

Introductory Comments

It is necessary to put the study of the Abrahamic covenant into the larger context of the study of Biblical covenants in general.

Over the past several decades a great deal of debate has gone on in theological journals and books in reference to the Biblical doctrine of covenants. Unfortunately, the “man in the pew” is often not aware of such a debate. Many of the assumptions of Covenant Theology which have simply been taken for granted, have been challenged, even by Paedobaptist / Reformed scholars.

Examples

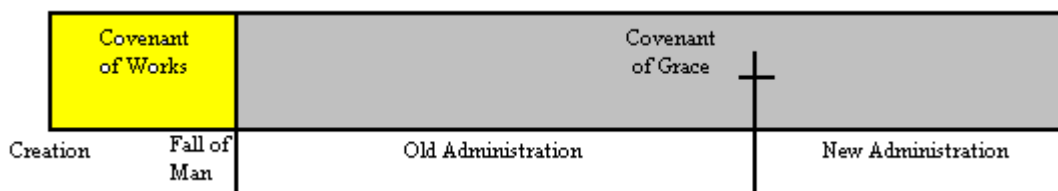
1. The definition of covenant. Previously the usual definition was "**an agreement between two or more people**". Now some covenants, especially those between humans, certainly contain that element, but it is now recognized that that is a totally inadequate definition with respect to the essential nature of a covenant in Scripture. Few leading Reformers would be satisfied with it.

The inadequacy of that definition is seen in the very first usage of the word covenant in the Bible, Gen 6:18. Here God unilaterally and sovereignly establishes his covenant with Noah.

Almost every scholar has his own definition of a covenant:

Dr. O. Palmer Robertson	"A bond in blood sovereignly administered"
Prof. John Murray	"Sworn fidelity"
Pastor G. Nichols	"God's holy covenant is his pledge, His sworn commitment or oath cp. Lk 1:71

2. Another example of challenge to old concepts has to do with the "covenant of works" with Adam. Reformed theology has taught that there was a covenant of works established with Adam in Eden, but more recent scholarship has challenged this. The word "covenant" is not used in the first three chapters of Genesis, nor, it is claimed by some, are the elements of a covenant present. Professor Murray, for instance, prefers the expression "The Adamic administration"
3. There has been some recognition in recent years that Reformed Theology has not done justice to the plurality of the covenants in scripture. It has traditionally been insisted that "there is only one covenant" and by this is meant "the covenant of grace" (see below). What we have in the Scripture, it was claimed, are not different covenants but different administrations of the one same covenant. But this clearly flies in the face of Scripture, cp. Gal 4:24, Heb 8:7-13, Eph 2:12



We should observe that the expression "covenant of grace" is not found in the Bible. It is a theological term. That does not mean that it is not legitimate, but it may not be the most helpful. Some have suggested that the words of Eph 3:11 are more useful - "**the eternal purpose of God in Christ Jesus**"; others the words of Eph 2:12 - "**the covenants of the promise**" (so the original Greek literally reads). Presumably, what was intended by the usage of "covenant of grace" was to guard the truth of the unity of the one way of salvation in all ages and the essential spiritual unity of the people of God in all ages. This is commendable, but could still be maintained by the more Biblical terminology.

Dr. Morton Smith writes:

"The term "**covenant of grace**" is used to refer to the gracious plan of salvation which God has given us in Christ. It may be a misleading term, if we are led to believe that there is just one gracious covenant. Actually the Bible presents a series of covenants which may be described as gracious in character. They are all part of the progressive revelation of the ultimate covenant of grace.... Strictly speaking, we may think of the grace of God coming to successive revelation in a series of gracious covenants. They climax in the New Covenant."

If we maintain the "**covenant of grace**" terminology we have to ask, "**With whom was this covenant made?**" We accept the statement of the Westminster Larger Catechism as correct - "**The covenant of grace was made with Christ as the second Adam and in Him with the elect as his seed**". (Question 31) And what was the purpose of this covenant of grace? Clearly it was to ensure salvation of God's elect: to ensure that salvation by giving them (the elect) the Holy Spirit to work repentance and faith in them.

It is clearly misleading and confusing then to **identify** the Abrahamic covenant with the covenant of grace as though it was actually that covenant. Because clearly from Scripture not all the offspring of Abraham, even through Isaac, were elect. The great majority of Israelites proved to be rebellious reprobates. Isaiah 1:2-20, Heb 3:16-4:2

The Abrahamic covenant then, **like all Biblical covenants**, must be seen as a "**mechanism**" for the **fulfilling of the purpose of the covenant of grace**, namely the salvation of the elect. Or if we like to use the alternate terminology - a "**mechanism**" for the fulfilling of the eternal purpose and promise of God in Christ Jesus, namely the salvation of the elect.

Coming Now to the Abrahamic Covenant Itself

It is revealed progressively in Genesis 12, 15, 17, 22. Chapter 17 is the pivotal chapter. Important elements include:

1. The covenant is made first with Abraham v.2 cp. 15:18
2. He is to be father of many nations v.4-6 cp. 15:5, 12:2
3. The covenant is also established with his descendants v.7 (his "seed")
4. The land of Canaan is a covenantal gift to his descendants v.8 cp. 15:18, 12:7
5. Circumcision was to be the sign of the covenant v. 10,11
6. It was possible to "break" this covenant and thus be cut off v.14
7. Isaac and his descendants would be the heirs of the covenant v.18-21

The Abrahamic Covenant and Baptism

William Payne

Note: Gal 3:16 teaches us that there is a duality which characterizes this covenant. Grasping this is crucial to understanding the Abrahamic covenant. "The focus of the Abrahamic covenant is ultimately not Isaac, but Jesus of Nazareth" (Nichols)

To Whom Did God Make the Promises?

First, clearly to Abraham. The covenant with its promises is made with him. Gen 15:18a, 12:1-3. Then also with his "seed" Gen 17:7. This clearly means his "descendants" (plural), but God through Paul tells us that the ultimate focus was singular - Christ. Gal 3:16 >p> Isaac is the appointed "heir of the promises", Gen 15:4, 17:21. Israel (Jacob) is the chosen son, Gen 25:23-24, cp. Rom 9:10-13. The covenant is established and the promises confirmed directly with them. cp. Gen 26:1-5, 23-25, 27:28-29, 28:13-15, 35:9-15 etc. We note therefore that not all Abraham's natural seed are beneficiaries of the covenant and its promises, but only those who issue through the God-given heir and the chosen son.

The vital significance of the duality brought before us by Gal 3:16 and Gen 17:7 now begins to be evident.

Point of Duality	Physical Posterity	Spiritual Posterity
Two distinct God-given heirs. The seed (singular) of Abraham. Both were miraculously given	Isaac	Jesus
Two distinct elect sons	Isaac's elect son was Israel (Jacob), Gen 25:22-23, Rom 9:6ff.	Jesus is also God's elect son, Hos 11:1, cp. Matt 2:15, cp. also Isaiah 42:1
Two distinct sets of descendants	The Hebrew people, the nation of Israel, are Abraham's covenantal posterity according to the natural created order, Gen 15:3,5,18; 17:7,9	Believers in Christ are Abraham's covenantal posterity according to the spiritual re-created order. Gal 3:7-9, 14, 29; Rom 4:11-17; Heb 2:16 etc.
Two distinct circumcisions	The one is in the body and characterizes the natural posterity	The other is in the heart (soul) and characterizes spiritual posterity. Rom 2:28-19, Philip 3:2, Col 2:11
Two distinct ways of generation. Each posterity, the natural and the spiritual, propagate successive generations. Each propagates and multiplies by the same method of generation by which it originated	The natural posterity originates and propagates by natural generation, i.e. human procreation	The spiritual posterity originates by spiritual regeneration. Is 53:10, Heb 2:13, John 1:12-13

The duality set out above is the duality of shadow and substance. A natural created-order shadow is intimately bound to the spiritual re-created substance. The shadow precedes and reveals the substance.

"recreated order substance".

The first posterity took explicit and distinct covenantal form in the Old Covenant by Moses. The second takes distinct and overt covenantal form in the New Covenant mediated by Jesus.

The first is the Hebrew nation; the second the Christian church. The distinguishing trait of the Hebrew nation was NOT that its were members in Christ but Jews circumcised in their bodies (this does not mean there were not true believers among them, of course there were). They are the natural covenantal posterity of Abraham.

The distinguishing trait of the Christian church is that its members ARE ALL believers in Christ (see the significant words of Jer 31:31-34, esp. v.34) and are circumcised in their hearts. They are the spiritual covenantal posterity of Abraham.

It is vital to see that the antitype of circumcision in the flesh is NOT baptism as such, but circumcision of the heart (Rom 2:28f, Col 2:11)

As the Old Covenant natural seed of Abraham received circumcision in the flesh, so the New Covenant spiritual seed of Abraham receives circumcision of the heart.

Note that many of the Old Covenant seed, though they had circumcision in the flesh, knew nothing of the circumcision of the heart and hence are exhorted to receive it (Deut 10:16, Jer 4.4, 9:26). Those embraced by the New Covenant are NEVER exhorted in this fashion for they are those who have already experienced it.

Baptism is closely aligned with circumcision of the heart in the New Testament (Col 2:11f) because it is the Christ-ordained means of showing forth and confessing the fact that we have received it. For this reason in the N.T. it is NEVER administered to any but those who profess repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, nor should it be, otherwise its profound significance is trivialized and lost.

If it is desired to draw an analogy between circumcision and baptism it would have to run thus in the light of what we have seen above:

As circumcision was administered to the natural seed of Abraham, so baptism is to be administered to the spiritual seed of Abraham, that is believers in Christ, who have received the true circumcision, that of the heart, through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.

Clearly then to baptize infants because they are the natural offspring of Christian parents is to introduce an element of terrible confusion. It is to confuse the natural with the spiritual; it is to confuse the shadow with the substance; it is to confuse the Old Covenant with the New.

The natural seed of Abraham did receive, under the Old Covenant, the fulfillment of the natural blessings promised (cp. Josh 21:43-45), but the spiritual blessings promised, which the natural typified, were intended not for the natural seed (in either Old or New Covenants) but for the spiritual seed, that is true, regenerated believers. This is the point of Paul's teaching in Romans 9.

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The natural offspring of believers have no longer any covenantal significance. They are greatly privileged to be born into a godly home and receive parental teaching, intercession and spiritual nurture. But like all others they must be born again to see the kingdom of God (John 3:3) and only when that is the case and there is evidence of repentance and faith (i.e. the circumcised heart) and therefore of New Covenant membership should they be baptized and added to the church.

Indebtedness to the work of Pastor Greg Nichols is gratefully acknowledged.