old. Circumcision was not a legalistic or formalistic overlay of Mosaic origins, but "a seal of the righteousness which is by faith." Under the gracious arrangement of the Abrahamic covenant, the application of the sign of faith prior to the evidence of faith was normative. In fact, to wait until faith appeared risked being "cut off" for non-compliance.

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<sup>5</sup>Glodo, <https://journal.rts.edu/article/covenant-sign-seal/>