

ECCLESIOLOGY
THE VISIBLE CHURCH
Lesson 20

Covenant Families

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Perhaps the key verse on covenant families is First 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.”
- B. If a believer in Christ is married to an unbeliever, the believer might ask, “Am I defiled if married to an unbeliever? 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?”
- C. The words “sanctified” and “holy” come from the Greek 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 the spiritually mixed marriage. In a covenant family, the children have certain privileges, blessings and benefits, which the children of unsaved homes do not have.

II. COVENANT FAMILIES PRIOR TO ABRAHAM

- A. 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.
- B. Job (Job 1:5). Job was the head of his family and made sacrifices even for his adult children. God gave Job the right and authority to act on behalf of his children.
- C. Noah (Gen. 7:1 cf. 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. Noah and his family were delivered from the Flood because of Noah’s faith, not because of the faith of his wife, sons or daughters-in-law.

III. COVENANT FAMILIES FROM ABRAHAM TO CHRIST

- A. Abraham (Gen. 17:3-14).
 - 1. Thousands of years ago, God appeared to Abraham and made a covenant with him, giving him promises.
 - a. Material blessings (the land forever, a great physical seed—the Jewish race).
 - b. Spiritual blessings (the Jews would be a great blessing to the world and Messiah would come through Abraham’s physical seed).
 - c. Salvation blessings (salvation would be by grace through faith in the Messiah alone, for no physical Jew could be a recipient of the spiritual

aspects of the covenant apart from believing in the Messiah as stated in Genesis 15:6: “Abraham believed the LORD, and it was credited to him as righteousness”).

d. Blessings to children.

2. The Abrahamic Covenant also included blessings for children of the covenant (Gen. 17:7). God entered into covenant with Abraham and his seed, descendants, children, so in God’s mind the descendants of Abraham are the rightful heirs of the Abrahamic Covenant. Obviously this is not a promise to save all the physical descendants (seed) of Abraham. This means the physical descendants of Abraham had a special place of blessing because they had God-fearing parents such as Abraham. Certainly children of true believers have spiritual advantages not possessed by children of pagans. The descendants still were required to believe and keep the covenant by faith and obedience (Gen. 17:9-10).
3. 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. Certainly the child could not believe and repent at that age. Nevertheless, the child was circumcised as a sign and seal of the covenant (Rom. 4:10-12). However, circumcision meant a great deal to the parents and much more to God as an act of obedience.
4. The 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 the 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 a potential heir by birth. Circumcision was only a symbol of that transaction that took place at birth.
5. While circumcision was only a symbol or a spiritual reality (the child was under the covenant), it was a very important ritual. It was a serious breach of the covenant not to have a child circumcised. God sought to kill Moses because of his failure to put the sign of the covenant on his son (Ex. 4:19-28).
6. The act of circumcision did not save any Jew. It was an outward symbol of the spiritual reality of being placed under the covenant. The child grew up and believed the promises of the covenant for himself. At that time, he was saved and placed into the covenant. The blessings of the covenant were only effective and real to those Jews who believed in the God of the covenant. The physical male Jew would have the sign of the covenant on his body but not have the reality of saving faith. The spiritual blessings of the covenant were to the believing seed of Abraham. A Jew in the Old Testament had to have a circumcised heart or his physical circumcision meant nothing (Ex. 6:12; Lev. 26:40-42; Deut. 10:6; Jer. 4:4; 9:26; Ezek. 44:7).

7. When God gave the sign and seal of circumcision, Abraham was circumcised, all the adult male servants were circumcised as well as their children. For those coming into the covenant as adults there was believer's circumcision. Yet, there was also infant circumcision.
- B. The Passover. At the exodus, when the Israelites left Egypt, the blood of the Passover Lamb not only covered young children not 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 the covenant family.
- C. 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).
- D. Joshua. Joshua believed in the God of the Covenant and not only pledged himself but his family to a faithful keeping of the covenant (Josh. 24:15).
- E. Rahab. She, a Gentile, obtained deliverance for her father, mother, brothers and sisters by her faith (Josh. 2:13, 18; 6:23-25). They were delivered because of Rahab's faith. She acted by faith on behalf of others.

IV. COVENANT FAMILIES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

- A. Galatians 3:1-29. 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 (Gal. 3:7, 14). Christians are spiritual descendants and heirs of the covenant (Gal. 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 (Gal. 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.
- B. Acts 2:38-39.
 1. On the Day of Pentecost, the Apostle Peter told the adult, physical, racial Jews and Jewish proselytes (Gentile converts to Judaism), that they were to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. Upon their reception of Christ they would receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38).
 2. This promise of forgiveness and the Holy Spirit, however, was not just to adults but also to their children (Acts 2:39). This 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)
 3. Acts 2:39 tells us God's people (Jew and Gentiles in Christ) can claim all the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant for themselves and their children in the age of the Church. Note carefully that all children of Christians are rightful heirs of the covenant by birth, but the covenant is only effective to those who are sovereignly called to salvation, "for all whom the Lord our God will call."

4. 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 all 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 (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.
 5. The Jew would have repudiated Christianity if he thought there were no promises for the salvation of his children. Yet, on the Day of Pentecost 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 no children were ever excluded.
- C. First Corinthians 7:14.
1. 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 saved Gentiles, where only one parent was a believer in Christ. 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.
 2. 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 mother. This does not say the children are saved. Yet to set apart means certain spiritual privileges.
 3. One believing parent sets apart the whole marriage and the children, and they are regarded as children of the covenant to whom the promises rightly belong. They are under the covenant by birth, but whether they will be placed in the covenant becoming the actual heir of the covenant, depends on whether they bow to Christ as Messiah, King, Savior and Lord.

V. CONCLUSION

- A. What is the inheritance that covenant children 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 also are put under great obligation to come to Christ in an act of personal faith.
- B. Christians have been disagreeing for centuries over whether the sign of circumcision in the Old Testament is 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, but the truth that must be agreed upon by all Christians is that children of Christians are part of the covenant by birth and promise. Covenant children have certain privileges and benefits that no child born into an unbelieving family has. The devil would get Christians 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.

- C. When the covenant concept is properly understood, it does make infant baptism easier to understand. However, infant baptism is a deduction from scripture and must be proven theologically, not exegetically. This is also true of the Trinity.