

FIRST CORINTHIANS

Covenant Families I Corinthians 7:14

When a Christian dad or mom holds a new baby, what is the first concern of these parents if they are spiritually minded? They want to know whether that child will be saved. Why? Because God has given this desire based on the covenant family concept. A covenant family is a family with at least one Christian parent with whom God has entered into a very special relationship. The ideal covenant family is one in which the father, who is the head, and the mother are both Christians and are directing and training their children in spiritual matters concerning Christ and salvation. Most Christians have never heard of the covenant family, having little or no concept of covenant theology, but they are living in a practical way to direct and train their children in Christ's salvation. Many Christians have a practice far better than their theology, but when they do get exposed to the biblical basis for the salvation of children, it strengthens, solidifies and comforts them in their desire to see their children saved and serving Christ.

When Carol and I had our first child, we knew absolutely nothing about covenant theology or covenant families, but we did know Christ. We also knew God had given us this child and we believed God would save him. We knew the possibility that he might never be saved, but our confidence was in God and we believed God had entered into a special relationship with us simply because we were Christians. With each child, we gained more understanding of God's covenant with parents and their children. By God's grace, all four of our sons are Christians, have married Christian women and are raising their children (our grandchildren) under the covenant. God honors faith even when there is little knowledge.

I have been doing a verse by verse exposition through First Corinthians, but in this lesson I'm going to backtrack to get the theological basis for the teaching of First Corinthians 7:14 which says, "For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified 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." The Apostle Paul is writing to answer a basic question which any believer who is married to an unbeliever might ask. The question is, "Am I defiled if I'm married to an unbeliever, and are my children also defiled because my relationship to my unbelieving mate is not blessed of God? Must I abandon my unbelieving mate and children because they are unbelievers?" The words "sanctified" and "holy" come from the Greek

root word which means "to set apart." This does not teach children born into a spiritually mixed marriage are automatically saved, but they are set apart in a special way because of the presence of the believing partner in a spiritually mixed marriage. In a covenant home, the children have certain blessings, privileges and benefits which the children of unsaved homes never have. This verse also teaches unbelieving mates are set apart to God's common grace blessing because of the presence of the believing partner. Rather than being defiled by an unbelieving partner, the believing partner's presence sets the unbeliever apart for blessing from God (not saving blessings but common grace blessings).

God blesses non-Christian husbands and wives because of the presence of a believer. From a purely practical standpoint, it is foolish for an unbeliever to leave his or her believing mate. However, how much more true spiritual blessing would the unbelieving mate receive if he or she would trust Christ and form a complete covenant family, with both mother and father trusting Christ for the salvation of the unbelieving children?

COVENANT FAMILIES PRIOR TO ABRAHAM

The covenant family concept can be officially traced back to God's covenant with Abraham, although the concept of the father being the head and priest over the family goes back to the beginning of mankind.

Job. Job was the head of his family and made sacrifices even for his adult children. God gave Job the right and the authority to act on behalf of his children.

Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them, thinking, "Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts." This was Job's regular custom (Job 1:5).

The example of Job teaches us God has set apart a believing family (covenant family), and parents are to plead with God for the conversion and spiritual growth of their children.

Noah. Noah and his family were delivered from the flood because of Noah's faith. Noah acted as a representative for his whole family.

The LORD then said to Noah, "Go into the ark, you and your whole family, because I have found you righteous in this generation (Gen. 7:1).

By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith (Heb. 11:7).

Noah is an example to future ages that the faith of a believing, righteous parent obtains a blessing, not for himself alone but for the children as well. Even Noah's son Ham, who was a shady character, was delivered from physical judgment for his father's sake and by his father's faith.

What we see in the lives of both Job and Noah is God's dealings with family as a basic unit. God regards the family as an organic unity with the father as its head and representative priest. This is the nucleus of a covenant family; therefore, we conclude that covenant families were in existence prior to the Abrahamic Covenant.

COVENANT FAMILIES FROM ABRAHAM TO CHRIST

Abraham

God appeared to Abraham thousands of years ago and made a covenant with him. In this covenant (which is called the Abrahamic Covenant) God promised Abraham material blessings (the land of Palestine forever and a great physical or natural seed the physical Jewish race), and spiritual blessings (the Jew would be a great blessing to the world, and Messiah would come through Abraham's physical seed). The Abrahamic Covenant also promised salvation blessings by grace through faith in Messiah. The salvation aspect of the Abrahamic Covenant has been theologically called the Covenant of Grace. In this covenant, God promises to save all of His elect on the basis of faith in Messiah alone. No physical Jew was born saved; he could not be a recipient of the spiritual aspects of the covenant made to Abraham apart from believing in God's promise to send Messiah. "Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6). The Abrahamic Covenant also included blessings to children. God made a covenant and promised to be the God of Abraham and the God of Abraham's children.

I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants (seed) after you for the generations to come; to be your God and the God of your descendants after you" (Gen. 17:7).

Notice carefully God entered into covenant with Abraham and his seed, his children, his descendants, his posterity, so in God's mind the descendants of Abraham are the rightful heirs of the Abrahamic Covenant generally and the Covenant of Grace in particular.

Obviously this is not a promise to save all the physical seed of Abraham, for history shows all Jews were not saved. This probably means the physical descendants (seed) of Abraham had a special place of blessing because they had God-fearing parents as was Abraham. Certainly children of true believers have spiritual advantages not possessed by children of pagans.

God entered into covenant with Abraham and his children, and they, in turn, were to keep the covenant by faith and obedience.

Then God said to Abraham, "As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for 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" (Gen. 17:9-10).

The external sign of the covenant in the Old Testament was circumcision. On the eighth day every Jewish father had his male sons circumcised to show his personal belief that God would keep his covenant. The circumcision meant nothing to the child, and certainly the child could not believe and repent at that age; nevertheless, the child was circumcised as a sign and seal of the covenant.

Under what circumstances was it (righteousness) credited? Was it after he (Abraham) was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! And he received the sign or circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. And he is also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised (Rom. 4:10-12).

This act of circumcision symbolized the father's faith and was a recognition that the child was under the covenant and would be spiritually placed in the covenant when he believed for himself upon reaching an age of discretion. Circumcision did not place the child under the covenant, but physical birth placed him under the covenant and made him a potential heir of the covenant, placing him within the visible people of God. The child was an heir by birth.

My aim in this message is not to argue over whether the sign in the Old Testament of circumcision was replaced by the sign of water baptism in the New Testament, or whether the sign should be placed on infants of Christians or only on those who believe in Christ. These are valid theological issues and Baptists and Presbyterians have been battling these issues for almost 500 years. My personal convictions are that the sign and seat of water baptism should be placed on infants of believing parents and that is one of the reasons I am a Presbyterian. The truth that both must agree upon is that children are part of the covenant by promise and have certain privileges and benefits that no child born into an unbelieving family has. The Devil would get us fighting over the sign which is merely a symbol so as to make us forget the truth that our children are part of the covenant and potential heirs to salvation.

The Passover. At the exodus, when the children of Israel left Egypt, the blood of the Passover Lamb not only covered children able to believe but also infants, for no first born male child was touched by the death angel, and whole families left Egypt. Male children who could not believe were covered by the blood and the faith of believing parents in a covenant family.

Entering the Land. When Israel was getting ready to enter the land of Canaan no one could enter who did not believe, but obviously infants and children who had not reached the age of discretion could not believe, and yet they entered the land. Moses made it clear that the covenant included "their little ones" (Deut. 29:11).

Joshua. Joshua also believed in the God of the covenant and not only pledged himself but his family to a faithful keeping of the covenant, for he said, "As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD" (Josh. 24:15).

COVENANT FAMILIES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Galatians 3. The New Testament makes it clear that the spiritual blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant belong to the Church of Christ because the Church has a relationship to Abraham as his spiritual descendants (seed). "Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham" (3:7). "So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith" (3:9). "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" (3:14). Christians are spiritual descendants and heirs of the covenant. "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (3:29). The Church made up of believing Jews and Gentiles are spiritual seed of Abraham because they believe and trust in the Messiah, Jesus Christ, the ultimate fulfillment of the covenant.

"The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say "and to seeds," meaning many people, but "and to your seed," meaning one person, who is Christ (3:16).

The Church is the heir to the Abrahamic Covenant through Christ and has a right to claim all the promises of the covenant.

Acts 2:38-39. On the Day of Pentecost, the Apostle Peter told the adult, physical, racial Jews and Jewish proselytes present that they were to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. Upon their reception of Christ, they would receive the Holy Spirit.

Peter replied, "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 (Acts 2:38)."

This promise of forgiveness and the Holy Spirit, however, was not just to adults but also to their children.

"The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off— for all whom the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:39)."

The promise was also to Gentiles and their children because it says, "And for all who are far off." The promise is that of salvation which included the Holy Spirit, and this promise is an integral part of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gal. 3:14). Acts 2:39 tells us that God's covenant people can claim all the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant for themselves and their children in the age of the Church.

Note carefully that all the children are rightful heirs to the covenant, but the covenant is only effective to those who are sovereignly called to salvation; that is, those who truly believe in Messiah (Christ) and the covenant.

The Messiah and the Christian message first went to the Jews, and for the first seven years there were no Gentiles in the Church. The Jews always understood the covenant to include their "little ones" (Deut. 29:10-12). Therefore, these Jews to whom the Apostles preached knew they were spiritual seed of Abraham when they believed and were partakers of the covenant.

And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, "Through your offspring all peoples on the earth will be blessed" (Acts 3:25).

They also understood their children were under the covenant and potential heirs to the covenant if they too would believe in Christ. A Jew would have repudiated Christianity if he thought there were no promises for the salvation and blessing of his children. Thousands of Jews became Christians. How quickly the Pharisees and other enemies of the gospel among the Jews would have seized upon the fact of children being left out of the covenant promises had such a defect appeared in the new Christian Faith. But no objections were ever raised, for the children were not excluded.

I Corinthians 7:14. "For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified 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." There was no question among the early Christians that two believing parents and their children enjoyed covenant privileges, but difficulty arose over the fact that there were instances, especially among the Gentiles who were saved, where only one parent was a believer. Furthermore, in some cases the believing parent was not the father but the mother. They wanted to know whether their children were accepted with the believing parent or cast off with the unbelieving parent. Paul says the unbelieving children are set apart to God because of the believing parent, and this regardless of whether the believing parent is the father or the mother.

This does not say the children are saved. Yet to set apart implies certain spiritual privileges. One believing parent sets apart the whole marriage and the children, and they are regarded as children of the covenant to whom the promises rightfully belong.

What is the inheritance these heirs are promised. Is it salvation? No. They do not inherit salvation, for salvation is not hereditary. Children inherit the promises of God. They inherit the assurance that God's favor is directed towards them because they are children of believers. They inherit the fellowship and protection of the church. They inherit the privilege of sitting under the gospel and understanding who Christ is and what He came to do. Covenant children have a great source of encouragement. Yet, they are also put under great obligation to come to Christ in an act of personal faith.

All this, of course, does not mean that grace is hereditary. And it certainly does not mean that a covenant child need not surrender his heart to the Lord. On the contrary, the many blessings this child has received place a heavy burden of responsibility upon him. If "all the ends of the earth" are called upon to turn to the Lord, then all the more the highly privileged covenant child should do so (William Hendriksen, *The Covenant of Grace*).

COVENANT FAMILIES' RESPONSIBILITIES

Parents

Parents have definite responsibilities in a covenant family. While the Covenant of Grace to parents includes a provision for their children, it is not an automatic thing. Parents who are under the covenant have duties and responsibilities to their children.

Love. Parents are to love their children and the children are to sense that their parents' love is due to the love of Christ within them. Children will basically learn to love God by the love they see in their parents. To love our children means to spend time with them, cultivate them and provide for them. Often we make major decisions based on our covenant love for our children.

After I had been in my church in Roanoke, Virginia for about ten years, I was receiving offers to go to other churches which were much larger and with bigger salaries. This was also a time when Carol and I were trying to get our priorities straight. We knew that a move at this time in life would be a major crisis for our children. We asked ourselves what our number one priority was and concluded it was to see our children saved and to be with them in heaven. Based on that priority we decided to stay in Roanoke and all other decisions were predicated on that fundamental decision.

Discipline. Parents must balance love with discipline; children who learn to obey parents are more likely to obey God, for the rebellious spirit is weakened. Children also learn to fear God through their parents, especially the father.

My oldest son Mark said that in his younger days he did not fear God but feared his dad. Today he says he fears God and not his dad.

Train. Parents are given the responsibility to train their children in spiritual things.
"Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it"
(Prov. 22:6).

These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up (Deut 6:6-7).

To train is not only to teach hard, cold facts about the Bible but also to influence the child in a positive manner towards Christ. Christian parents are training their children to accept the God of their parents through their own personal faith.

This is why some Christian parents send their children to a Christian school or home school. They want the home, the church and the school to be consistent in the training of their children under the covenant.

Example. The parents are to be examples before their children. In early life, children are copying their parents for both good and bad. Impressions are communicated to children and make a permanent impact on their lives. It is not so much what a parent says as what he or she does that impresses a child. The lives of mom and dad are the single greatest witness to children.

Quite often I speak to adult Christians who strayed away from the church in their teens and early twenties and then came to Christ later in life. They tell me it was the life of their Christian parents they could not shake from their thinking. They could rationalize scripture and even the gospel but could not deny their parents knew Christ.

When our first son Mark as a teenager was going through such a rebellious period, denying Christ and all his Christian heritage, Carol and I decided to get off his back and to rededicate ourselves to Christ, and God graciously answered our prayer, giving us a son with a heart for Jesus. Christian parents need to get off their kid's backs about spiritual things and live a positive, dynamic life for Christ before their kids. We can drive our children away by making them do Christian things when they are not Christians, and this is especially true in the teenage years. Christian parents need to instruct their children when they are young and as long as they want instruction. Yet, there comes a time when children in a Christian home do not listen much. Then the Christian parents need to walk very close to God and pray, pray and pray!

If parents are not faithful to keep their end of the covenant, they cannot expect God to save their children. Yet, because God is a merciful God, He sometimes saves children when their parents are not faithful. Faithful parents can have some confidence God will do a saving work in their children. However, there can be faithful parents who have rebellious children because the children hate Christ. Even a child raised in a Christian home must make a personal decision for Christ. Often Christian parents go on tremendous guilt trips when their children are not converted. They blame themselves for their child's rebellion. Surely no parent has ever raised children perfectly; most of us

make many mistakes, but the child also has some responsibility in the covenant. It is to believe in Christ and the covenant for himself or herself. Ultimately the covenant comes down to God's sovereign grace and the child's willingness to believe.

St. Augustine was raised in a Christian home under the supervision of his godly mother, Monica. He was very rebellious to Christ, and when he went off to college, he lived a debauched life, having conceived an illegitimate son when he was only 17. He accepted the philosophy of the world and was as far from Christ as any person could be. Monica never stopped praying for the salvation of her son, although one time she almost threw in the towel. Ambrose, a bishop, encouraged Monica by saying, "A child of so many prayers surely will not be lost." Around the age of 30, Augustine was marvelously saved and became the leading theologian of the late fourth and early fifth centuries.

Children

Children also have responsibilities under the covenant if the covenant is to be fulfilled in its entirety to the life of the child.

Believe. Although the children of believers are placed under the covenant and its promises at birth, and although they have the possibility of confirming that covenant by faith in later years, not all will truly exercise faith. Not all will inherit the promised blessing. They may reject Christ even though they have been given special advantage and privilege. Yet, they may also believe as did Timothy who was raised in a Christian home:

I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, lives in you also" (II Tim. 1:5). And how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation (II Tim. 3:15).

Children raised in Christian homes who reject Christ are covenant breakers, and to be a covenant breaker is to be under far greater responsibility before God. God will give grace to covenant children who respond to their godly training, but woe to those covenant children who knowingly despise their covenant heritage.

"If they (covenant children) refuse to walk in the way of the covenant, the vengeance of the covenant will be executed upon them" (William Hendriksen, The Covenant of Grace).

Accept. Covenant children are to accept the covenant they have been taught by their parents. A child raised in a Christian home must come to a point of decision when he chooses the God of his parents for his God. Children in a Christian home have been raised with an understanding of Christ, the gospel, the covenant, etc. When they refuse to come to Christ they are rejecting their Christian heritage and openly declaring their rejection of God and His covenant of salvation in Christ. When children in Christian homes believe in Christ, they confirm the covenant made with the parents and their children and come to the point where they can say, "Dad and Mom's Christ is now my Christ! I affirm my right to the covenant and believe for myself, accepting the responsibilities and duties of the covenant."

We raise our children like Christians not pagans. We teach them to pray, to memorize scripture and the Catechism, to sing the song, "Jesus Loves Me." So when they come to the point of decision they do not reject their Christian heritage but accept Christ and His covenant and follow the God of their parents who is the God of the Bible. Many kids raised in a Christian home cannot remember when they trusted Christ because it was done at a very early age. The issue is never when but are they trusting Christ now for salvation claiming their covenant blessings.

COVENANT FAMILIES' ADVANTAGES

Positive Presumption. Because children are related to the covenant, parents can have positive presumption that their children may one day be saved. Every Christian parent must face the fact that his or her child may never be saved, but Christians can claim the promise of God for their children's salvation. Knowing God's promise gives confidence and hope, not a negative spirit about the destiny of our children. Christian parents may die and go home to be with the Lord before their children receive Christ.

John Newton, the famous Puritan minister, had a pious mother who instructed her son and prayed for him, and this made an impression on him that sunk deep into his heart. He became very wicked and lived a profligate sailor's life. Often when he was deep in midnight revelry, he would imagine he felt the soft hand of his mother upon his head, pleading with God to forgive and bless her boy. Newton was finally saved., and later used by God to lead thousands to the Savior, it was he who wrote the words of the famous hymn which says: "Amazing grace—how sweet the sound—That saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found—Was blind, but now I see."

Positive Blessing. Children of believing parents, if not saved, at least get many blessings in common grace--the privilege of a godly home, the care and protection of Christian parents, the privilege of hearing the Bible, the benefit of mingling with God's people so as to be exposed to less gross sin and the oversight of the local church elders. The benefit to an unbelieving child in a covenant family, although short of saving benefit, is nevertheless of great value.

Bill Gothard says that over 50% of the people in "Who's Who?" are sons and daughters of preachers and missionaries. Why? Common grace through the covenant.

In the 1900s a survey was made of what happened to the family of Jonathan Edwards, a Puritan minister and third president of Princeton College. This would deal with his children, grandchildren, great grandchildren and great, great grandchildren.

- 13 College presidents
- 65 professors
- 30 judges
- 100 lawyers
- 1 Dean of a prestigious law school
- 80 public office holders
- 100 missionaries
- 3 mayors of large cities
- 3 governors
- 3 U.S. Senators
- 1 Vice-President of the USA

Undoubtedly many of these people were saved but others probably broke the covenant and were not saved. Nevertheless, God's common grace to covenant families was obvious.

Positive Assurance in the Death of an Infant. The Bible is not clear as to whether all children who die in infancy are saved. In fact, the only clear verses we have on the subject are related to children who die in covenant families. We cannot be dogmatic as to where children of unbelievers go after death whether heaven or hell. We must leave the children of unbelieving parents in the hands of a loving, sovereign God who does all things right and well. However, parents of a covenant family have hope for infants who die as seen in the loss of King David's son. "But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me" (II Sam. 12:23). What a comfort it is for believing parents to know if they lose a child in infancy they will see it again in eternity.

CONCLUSION

Saved

Perhaps you are saying as a Christian, "Since I am part of a covenant family, how come I don't experience more covenant blessings?" Could it be you do not know about the Covenant of Grace? Perhaps you have neglected this important doctrine; therefore, you are not sufficiently covenant-conscious? Perhaps you have never prayed and pleaded with the Almighty on the basis of the covenant God has established with you and your children. There is no time like the present to start.

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 (Psa. 103: 17-18).

Unsaved

Are you a child who has been raised in a Christian home, yet you hate Christ, hate church, and hate God's people? Do you long for the day you can get away from your parents and their God and live as your please? Think twice before you reject the God of your parents! God has placed you in a Christian borne so you can hear the truth about Christ and respond to Him by faith. You have a tremendous advantage. Don't reject your covenant privilege. Don't reject your Christian heritage. Bow to Christ. Accept the true God, the God of scripture and the God of your parents. Children of the covenant who reject Christ are doubly guilty, and if you die without Christ, your punishment will be greater because you turned from the promises of salvation God gave your through your parents.

Are you an unbelieving parent? Do you have children who give you fits, who do things even you would not do? Unbelieving parent, turn to Christ. Trust Him as your Savior. Bow to Him as Lord. Become part of God's covenant. When you believe, you will establish a Christian home, a covenant family and you will have God's promises to deal with your wayward children. Trust Christ and begin a new spiritual family in Christ.

I have a friend named Paul. His brother Bill led him to the Lord and later Bill rejected everything about Christianity and went back into his old way of life. Bill said to Paul, "I have stopped believing in Christ and so has my family." Paul answered, "I believe in Christ and so does my family. Bill, you have ended a spiritual family. We are just beginning a great spiritual covenant family under Christ"