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THE SIGN OF THE COVENANT UNDER THE OLD ADMINISTRATION

Another touchy area for the critics of infant baptism is the connection covenant-theology makes between circumcision and baptism. Most critics challenge the idea that baptism replaces circumcision. As far as they are concerned, these two rites are mutually exclusive. In their view baptism is not a one-to-one replacement of circumcision. The reason for this is because baptism is of a different form (washing with water) than circumcision (cutting away the flesh of foreskin); therefore, they cannot be coterminous signs. Their difference is enough to cancel any similarities.

Anyone who has taken a rudimentary course in logic should be able to identify the fallacy inherent in this criticism. Differences in "form" do not imply differences in "substance". If we are going to see the connection between circumcision and baptism we need to dispense with the "forms" and deal with the core issue: the substance or their meaning. That is to say, in order to answer the question, "is baptism a one-to-one replacement of circumcision?" we need first to find out what circumcision was in the Old Testament and then compare that with baptism in the New Testament. Then we will be able to make a valid comparison.

CIRCUMCISION THE SIGN OF THE COVENANT

In the Old Testament, circumcision was the "sign" and "seal" of God's covenant with His people. By covenant we simply mean a binding relationship. In covenant, God binds Himself to His people. In ancient times all covenants re-

quired a sign or oath to consummate the covenant. God's covenant with Abraham was no different. It required an oath/sign. That "circumcision" was the sign of the covenant is established in Gen. 17:10-12 wherein God says, "This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised; and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you."

CIRCUMCISION: THE SEAL OF SPIRITUAL UNION

It should go without saying that since God is a wise, and holy, Spirit, circumcision was essentially spiritual. That is, it was "sacred" at the core, and sacred in the deepest sense of the word, for it signified a binding relationship with a spiritual being - God. Circumcision was thus synonymous with covenant. It signified the seal of God's ownership of His people and the sealing of a union between God and His people. That is why God says, "My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant" (Gen. 17:13).

Unfortunately, too many evangelicals have a truncated view of circumcision. Many of them view circumcision simply as a sign of ethnic or political membership. Certainly, as the descendants of Abraham multiplied over the years, circumcision took on these attributes; but these were secondary features and not its primary import. From its very inception circumcision was never a racial sign. When Abraham was given circumcision as the sign, there was no vast tribe of Israel or a nation with political boundaries and interests. Abraham

was simply a man with a family wandering through the wilderness in obedience to God's command.

Essentially then, circumcision didn't carry the weight of racial profiling, or national membership. It was established simply as a sign that signified a unique spiritual relationship between the one true God and His chosen man and family. It is on this basis that Murray argues, "[we] have no authority whatsoever to say that circumcision was simply the sign of an external relationship or of merely racial and national identity" (Christian Baptism, pg. 46). Circumcision fundamentally signified the seal of a spiritual union/relationship - anything different is misleading and biblically unsubstantiated.

CIRCUMCISION: THE SEAL OF SANCTIFICATION

Two other aspects of circumcision are yet worth mentioning. Not only did circumcision signify the sealing of a union with God, it also signified sanctification. That is, circumcision signified the removal of sin. There are a number of Old Testament passages that bear this out, but to list just a few: Deuteronomy 10:16, "Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer." "Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, and take away the foreskins of your hearts, you men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem..." (Jeremiah 4:4). "Behold, the days are coming," says the LORD, 'I will punish all who are circumcised with the uncircumcised...' (Jeremiah 9:25).

Not only does circumcision signify union with God, but removal of defilement. The latter logically flows from the former. Why is that? Think about it. To be united to God, one has to be sanctified. Thus, circumcision signified sanctification, or the cutting away of defilement, the cutting away of sin - an entirely appropriate sign given the spiritual and utterly holy nature of God. God will not tolerate sin; therefore, to be one of His, the defilement of sin must be removed. The apostle Paul echoes the same, "but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and cir-

cumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God" (Rom. 2:29). Moreover he wrote in Col. 2:11-13 saying: "In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead." This latter passage is of particular interest since Paul connects circumcision and baptism. He does this to show that circumcision and baptism are essentially the same in substance. They signify and seal the same things - union with God and the removal of defilement.

Why is the removal of defilement necessary to be in union with God? To reiterate, God is holy and spiritual. Second, we are carnal and sold under sin. (Rom. 7:14) What this means is that we are sinners by nature. We have inherited a sinful nature from our father Adam - a nature that is fundamentally defiled. Abraham, just like us, was also united to Adam. Thus, in order to be united to God in covenant, Abraham needed to be purified. Circumcision was the "sign" and "seal" of this purification: it was the sign and seal of his repentance.

Given its deep spiritual meaning, it is astonishing - or at least ought to be for those who charge advocates of infant-baptism with presumptiveness - that God would command Abraham to circumcise the infants of his household. After all, how could infants understand the significance of circumcision? How could they make a positive decision for Jehovah? Notwithstanding this dilemma, God included infants in His covenantal claim. "He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male child in your generations, he who is born in your house or bought with money from any foreigner who is not your descendant. He who is born in your house and

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FAMILIES IN FOCUS

MAN AND GOD IN RELATIONSHIP - PART 2



The doctrine we saw in the last issue is concisely articulated in Chapter 7, Section 1 of the Westminster Confession of Faith. "The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto Him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of Him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which He hath been pleased to express by way of covenant."

God dealt with man federally with Adam as mans covenant representative. God spelled out the terms of mans submission to Him by covenant. Though the terms of this covenant are not formally stated in scripture, they are clearly implied. Adam was called to obedience to God's expressed will with a gracious promise of life upon obedience, and conversely, death upon disobedience. For the purpose of keeping this covenant distinct from the covenant of grace the church has traditionally called it a covenant of works. Chapter 7, Section 2 of the W.C.F. reads, "The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience." It must be remembered though that it was not a covenant by which man could merit eternal life. Had he been perfectly obedient he still would have been but an unprofitable servant, doing only what was his duty to do. Man was never in a position to make God his debtor, and as the Confession states, it was a gracious condescension on Gods part to grant blessedness to man.

It is good to stop at this point to reflect on the fact that all men are obliged to God. They are all totally dependent on God for their existence

and the blessings they enjoy. But they are also under obligation to render to God perfect, wholehearted obedience. Psalm 2 relates how the heathen recognise God and His Anointed's dominion over them and nevertheless seek to continue in rebellion against Him. They say in verse 3, "Let us break Their bonds in pieces and cast Their cords from us."

You, too, whether you are saved or not, whether you belong to the church or not, whether you are a member of the covenant community or not, are obliged to give God a perfect submission of yourself. And God who is the Judge of all the earth holds you accountable and will at the last day settle the score with righteous judgement - life for the perfectly obedient and death for the sinner.

Tragically, Adam broke the terms of relationship with God. By this one act of rebellion he plunged himself together with the whole human race, into a state of sin and misery. Our federal head never rendered perfect obedience, to His Maker. He made both himself and the whole human race incapable of ever attaining a righteousness that would be pleasing to God. Added to that lies the fact that man was now corrupted and could in no way make satisfaction for sins already committed. Under the terms of the covenant of works, life with God had become an impossibility.

By the fall man did not cease to have a relationship with God. He was now in a position where he was condemned by the terms of relationship with God. God has never rescinded the covenant of works. Man was now in a lost condition and the whole human race would have perished everlastingly, had not God intervened in grace.

The subject of God's grace thrills and motivates the children of God. They have come to realise that God from eternity past has planned a relationship with His people, though they were sinners, through the mediatorial work of Christ, federally for His own people.

The covenant of grace is a relationship that God established, in eternity past, through the mediator, Jesus Christ. This covenant, as the covenant of works, God made with a federal head and not with individuals together forming one large body. So the essence of the covenant of grace is a covenant embraced by all three persons of the Trinity. God the Father gave the Son. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." (John 3:16) "Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.'" (Matt 25:38). God the Son agreed to come as a mediator and to give His life a ransom for many. "Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father." (John 10:17,18). God the Spirit agreed to make application of this redemption to those whom the Father had chosen. "But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are Sons of God." (Romans 8:9,14) Because Christ is the federal head of His people, the covenant representative, the people of God are the recipients of God's grace, His favor and blessing.

What makes this covenant so different from the covenant of works is that God bestows His

blessing on the people of the second Adam, not in the way of their obedience, but merely of His free, sovereignly bestowed blessings. Yet, God does not give these blessings because He has overlooked the violation of the first covenant. His justice requires that the soul that sins must die. He can not arbitrarily set aside the covenant of works to make room for another covenant. In the covenant of grace, He meets the conditions of the covenant of works, something which mere man would never again be able to do. He sent His Son as, both a ransom for sin, that His justice would be satisfied, and a spotless, perfect Savior bringing in a righteousness, a perfect obedience to the will of God, which pleases God. So the people of God are saved by works, not their works, but

Only those who are in Christ partake of the blessings of the covenant of grace.

by the works of Christ. Christ's merit is imputed to His people, and this free imputation of Christ's satisfaction and righteousness is what we call grace. The

covenant of grace speaks of salvation and a right relationship to God based on the work of the Savior, Jesus Christ, the head of His church.

Scripture clearly shows that though the whole human race were included in the covenant of works, and represented by Adam, only those who are in Christ partake of the blessings of the covenant of grace. The question that we will seek to understand the next time, the Lord willing, regards how the Lord administers this covenant of grace. It is a pertinent question, since not all men are included in this covenant. Who are included and who are not included?

The exhortation for us at this point is that since it is impossible for us to ever fulfill the terms of the covenant of works, we must cease from trying to do it. We need to believe the gospel of Jesus Christ and rest in Him. And we need to bring our families with us.

-by Bill Kroesbergen

YOUTH'S CORNER

REPEAT EVENTS

The questions concern events that were duplicated by different people, at different times. Answer each question by giving the names of the two duplicating the act.

1. slept through a storm at sea?
2. helped widows by producing oil for their financial survival?
3. were injured by falling from an upper room?
4. were approached by an angel as they threshed wheat?
5. walked barefoot as a symbol of trouble and woe?
6. ate a book?
7. made their son "pass through fire"?
8. helped endangered men make an escape by letting them down from a window?
9. were told to take off their shoes because they were standing on holy ground?
10. celebrated their birthday with a party?

ANSWERS:

1. Jonah 1:5, Luke 8:23 2. 1 Kings 17:10-16, 14:16
3. Exod 3:4,5, Josh 5:15 10. Gen 40:20, Matt 2 Kings 21:1,6 8. 1 Sam 19:11,12, Josh 2:1-15
6. Ezek 2:9 3:1-3, Rev 10:10 7. 2 Kings 16:2,3, 6:11, 1 Chron 21:20 5.2 Sam 15:30, Isa 20:2,3
Kings 4:1-7 3. 2 Kings 11:2, Acts 20:9 4. Judg 1. Jonah 1:5, Luke 8:23 2. 1 Kings 17:10-16, 14:16

BOOKS IN REVIEW

The Everlasting Righteousness by Horatius Bonar

Though the gospel of Jesus Christ has been preached for two millennia, it still remains for each generation and particularly every soul to deal with its claims. Hence the need for discussions of the pertinent questions and their answers, not to mention corrections of many errors and mistaken notions.

Bonar begins with asking some questions such as, "May I come to Him who hateth sin, and yet find that the sin which He hateth is no barrier to my coming, no reason for my being shut out from His presence as an unclean thing? May I worship in His holy place, with safety to myself, and without dishonour to Him?"

He develops the theme of substitution, how the righteousness becomes ours and the peace and pardon made sure to us. There are helpful statements on faith and assurance such as, "The belief of the gospel saves; the belief of the promise annexed to that gospel makes us sure of this salvation personally."

Easy to recommend, it encourages the weak in faith and stimulates the assured Christian to live out of this grace.

-submitted by Bill Kroesbergen



MISSION SPOTLIGHT

MISSION TO JAPAN

Our mission has been in progress continuously since 1949. We were actually here before the War but had to leave and then returned. We began working with the Reformed Church of Japan shortly after their formation in 1946. (They formed as a result of realizing that they could no longer continue with liberal theology as a basis of fellowship and proclamation.) Sort of by gentleman's agreement the OPC mission has worked in the northeast district of Japan, while the other co-operating missions -CRC and at that time the So. Presbyterians- have worked in Tokyo and Osaka-Kobe respectively.

Our goal is to establish churches which are faithful to the word of God. The RCJ has accepted the Westminster Confession of Faith and catechisms as their secondary standards. There are about 125 churches and chapels spread through out the country. The greatest concentration of churches is to be found in the Tokyo and Kobe regions. However, this representation is not so disproportional to the population as it is a reflection on the tradition harden hearts of the people in the northeast. The average size of a church in Japan is 20-30 members and the overall percentage of believers is less than .5% (yes less than 1/2 of a percent) of the 125 mill people. This is a very needy land.

Francis Xavier was the first missionary to come to Japan, in 1549. As a Catholic priest he preached a rather syncretistic doctrine and the true gospel was mired in a works righteousness that continues to confuse people today. After the closing of Japan to foreigners and seeking to wipe out all challenges to the government including Christians by the Tokugawa shogun, no protestant missionaries came to Japan until the 1880's during the Meiji era. It has only been in the last 120 years or so that protestant mis-

sions have been in Japan. This nearly 2000 year history with out the gospel has left Japan very crusty and dark.

Needless to say the modern idolatries of materialism, humanism, secularism, and pleasure are very strong in the hearts of people here. The generations since the war have built a strong materialistic based economy and society which seeks to fill their lives with things and pleasures. But you know they are empty as we all are without the grace of god in our lives.

Perhaps the two words which might best describe the average Japanese grown-up would be "anxious" and "lonely". Though there are so many people in a small space they have very few whom they can call friends or trust. And without Christ we are all anxious.

There are two major religious groups. The Shinto is somewhat pantheistic and believes in the unity of nature, a oneness with the spirit of Japan (which the Japanese can experience through the emperor, who is a descendant of the sun goddess) and experiencing the awe in nature. The second major religion which people may identify with (most only nominal as is true in N. America with Christianity) would be Buddhism. This is a religion which seeks purity through a denial of all desires leading to nirvana or enlightenment. Religiosity and moralism but no relationship to a personal God who by grace through the accomplished work of Christ on the cross redeems us as we are united to Him by faith.

It is a privilege to bring the Gospel to Japan. It is a privilege to introduce them to the person of Christ. It is a privilege to show them there is hope in Christ. It is a privilege to bring not only

the bad news of sin but the good news of Salvation by grace through faith.

We sure could use more workers here. We keep getting requests from all over Japan for help. We are in great need of both short-term and career missionaries. Our MA program uses short-termers as English teachers in various settings to make contacts with people and offer many opportunities to share the gospel. There are several areas in the north of Japan without any clear witness or workers where the presbytery has asked if we could help. Thus far no workers are available. Two more presbyteries in the south and west have made similar requests. We need workers. Besides this need of career missionaries we need short-termers all the time - retired folks with time and energy to

give to the Lord or perhaps there are some college grads who want to share Christ with those who are lost. I know you are there.

Pray the Lord will be pleased to pour out His Spirit on this land and that many will have ears to hear and turn in repentance and faith to Christ. Pray that this nation will come and worship the one living and true God as their Lord and Savior. Let this nation bow down and worship Him declaring his glory.

This is very sketchy, but I hope it gives you some idea of the needs in Japan and the reason to pray earnestly for the gospel to run free in this land.

*Sincerely, Calvin Cummings
OPC Missionary in Japan*

THE SIGN OF THE COVENANT UNDER THE OLD ADMINISTRATION

CONTINUED FROM INSIDE FRONT COVER

he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant" (Gen 17:12-13).

Amazingly, not only did God expect Abraham to circumcise his own offspring, but every male servant or slave bought with his money as well. Why did God command this? God's covenantal claim is categorical. "I shall be your God, and you and your descendants after you shall be my people" (Gen. 17). God claimed absolute sovereignty over all Abraham's house. It was all or nothing. Therefore, to withhold anyone, or anything for that matter, from God was a breach of the covenant; it would have constituted an act of rebellion.

Since Israel was God's possession, and like their father Abraham was afflicted with the taint and imputation of "original sin," the nation had to bear the same spiritual sign. They had to be

circumcised in the flesh to symbolize what must become a progressive reality in their lives. In other words, they were sealed beforehand as a witness that, as they grew up, they had to repent and trust in Jehovah as well. This is precisely why Moses instructed the fathers of Israel to impress "the way of Jehovah," the Law of God, upon their children. They were to instruct their children as they grew up to love the Lord their God (Deut. 6: 4-9).

CIRCUMCISION: THE SEAL OF JUSTIFICATION

The final attribute of circumcision was that it was a sign and seal of forensic righteousness. The fact that circumcision under the old administration was the "sign" and "seal" of justification by faith in the salvation of Jehovah should be jarring to those who hold a baptistic view of circumcision. Paul makes the connection between circumcision and forensic righteousness loud and clear: "And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised, that righteousness might be im-

puted to them also, and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised" (Rom. 4:11-12 emphasis added). This passage unequivocally, and categorically highlights, the deep spiritual and salvific nature of circumcision.

What makes this astounding was that it was applied to infants at the time. This totally contradicts modern evangelical views. Obviously, it was not a sign and seal of an infant's faith (unless of course, we want to strip faith of understanding, as, unfortunately, some recent defenders of infant-baptism have done), but was the sign and seal of God's promise to the infant. It was a seal that the blessing of salvation by faith was his as well.

However with a promise there is always an obligation. God's promise to Abraham did not preclude Abraham's obligation to walk and be blameless before God. In no way does this imply works-righteousness, because as Abra-

ham walked before God, He was the one enabling Abraham (Phil 2:12-13). Nevertheless, Abraham had to do the walking. In other words, God works through means. Those means are active faith and obedience. This is precisely what was required of all circumcised infants - as they grew up, the confirmation of the Covenant promise became evident by their personal and active faith and obedience. And notice that they did not submit themselves to a re-circumcision, or a second circumcision. The very idea is preposterous.

Circumcision was an intensely spiritual practice. It was deeply soteriological. In other words it signified salvation. Although, racial and political aspects were derived, these were secondary features at best. Fundamentally circumcision never portrayed peripheral or external blessings because covenant union ultimately was not, and is not, about race or politics. It is always about salvation in God. This is what circumcision signified in the old economy; and that's why it was the sign of the covenant.
-Tristan Emmanuel

Elders: Mr Barry Everts
1405 Seaton Road
RR#1 Cambridge, ON
N1R 5S2
(519) 623-8208
beverts@execulink.com

Mr Cope Jonkman
RR#1
Paris, ON
N3L 3E1
(519) 448-1068
cjonkman@execulink.com

Deacons: Mr Ray Halma
2310 5th Conc Rd W
RR#2 Branchton, ON
N0B 1L0
(519) 622-4389
rhalma000@sympatico.ca

Mr Evert Winkels
52 Selkirk Street
Cambridge, ON
N1S 1Z3
(519) 622-5745
ewinkels@sympatica.ca

SHEFFIELD REFORMED CHURCH

For Christ's Crown and Covenant

Services: Sundays at 11:15 am and 6:00 pm
(meeting at Knox Presbyterian Church, Sheffield)

P.O. Box 12-4
Sheffield, ON
L0R 1Z0

(519) 624-5920

email - gcc@execulink.com

web site - <http://www.execulink.com/~gcc/index.htm>