

The Covenant of Grace by Rev. Tom Aicken

What is the Covenant of Grace? It is an agreement. This is perhaps the simplest way of describing it. The Covenant of Grace is an agreement that was made back in eternity between the Persons of the Triune God, an agreement between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As God is one, however, so His thoughts, affections and will are also one, which in itself, along with its glorious and most gracious purpose, makes this covenant altogether different from all the covenants between men and infinitely better. This is an agreement that the three Persons of the Godhead entered into long before creation, that the Son of God would come into the world at the time appointed and would offer Himself up on a cross to save His people from their sins.

This agreement is the basis of the frequently repeated promise that we find throughout the Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation, namely, "I will be your God, and you will be my people." There are many hundreds of exceedingly great and precious promises that God has made to His people, but this is the particular promise of blessing which embraces them all.

It is important for us to understand that the Lord could not be our God and we could not be His people but for the fact that Jesus came and lived among us. He came and lived a perfect life. He was obedient even unto death on the cross. And it was right there, on the cross, that He made a perfect atonement for our sins. We could not just decide on our own to be the people of God. It was not in us to do that, nor would it provide the legal basis for us as sinners to be acceptable to Him. We could not be received by God with favour and be at peace with Him except for the fact that Jesus was offered up unto death at Calvary. That is what the Covenant of Grace is all about. It focuses on the fact that God agreed within Himself and determined before the foundation of the world that at the proper time Jesus should come, that He be offered up unto death in our place, and that whatever saving grace God shows to men is a result of this decision and unwavering commitment on God's part.

Let us go back now to the Old Testament and see how this eternal covenant between the Persons of the Godhead is revealed in human history. Particularly, let us go back to the time of Abram, or Abraham as he later came to be known. Abraham was 75 years old and living in the land of Haran when God first called him. We learn this in Gen. 12, and from that time the Lord our God made four things clear to His servant: first, that He would make Abraham into a great nation; second, that He would bless Abraham, and then make him a blessing to others; third, that He would protect Abraham and his descendants; and fourth, that He would bless all peoples on earth through Abraham. This last promise is especially significant because it ties Abraham, through Noah, all the way back to the promise made to Adam in Gen. 3:15.

The Coming Deliverer

What had been the promise to Adam? It was that someone would come from among Eve's offspring and crush the serpent's head. In other words, God would send a deliverer, someone

who would defeat Satan and redeem God's people from sin and condemnation. But when would that deliverer come? Generations came and went. The stage was further set for the coming of this deliverer by the promise made to Noah in Gen. 8, but, still, there was no clear evidence of his coming until this promise was made to Abraham in Gen. 12, "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

In Gen. 15, God added another installment to His promise. Abraham wondered how God was going to do what He had said, especially since it rested on Abraham having children, and here he was already an old man without any children of his own. So, against every natural expectation that men might have, God promised that He would indeed give children to Abraham, that Abraham's offspring would spread over every generation to the end of time, and that they would be as many as the stars in the heavens. Of course, we must not think that these offspring were to be Jews only. They would be Jews and also a vast multitude of Gentiles (see Gal. 3:26-29). Do you see what happens? We find this repeatedly and pretty regularly throughout the Scriptures, that the fulfillment of God's promise of blessing to His people is very often far richer and much better than what we first understood the promise to be!

There is something else we find in Gen. 15. Abraham also wondered how he would gain possession of the land that God had promised him. So, on that day God made a covenant with Abraham, a covenant sealed in blood, to assure him that the land really would be his (vv. 17-21). Once again, though, we must be careful not to limit too much our understanding of the promised blessing. The fulfillment of the promise is again better than what we might first think it to be. Jesus will take possession of all the earth (Ps. 2:8), and He assures us that the meek, His co-heirs, will also take possession of all the earth (Matt. 5:5). That little bit of real estate in the Middle East, therefore, that fertile crescent which had been the land of Canaan, is not all there is for us to anticipate as our inheritance. That is but a down payment and pledge (as the Holy Spirit Himself would later be, Eph. 1:13,14) of the blessing, the new earth, which is yet to come in all its fullness (see Heb. 11:8-10, 13-16; Rev. 21:1-4).

The Covenant Confirmed

It is not until we come to Gen. 17 that we find the Covenant of Grace more fully explained and more clearly confirmed. In all this there is not much which is really new; in fact, there is nothing here which had not been revealed in seed form earlier. What is new is Abraham's obligation, which becomes the Old Testament administration of God's eternal Covenant of Grace. In vv. 9-14, God explains what Abraham himself must now do. Part of the explanation is figured in the sign that God uses to confirm His covenant, namely, circumcision. As we come to understand the significance of circumcision, and why it was appropriate as a sign of God's covenant with Abraham, we can begin to see and appreciate more about the covenant itself.

"Then God said to Abraham, 'As for you, you must keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is My covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall

be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between Me and you” (Gen. 17:9-11).

There it is. Circumcision was to be the sign of the covenant between God and His people, the sign and symbol of all that God had promised to do. Any other sign might have been given, of course, for that was God’s choice, but this was the sign He saw to be most appropriate for all that He had promised. Circumcision was an appropriate sign in at least three ways:

(1) Circumcision was a ritual that involved the shedding of blood, and like all the blood rituals of the Old Testament it pointed to the connection between death and forgiveness, and thus served to foreshadow the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Individually and collectively, the blood rituals said to the people, “You need forgiveness. You need cleansing. You need the One whom God will send, and by whom all nations will be blessed. You need the spotless Lamb of God who will take away the sin of the world.”

(2) Circumcision was appropriate as a covenant sign because the cutting away of the foreskin was symbolic of the need for regeneration. It spoke of how the sinful nature had to be removed if one was to have peace with God and inherit His blessing. On this point so many Jews went astray in their thinking. They thought that if they had the sign of God’s covenant upon them, they were already God’s children and were therefore eternally secure. We call this error “presumptive regeneration,” and it is a most pernicious doctrine. Unbelieving Jews often held to this notion, and they continued to teach it to succeeding generations. Many professing Christians hold this same view of presumptive regeneration today regarding baptism. However, circumcision as a sign of the covenant spoke in fact of how the people first had to be cleansed of their sins, and only then would they be received of God as His children and heirs.

This is brought out in Jer. 4:4, “Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, circumcise your hearts, you men of Judah and people of Jerusalem, or My wrath will break out and burn like fire because of the evil you have done, burn with no one to quench it.” Certainly, this text does not give any place to presumptive regeneration. One must be circumcised in heart, and not in flesh only, or he is still in his sin and under the wrath and curse of God!

Thus, circumcision was an Old Testament symbol of regeneration, a symbol of that inner cleansing which God required and without which no man could see the kingdom of God. Circumcision said to the people, “You need a new heart. Do not presume or take anything for granted. You cannot approach God in your sin.”

(3) Circumcision was appropriate as a covenant sign in that it was given not only to adult males, but to their infant boys as well. Just as the promise of God extended to many generations who were yet to come, circumcision as a sign established covenantal continuity between the generations.

“For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a

foreigner – those who are not your offspring; whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant” (Gen. 17:12,13).

From the beginning, as one can see here, God was never interested in ethnic purity. Circumcision was not meant to serve as a badge of racial approval. No, it was given to believers, whether Jew or Gentile, and to their children. It was given to the children before they became believers, and it was recognized that many of those very children might never become believers, as in the case of Ishmael, but it was given to them anyway at God’s command.

The Message of Circumcision

Circumcision as a sign, as a visual sermon if you like, spoke to children growing up in believing homes, and it spoke to their parents, too. As a sign to children, it pointed the child to his need of cleansing. It did not bring the cleansing which it signified. Rather, it preached the need of cleansing. It pointed the way. When I drive into Vancouver, I see a number of signs along the road telling me that Vancouver is ahead. I know when I see these signs that, if I keep following them carefully, I should eventually get there. The sign to Vancouver, however, is not the city itself. I have not arrived at my destination just because I see a sign that says ‘to Vancouver.’ Well, circumcision was just like that. It said to the children and others, “You need everything this symbol represents. Do not think that because you have the sign you already possess the desired blessing it portrays and directs you to pursue. The sign tells you that it is right ahead, but it is not the blessing itself. You need a new heart. You need the Saviour God has provided. Do not expect to get to heaven on the coattails of your parents. It does not work that way. Just as your parents had to believe in order to be saved, so you, too, must believe in order to be saved. God has many children – many co-heirs with Christ to the kingdom of heaven – but He has no grandchildren.

To the parents, circumcision said that there was hope, not only for them, but for their children as well, and for the generations to come. God would bless the children in temporal ways for the sake of their believing parents, and all those in their house who came to trust in the Lord would also receive His eternal favour. The promise, remember, was “to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.” In other words, it was not that the blessing would stop at the first generation and go no further. No, as a parent believed and was saved, so he could hope that if his children believed they, too, would be saved, and so would it be for the children of their children throughout their generations. Mind you, if a child never came to believe he would not be saved, and that also was God’s promise. The point is that the blessing of God had the potential to spill over into succeeding generations, and regarding spiritual seed it did.

The free offer of the gospel was for parents, for their children, and for all whom the Lord would be pleased to bring under the glorious sound of it. God did not say, “This offer is too wonderful and too extravagant on My part to extend indefinitely. I will therefore make it a limited time

offer, something that is good for now, but I am not sure when or if I might be able to offer it ever again.” No, retail stores give limited time offers like that, but God shows His covenant mercy to a thousand generations (Ex. 20:6). The free offer of the gospel had been in place since Adam, and it will be in place to the end of time. “Believe in the Lord and you will be saved. That goes for you, and it goes for your house.”

Circumcision was therefore an appropriate sign of the old covenant because, since children received it, and since it marked the reproductive organ, it represented the hope that parents could have for their children and their children’s children. “But from everlasting to everlasting the Lord’s love is with those who fear Him, and His righteousness with their children’s children, with those who keep His covenant and remember to obey His precepts” (Ps. 103:17,18).

Females Covered Too

Since circumcision was applied to the male reproductive organ, of course only males were circumcised. But it must not be thought that this deprived females from covenant blessings. Females received the blessings also, as did all who became circumcised in heart. This is an important point in itself, and we must not get too caught up in the symbolism that we lose sight of it. Every male child who was born was to be the head of another household which would come in the next generation. Like Adam who represents all his posterity in creation, and like Christ who represents all who are His in the new creation, so the head of every house represented everybody in his house, male and female. Thus, in the circumcision of all the males everyone was covered.

Circumcision marked and sealed the unsearchable riches of Christ for those whom God had chosen to be His own from eternity. Yet, there was also a dark side to all this. If anyone was willfully rebellious, refusing to be circumcised, he was to be treated as a covenant breaker (Gen. 17:14). Females could not receive this sign of blessing, and that was alright, but anyone who would not receive it would not receive the blessing either. These people were to be put out of the camp; they were to be denied the privileges of being in the covenant community.

We can see then that the Jews were to take the sign of circumcision very seriously. It was not to be neglected nor treated lightly. In Gen. 17:3-8, the part that begins, “As for Me...,” God says in effect, “I take My part seriously.” And in Gen. 17:9-14, the part that begins, “As for you...,” God says in the same way, “I want you to take your part just as seriously.” God’s people have not always received the ordinances of the Lord with understanding and due respect, nor has the Church always administered them properly, but Abraham did and he is an example to us all. “On that very day Abraham took his son Ishmael and all those born in his household or bought with his money, every male in his household, and circumcised them as God told him” (v.23).

Abraham understood that circumcision pointed ahead in time, for him and his house, to the coming of Messiah. He understood that circumcision pointed ahead to the offering up of the Lord’s Christ on the cross, just as the sacrifices did. And he understood that neither he nor any man could have peace with God and receive His eternal blessing apart from this one offering up

of Christ, the spotless Lamb of God. Jesus said, "Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing My day; he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56).

Sprinkling Clean Water

Let us now move over into the New Testament and see what has happened to circumcision. We find, as we might expect, that all the blood rituals pointing ahead to Christ and His sacrifice on the cross are removed. This is now a new administration of the Covenant of Grace, and so the signs are changed in order to mark that. By this time, indeed, Christ had come and been offered up. To continue the blood rituals, including circumcision, would have been to imply that He had not yet come – or worse, that His atoning sacrifice had failed – and that we are still waiting for the justice of God to be satisfied. As bad as it was to neglect circumcision under the old covenant, then, it would have been even worse to continue it under the new covenant, if by so doing we meant that Christ had not yet come or had failed as our Mediator. Consequently, we need not be surprised that circumcision has been removed in the New Testament as one of the signs of God's eternal covenant. The question is, rather, what has replaced it? What sign does God give His people now to represent His covenant, to portray His regenerating grace, to show the redemption Christ has accomplished and the obligation we have to serve Him?

The answer is the water of baptism. New Testament baptism has replaced Old Testament circumcision, as Col. 2:11,12 makes clear, and as a bloodless sign to portray cleansing it is more suitable. It is important, however, to point out that under this new administration of the covenant there is no essential change to the covenant itself, although the benefits have increased because Christ has been offered up and believers are now sealed with the Holy Spirit. Had there been a change in the covenant itself we may be sure that God would have told us about it. How else could we possibly know? We search the New Testament Scriptures in vain, however, to find any such change or any reduction in the blessings promised to Abraham. What we find instead, and we see this over and over, is that New Testament blessings are a fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham. We see that the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, which is specifically predicted by the prophet Joel, is in fact the means by which God extends His covenant outward to the nations, and thus fulfills His promise to bring blessing to the nations through Abraham, and particularly through Abraham's seed, the coming Messiah. As we read in Gal. 3:14, "He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit."

The Day of Pentecost

Now come with me to the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2. Peter has been preaching, and, as he reaches a certain point in the sermon, he says, "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." Wow, what a ton of bricks to unload on these devout Jews who had come from afar all the way to Jerusalem to show their devotion to the Lord! Suddenly, they were confronted with their sin. Though they had been waiting and longing for Messiah, they now realize that He has come and that they have nailed

Him to a cross! They have crucified the Lord of glory! Standing there listening to Peter, they are cut to the heart. Desperately, they cry out to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"

These Jews and Jewish proselytes are in effect asking for a word from God. Is there anything they can do? They are looking for mercy, but they know they do not deserve it and can hardly imagine that they should ever be forgiven. What they are told coming into the New Testament church is much the same (except for the covenantal sign and a fuller revelation of the gospel) as what any outsider would have been told in the Old Testament coming with his family to live in Israel. Peter replies to their plea, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children, and for all who are afar off, for all whom the Lord our God will call."

Peter's Reply Examined

Let us examine the parts of Peter's answer carefully. First, the people are told to repent. Repentance was required as much under the old covenant, under the old administration of the Covenant of Grace, as it is under the new.

Second, they are told to be baptized. In the Old Testament, those who repented and embraced the God of Abraham were instructed to be circumcised, but now they are told to be baptized. In order to show that baptism has replaced circumcision, Peter tells the people that this is for the forgiveness of their sins, which is precisely what circumcision had represented earlier. In order to show that baptism speaks of a new and better administration of God's covenant, he tells them that they will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. It must be remembered, of course, that the ritual of baptism in itself, the mere sprinkling of water, would not provide forgiveness for anyone; it simply portrayed as a symbol the forgiveness that would be theirs if they repented and turned to Jesus. Baptism would not give them the Spirit, but it represented the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

Third, they are told that the promise spoken by the prophet Joel is for them and their children. In point of fact, what we discover in Acts 2 is a further enlightenment and fulfillment of all that had been promised to Abraham in Gen. 12-17, so that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved (Rom. 10:13).

An Added Dimension

What we find at Pentecost is far from any structural change or diminished benefit of God's covenant blessing. Indeed, the fact that the covenant has now been sealed by the blood of Christ gives it an added dimension and shows the legal basis for such blessing. Circumcision as a bloody ritual pointed ahead in time to the finished work of Christ; baptism, a non-bloody symbol of washing, points back to it and declares the believer's victory in Christ. Both represent spiritual realities, both portray the gospel in simple form, and both point the way to

what is needed to be right with God. And just as circumcision was applied to the children of believers, so we would expect the same of baptism. Had there been any change in that pattern, surely, we would have been told. Here, however, the silence of the New Testament witness is deafening.

Let us look further into this. If baptism is “the circumcision done by Christ,” as Paul writes in Col. 2:11,12, and if the principle of applying this covenant sign to the children of believers still holds, we can expect to find in the New Testament household baptisms, just as in the Old Testament there were household circumcisions. That is in fact what we do find. There are five household baptisms recorded in the New Testament. They were the houses of Cornelius, Lydia, the Philippian jailer, Crispus and Stephanus. Some would tell us that there were no infants in those houses, but we do not know that. It is up to those who insist that baptism has not replaced circumcision, or that God has withdrawn the blessing of generational continuity, to prove that children are not to be baptized.

As we move into the New Testament, what we find is not that God has subtracted covenantal benefits, but that He has added to them. In some cases, the benefits have been expanded. The sign of the covenant is now given to females, for instance, which did not happen in the Old Testament. As Paul entered Philippi, and preached to the women gathered at the river, we read that “one of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home.” Lydia believed; we do not know about the other members of her house. And yet she was baptized and so, too, was her house. Was she a single parent? Was she married to an unbeliever? Again, we do not know these things. Yet, as a believer herself, she was entitled to have the sign of the covenant, not only on her, but on her children as well.

God Has Increased His Mercies

Today’s single mothers, especially, should appreciate this. We have a growing number of women in our society who find themselves having to raise their children alone. They are divorced, perhaps, or their husbands have simply walked out on them. These women face a mammoth and frightening task. What happens if, as with Lydia, they come under the sound of the gospel and are saved? Does the Bible hold out any hope to them in their circumstances? Indeed, it does! It is the comfort of the Covenant of Grace. Both they and their children stand in a covenantal relationship with the Lord. In a most significant way, in other words, they are not raising their children alone.

This is the meaning of 1 Cor. 7:14, “For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified (not saved, but set apart for peculiar blessing) through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy (again, set apart).” The children of a believer (whether believing father or mother) are in the covenant, and are therefore separated from the world unto the Lord for His

special care and temporal protection. These children may not be believers themselves – and, sadly, too many of them may never become so – but they are in God’s gracious covenant. They will be blessed of God in countless ways for their parents’ sake. They will be given access to, and the advantages of, a godly upbringing. And God’s promise is to them, it is signified and sealed in their baptism, that if they believe in the Lord Jesus Christ they will be saved.

Some Vital Lessons

Are you a child of a believer who has also become a believer? Perhaps you were baptized as an infant. You have greater cause now than ever before to rejoice in your baptism, and I hope you will. As a believer, Martin Luther rejoiced in his baptism. He was so glad when he first believed in Christ, for he knew that his baptism assured him that, if he believed, he was indeed saved. Is this not the promise of the gospel? Baptism, like the rainbow, is God’s visual signature added to the verbal promise to give further authentication of all that is promised. The devil could send ten thousand accusers as far as Luther was concerned, and it would not make the slightest bit of difference to him – why? – because God Himself had spoken and sealed through baptism that, if he would but believe, he would most certainly be saved.

Are you a child of a believer, but not a believer yourself? Perhaps you were baptized as an infant, too. If so, I plead with you by the mercies of God not to ignore your baptism. Listen carefully to what it is telling you. It is not telling you that you are God’s child and therefore eternally secure in that hope. Nor is your baptism telling you that if your parents trained you according to the Word of God, the Lord will honour that by giving you that same grace to believe. No, my friend, saving faith does not come even from the best of training but from God’s electing love. What, then, is your baptism telling you? It is saying very simply, “You need Jesus Christ. No one comes to the Father but by Him. You need a new heart, a clean heart. You cannot approach God in your sin. You need all the spiritual blessings your baptism signifies and can be found only in Christ. Do not expect to get to heaven on the coattails of your parents. Remember, God has no grandchildren. You must repent and you must believe. Whoever believes in the Son of God has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.”

Perhaps you are a parent, or a parent-to-be, and you are wondering, should I have my children baptized? If you are an unbeliever, the answer is “No.” I hope you understand that baptism is not a magical charm which serves to win God’s favour for your children in spite of the fact that you yourself are still in your sin. If, however, you are a believer, no longer dead in sin but alive now in Christ, then yes, you should have your children baptized. Baptism is not a charm for them either, but as covenant children they are entitled to this sign of the covenant. It does not in itself guarantee them salvation, but it points them to Christ, and it encourages you to seek by prayer, precept and example to win them to Christ. How great is the Lord, and how greatly to be praised for His eternal Covenant of Grace!

