

## **Knowing God; Understanding God's works through History (2)**

### **Introduction**

We will continue our subject that we began to address last Lord's Day. What we then sought to show and demonstrate is that God has revealed Himself to His people through history whereby they might know more fully what He is doing and why He is doing what He is doing in history. This is one of two ways that our God has chosen to manifest Himself to us. We spoke of these last week. First, God reveals who He is to us through our coming to understand His *attributes* that He has displayed in His creation and in His Word. In this way we come to know in a measure His nature, that is, *what He is like*. But secondly, God reveals Himself through His *actions*, what He has done and is doing in history, that is, by *what He does*. We underscored that God's self-disclosure is always through His full, final, complete, and inerrant Word. Through history, however, He has revealed His Word more clearly and fully to His people. He has done this by raising up godly men, mighty in the Scriptures, who confronted errant, even heretical teaching that had troubled the churches. In their exposure and correction of error, these godly men clarified and declared truth regarding His ways.

Last Lord's Day we considered the passage of Romans 5:12-21 and how it has been employed through history to reveal and expound biblical doctrines. These doctrines had not been formerly stated clearly and forthrightly until these words of Scripture were applied to error that arose in church history. We showed how the doctrine of *original sin* was first set forward in the second century by Irenaeus and more fully in the early fifth century by Augustine. Whereas Irenaeus was addressing the error of Gnosticism, Augustine was refuting the errant views of free will of Pelagianism. This same passage of Romans 5:12-21 was called upon frequently by the early Protestant Reformers in their refutation of the errors of Roman Catholicism. One of the leading doctrines of reformed teaching was that of *total depravity*, which was argued from Romans 5. In addition, the passage taught the reformed biblical principles of *Solus Christus*, that salvation is by and through Jesus Christ alone, and the doctrines of *Sola Gratia* and *Sola Fide*, which speak of salvation by God's grace alone and God's justification of believing sinners through faith alone.

And then toward the end of last Lord's Day message, we showed that the English puritans in the 17<sup>th</sup> century drew upon this passage of Romans 5:12-21, and many others, in order to articulate what reformed (Protestant) Christians have called *covenant theology*.<sup>1</sup> We only began to introduce this subject last Lord's Day, but we will continue to address it today. However, we will employ another passage of Scripture to do so, which is Galatians 4:21-31. We will first read the passage at this time and say a few words about its context, and then later we will draw upon it to address the biblical teaching regarding covenant theology.

### **I. The two covenants of Galatians 4:21-31**

Let us read **Galatians 4:21-31** in which the Apostle Paul wrote:

Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not hear the law? <sup>22</sup>For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman. <sup>23</sup>But he who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise, <sup>24</sup>which things are symbolic. For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar— <sup>25</sup>for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is,

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<sup>1</sup> Sometimes covenant theology is referred to as *federalism*, which speaks of God's dealing with a people due to His commitment to the (federal) head of that people, such as Adam, Abraham, David, and the Lord Jesus.

and is in bondage with her children—<sup>26</sup>but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all.  
<sup>27</sup>For it is written:

“Rejoice, O barren,  
You who do not bear!  
Break forth and shout,  
You who are not in labor!  
For the desolate has many more children  
Than she who has a husband.”

<sup>28</sup>Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise. <sup>29</sup>But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, even so it is now. <sup>30</sup>Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? “Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman.” <sup>31</sup>So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman but of the free.

The Apostle Paul was correcting doctrinal error that had been taught and embraced by the churches in the region of Galatia. Paul had originally founded these churches through the preaching of the gospel that he had conducted during his earlier missionary journey to that region. He had taught them that they could be saved from their sin through the gospel, that is, through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. They could be saved through faith in Christ alone because of who He is and for what He had done through His life, His crucifixion, His resurrection and enthronement as Lord in heaven. But after Paul had left the region, false Jewish teachers, who also claimed to be Christians, taught Paul’s converts that they were not saved through faith in Christ alone, but through faith in Christ plus through keeping the law of Moses in order to earn God’s forgiveness of sins and to gain eternal life. Paul repudiated these false teachers and their teaching. He declared that their departure from the gospel was damnable (Gal. 1:6-9).

Now here in Galatians 4 the Apostle wrote of two specific covenants, the one brought condemnation through Moses and the other brings salvation to believers through Jesus Christ. He called upon both Sarah and Hagar who bore sons to Abraham to illustrate these two covenants. Ishmael was the son of Hagar, the bondwoman. Isaac was the promised son of Sarah, the “freewoman. Paul declared that these two women and their two sons represented two different covenants, even two different kinds of covenants, the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. Ishmael was born through Abraham’s fleshly effort (works) hoping to gain the blessing of God through him. Isaac was born due to God’s supernatural grace through faith in God who had promised Abraham a son by Sarah. And so, here two covenants are set side by side and over against one another. Now, having laid this foundation, we will consider the implications of this passage later.

But let us now consider...

## **II. The errors that the puritans were addressing in the 17<sup>th</sup> century—the state church and baptism as a saving ordinance**

We spoke about how God through history has used the error of some in order raise up godly men to refute and correct that error, resulting in newly discovered and broader understanding of true biblical doctrine. What was it that the English puritans were addressing? There were a number of issues, but the two primary matters included (1) the identification and nature of the true church of Jesus Christ, and (2) the biblical teaching and practice of Christian baptism and how it relates to salvation.

England at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century had a state church, the Church of England. This state church had become independent from the pope and Roman Catholicism in the Act of 1532. The Church of England then became “Protestant”, but in name only. It continued to hold to the faith and practice of Rome, but declared itself a separate Protestant church. During the following decades the puritans rose within the Church of England in their efforts to correct its false doctrine and practice by the Scriptures.

The Church of England regarded every citizen within its realm a member of the true church of Jesus Christ. All citizens and their infants were required to be baptized, in which sprinkling was the mode of baptism. Baptism had been regarded as a saving sacrament. Both the Church of England and Roman Catholicism taught their people that they, along with infants, were born again (regenerated) through the baptism performed by the church. The puritans rejected the concept of a state church in which all citizens were members and that baptism, including infant baptism, secured salvation. It was from the study of the Holy Scriptures that the puritans articulated their understanding of covenant theology that corrected these errors and proclaimed biblical truth. The puritans recovered the truth of the Bible that only those who were in relationship with God in the covenant of grace in Jesus Christ were saved from their sin. They further taught that it was through the biblical teachings of a covenant relationship with God that the entire purpose of God in history could be properly understood, that a proper understanding of the covenants was the key to understand rightly and comprehensively the teaching of the Bible.

### III. The essence of covenant theology

We who are reformed (historically Protestant) hold to covenant theology. This is the belief that the Holy Scriptures teach that a relationship between God and His creatures can only be obtained and enjoyed by God's willingness to condescend to enter and maintain a relationship with Him. Our own **Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689** sets forth this matter in article 6, paragraph 1, which reads,

The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience to him as their creator, yet they could never have attained the reward of life but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant. (Luke 17:10; Job 35:7, 8) (Art. 6, par. 1)

In short, therefore, covenant theology is the interpretive framework for understanding the entire story of the Bible. It describes the manner in which God has dealt with people in history. Now, more precisely,

#### A. What is a covenant?

What is a good definition of a biblical covenant? It may be stated in this way:

A covenant is "*a declaration of [God's] sovereign pleasure concerning the benefits He will bestow on [man], the communion they will have with Him, and the way and means by which this will be enjoyed by them.*"

This was the definition proposed by a 17<sup>th</sup> century reformed Baptist, **Nehemiah Coxe** (d. 1689).<sup>2</sup> This definition would have been affirmed by all those who held covenant theology.

What is meant by the expression of "the way and means", speaks of what is required by God through which mankind may receive and enjoy God's benefits promised in His covenant. It is common, therefore, to speak of "covenant sanctions" that must be present in a covenant relationship. These include obligations and promises of the parties participating in and enjoying the covenant relationship. And so, it has been said that "Covenant sanctions are threats that enforce and ensure the fulfillment of the covenantal commitments."<sup>3</sup>

Now in the establishment of covenants between God and people set forth in the Bible, the covenant is of such inestimable value and the relationship is of such a superlative nature that the death of the covenanter is pledged. Covenants are ratified with blood, either through the death of the covenanter or a sacrificial animal that represents the covenanter.

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<sup>2</sup> Samuel Renihan, **The Mystery of Christ; His Covenant and His Kingdom** (Founders Press, 2019), p. 40.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 41.

In the context of making a covenant, the covenanter is not sacrificed (προσφέρω), but we are told that the death of the covenanter must “be brought forward as evidence” or “pledged” (φέρεσθαι). The idea is that to make a covenant, one must swear an oath that guarantees participation and fulfillment of the covenantal commitments. In this sense, the idea of “bringing forward as evidence” remains true, but it is not the actual death of the covenanter, but the potential death of the covenanter that is brought forward as evidence in a covenantal transaction. This aligns with διαθήκη (covenant) being used in the Old Testament to describe covenants between living parties, not dead ones. The translation (of Heb. 9:16) therefore should be, “For where there is a covenant, the death of the covenanter must be pledged.”<sup>4</sup>

Covenants involve both precepts and promises, that is, both stipulations and consequent promises. Depending on the nature of the precept(s) of a covenant and the basis on which the promise(s) is received, covenants will vary in nature.

A covenant that suspends the enjoyment of its blessings on obedience to precepts (laws) is of a different character than a covenant that freely distributes its blessings. A covenant based materially on a commitment of obedience to a command is *a covenant of works*. A covenant based materially on a commitment of promise is *a covenant of grace*.<sup>5</sup>

This is a very important distinction. Let us first consider the nature of the covenant of works. Then we will consider the covenant of grace.

## **B. The covenant of works**

Those who hold to covenant theology understand that the Holy Scriptures teach that God entered into a relationship with all of humanity through Adam based upon a covenant of works. The essence of this covenant is stated in Genesis 2:8-9, and 15-17.

<sup>8</sup>The LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there He put the man whom He had formed. <sup>9</sup>And out of the ground the LORD God made every tree grow that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

<sup>15</sup>Then the LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to tend and keep it. <sup>16</sup>And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; <sup>17</sup>but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”

God had promised Adam that He would serve as His prophet, priest, and king over His creation, if he would continue in submission and obedience to his Creator. But Adam fell into sin, losing all that he had and all that the human race could have had if he had remained faithful.

Although the details are rather brief and general, that it was a covenant of works is clear. God covenanted with Adam so that he would be able to dwell in this garden paradise and enjoy all of its benefits perpetually (eternally), conditioned on his obedience to God’s command, “of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” Two trees stood forth as most significant in the garden, the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. One was a pledge of everlasting life. The other was the promise of death, exclusion from life from God and before God. The condition and state of blessing in dwelling in God’s garden was contingent on Adam’s obedience to God’s law, which here was a command of prohibition. Adam’s ongoing covenant relationship with God, which would have continued in eternity, was based on Adam’s obedience, based on Him keeping his work of obedience to God.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 44.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 47.

Here is a good description of a relationship with God according to this covenant of works:

In a covenant of works, you must earn the reward. You get out what you put in. You reap what you sow. Obey and be blessed; disobey and be cursed. The idea of merit or earning, though, is relative in the sense that God dictates the terms of what the obedience rendered will be as well as what the blessing rewarded will be. Apart from God making rewards available through covenantal obedience, the creature would never claim recompense from God because the creature can never place the Creator in its debt. And therefore, if God says, “Do this and receive that” then such is the agreement. God is free to dictate the conditions and rewards as He sees fit according to His own wisdom and justice. And once God has established a work-reward relationship, the blessing can be claimed according to justice. In a covenant of works, your obedience rightly earns the blessing.<sup>6</sup>

Adam broke the covenant of works when he disobeyed God’s law and ate of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The result was that he brought God’s condemnation upon the entire human race that he represented. Even after Adam’s fall into sin the covenant of works continued in force upon all people everywhere. But upon Adam’s fall, eternal life could no longer be attained by fallen man’s obedience to God’s law, for he was subject to God’s eternal damnation due to Adam’s sin. This was underscored in our consideration of Romans 5:12-21 last Lord’s Day. Thankfully, however, God promised redemption from the covenant of works under which God had cursed mankind. He promised to save sinners through...

### C. The covenant of grace

The covenant of grace is very different in nature from the covenant of works. In the covenant of works God first gives his *law*, which, if followed by *obedience* (works) is then rewarded with His *blessing*. But when God relates to people based upon the covenant of grace, God first gives His *promise* (which is not conditioned on works), then His *promise* is received through *faith*, which then is followed by the grateful response of those who have received His blessing.

So, in a covenant of works, when *obedience* has been rendered, blessings promised are enjoyed. Conversely, in a covenant of grace, after *promises* have been *received*, *laws* are introduced... This difference has been summarized often as Edward Fisher did in his *Marrow of Modern Divinity* by contrasting “Do this and live” with “Live and do this.”<sup>7</sup>

God first promised the covenant of grace by which He would save His people from their sin in Genesis 3:15. It was in God’s pronounced judgment upon the serpent for its part in leading mankind into sin that He first promised a coming Deliverer from sin. Through sin, Adam had lost God’s blessing as His prophet, priest, and king, as he reigned with God, on behalf of God, in paradise, the Garden of Eden. By yielding to the temptation of the serpent, Adam had rebelled against God. Adam gave over his kingdom to the devil, to whom Adam (and his race) had now become enslaved. The kingdom of Satan had ascended over man. All mankind would thereafter labor with hardship, the earth itself resisting him. Man would suffer the injustice from others even as he perpetrated injustice upon others. He would endure a difficult life of pain and sorrow, until the day that he returned to the dust from which he had come.

But here in the beginning God gave a word of promise. It is the first word of the gospel in Holy Scripture. This is why this promise is commonly referred to as the *protoevangelium* -- “the first gospel.” Genesis 3:15 reads,

“And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.”

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 48.

God made this promise to His people through His pronouncement of judgment upon the serpent. He would save His people unto himself, delivering them from under the authority of the devil who will have made their life difficult and miserable. God would call forth a people, who would be opposed to the devil and he toward them. And then one day he would cause the Seed of the woman, which we know to be Jesus Christ, to strip the devil of his authority that he had gained over fallen man. God declared to the serpent that this Seed would “bruise your head”, even as the devil would but bruise the heel of this Seed, which foretells the death of Jesus Christ upon His cross. Here is the first word in Scripture of the salvation that God purposed to bring to His people, and it reflects that this work of salvation is a manifestation of the covenant of grace that God makes with His people. There are no conditions to be met in this covenant, as there were with Adam in the first covenant. It was the promise of a relationship with His people; it would be a covenant of grace.

And so, here in the first few chapters of Genesis, the ways of God with mankind are set forth. God would relate to fallen mankind based on a covenant of works, unless and until He intervened in saving them by means of the covenant of grace. Here God declared what He would accomplish through history. He would save His people from their sin through sending a Deliverer, a King who would rescue and deliver them from the kingdom of satan into His own everlasting kingdom.

#### **D. The covenant of works and the covenant of grace through history**

It is in this way that the entire unfolding story of the Bible can be best understood. Those who hold to covenant theology believe that the Lord deals with mankind according to the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. This is the theological key to understanding the history of redemption, which is the unfolding story of the Holy Scriptures.

Now the puritans knew, of course, that the Bible reveals a number of different covenants that God made with various individuals and peoples through history. These include the covenants that God made with Noah after the flood (cf. Gen. 9:9ff), with Abraham (Gen. 12:1ff; 15:18ff; 17:1-16), with Israel through Moses (Exo. 19:15f), with King David and His Son (2 Sam. 23:5), and the new covenant which the Lord Jesus established through His death (cf. Matt. 26:7f), which had been foretold by the prophets (cf. Heb. 8:6-13; Jer. 31:31ff). But the English puritans understood that each of these divine covenants could be classified either as a covenant of works or a covenant of grace. *This is the heart of what is to be reformed, to hold to and espouse covenant theology.*

Now this understanding and acceptance of covenant theology was developed and articulated by the English puritans of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. What they had set forth was the teaching of Scripture in a manner that had not been previously seen or understood with clarity. Now please understand, it is not as though earlier Christians did not think in general about these matters. The essential nature of the covenants was taught and proclaimed by the early Church Fathers and the Protestant reformers (e.g. Luther, Calvin), but the understanding of covenant theology was not set forth in the clarity of expression and comprehensive understanding until God revealed biblical truth to the puritans of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, both in England and in New England.

But not all who espouse covenant theology agree on how the various covenants in Scripture should be understood. They differ on how each of the covenants should be understood as either a manifestation of the covenant of works or the covenant of grace. And this is where we as reformed Baptists have differed from our paedobaptist brothers which has resulted in significant differences in our understanding of baptism and its subjects and the nature of both the church of Jesus Christ.

#### **IV. The differences between reformed Paedobaptist and reformed Baptist understanding of the covenants.**

Paedobaptists believe that not only are believers in the covenant of grace, but so are their children, if at least one parent is a believer. On this belief, infants and children of believers are “baptized” and that by the mode of sprinkling. All who are baptized, whether believers or their children, are within the covenant of grace. Reformed Baptists, however, believe that only true believers are in the covenant of grace before God,

and only true believers (disciples) are therefore to be baptized, and that by immersion. Now although my closest friends in the ministry are paedobaptists and my favorite writers and Christian leaders in history are paedobaptist, we disagree with their understanding of interpreting the covenants that are recorded in the Bible. Let us consider these differences.

### **A. The paedobaptist understanding of the covenants of works and of grace and the covenants of Scripture**

Paedobaptists believe that God *instituted* and *inaugurated* the covenant of grace in Genesis 3:15, and that God has dealt with His people through history as He has administered the covenant of grace to His people. They believe that all of God's covenants that God has made through biblical history were different administrations of the one covenant of grace. This has resulted in their understanding of the nature of the local church and in their practice of infant baptism by sprinkling.

Much of their reasoning is due on their understanding that God had enacted and maintained the covenant of grace with Abraham and his *physical* descendants. It is argued that God in His grace had called forth Abraham from his life of idolatry and into favor with Himself, and then God promised Abraham unconditionally His covenant to Abraham and his physical descendants.

God did not reveal to Abraham in the beginning the full nature and implications of His covenant with this man. Over the course of a number of chapters in Genesis God revealed His covenant and its implications to the patriarch.

The grand promises of the Abrahamic covenant, as originally given to the patriarch, are recorded in Genesis 12:2, 3, 7. The covenant itself was solemnly ratified by sacrifice, thus making it inviolable (unable to be broken), in Genesis 15:9-21. The seal and sign of the covenant, circumcision, is brought before us in Genesis 17:9-14. The covenant was confirmed forward by a divine oath in Genesis 22:15-18, which provided a ground of "strong consolation" (Heb. 6:17, 19).<sup>8</sup>

Here are the passages in Genesis that speak of God's covenantal dealings with Abraham. First there us **Genesis 12:1-3**.

Now the LORD had said to Abram:

“Get out of your country,  
From your family  
And from your father's house,  
To a land that I will show you.  
<sup>2</sup>I will make you a great nation;  
I will bless you  
And make your name great;  
And you shall be a blessing.  
<sup>3</sup>I will bless those who bless you,  
And I will curse him who curses you;  
And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Gen. 12:1-3)

We then read later God's promises to Abraham in **Genesis 15**:

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward.”

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<sup>8</sup> Arthur Pink, **The Divine Covenants** (Pietan Publications, 2003), p. 131.

<sup>2</sup>But Abram said, “Lord GOD, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” <sup>3</sup>Then Abram said, “Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!”

<sup>4</sup>And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir.” <sup>5</sup>Then He brought him outside and said, “Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.” And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be.”

<sup>6</sup>And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.

<sup>7</sup>Then He said to him, “I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to inherit it.”

<sup>8</sup>And he said, “Lord GOD, how shall I know that I will inherit it?”

<sup>9</sup>So He said to him, “Bring Me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” <sup>10</sup>Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, down the middle, and placed each piece opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. <sup>11</sup>And when the vultures came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

<sup>12</sup>Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror and great darkness fell upon him. <sup>13</sup>Then He said to Abram: “Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years. <sup>14</sup>And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions. <sup>15</sup>Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age. <sup>16</sup>But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”

<sup>17</sup>And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces. <sup>18</sup>On the same day the LORD made a *covenant* with Abram, saying: “To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates— <sup>19</sup>the Kenites, the Kenezites, the Kadmonites, <sup>20</sup>the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, <sup>21</sup>the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.”

The last major passage that addresses God’s covenant with Abraham is in **Genesis 17:1-14**, and here we read of the command for Abraham to circumcise the male children that descend from him and all other males who may align themselves with Abraham’s people.

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless. <sup>2</sup>And I will make My *covenant* between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.” <sup>3</sup>Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying: <sup>4</sup>“As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. <sup>5</sup>No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations. <sup>6</sup>I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. <sup>7</sup>And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. <sup>8</sup>Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.”

<sup>9</sup>And God said to Abraham: “As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. <sup>10</sup>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; <sup>11</sup>and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you. <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. <sup>14</sup>And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.”

The reformed paedobaptists (Presbyterians and reformed Congregationalists) of the 17<sup>th</sup> century did not believe that infant baptism imparts salvation.<sup>9</sup> In this way they rightly distanced themselves and repudiated the doctrine of baptism taught by Roman Catholicism and the Church of England. But they did and still do view circumcision as a covenant sign that signifies membership in the external covenant community, which they claim to have been the covenant of grace. They also believe that the Mosaic covenant was a manifestation of God's covenant of grace, but that it was administered in a different way. And then they also believe that the covenant that God made with King David was a covenant of grace, which was but another administration of that covenant. And of course they rightly teach that the new covenant that Jesus Christ instituted was the covenant of grace.

But because they believed that the Abrahamic covenant with Abraham's physical descendants was an administration of the covenant of grace and that covenant membership was extended to the physical descendants of Abraham, that under the administration of the new covenant in this New Testament age the physical children of believers should also be regarded as "covenant children", who, although may not have salvation, but are, nevertheless, externally in the covenant of grace. And as such, they are baptized as infants if at least one parent is a believer, because the child of that believer is included in the covenant. They argue that New Testament infant baptism of children of believers is of the same nature and practice of circumcising male children of parents who were of Israel.<sup>10</sup>

The result of this is that our paedobaptist friends do not believe that a New Testament local church should be comprised of true disciples of Jesus Christ. They believe that the local church can be a mixed group of converted and unconverted people, but all are regarded to be external members in the new covenant.

## **B. The reformed Baptist understanding of the covenants of works and of grace and the covenants of Scripture**

In contrast to our paedobaptist friends, reformed Baptists have had a significantly different understanding of the covenants of Scripture. The chief distinction is this: we understand that the covenant of grace, although promised repeatedly through the Old Testament Scriptures, was not enacted by God until Jesus Christ died upon His cross to pay for our sins. The covenant of grace was not administered during the times of the Old Testament, but was promised throughout. Each of the covenants of the Old Testament pointed to the coming of the covenant of grace in Christ, but none of the Old Testament covenants administered that covenant to its people. The New Testament speaks of the new covenant being enacted by Christ, which had been long-promised in the Old Testament. Our Lord declared the night that He was betrayed, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you" (Luke 22:20). Although all who have ever been saved was due to the covenant of grace, that covenant, which is declared to be "new" and in distinction to the "old" covenant, was only in the form of God's promise during the times of the Old Testament.

How do reformed Baptists understand the Old Testament covenants? First, let us consider the Abrahamic covenant. We understand the Scriptures teach that God made His covenant with Abraham with regard to both his physical descendants but also with his spiritual descendants. But the manner in which He related with the physical descendants of Abraham was a *covenant of works*. Remember the nature of a covenant of works: in a covenant of works one must obey God's law in order to receive God's blessing. God made it quite clear that His relationship with Abraham's physical descendants was a law of circumcision was in place. God declared to Abraham,

"As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. <sup>10</sup>This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants

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<sup>9</sup> And reformed paedobaptists today do not believe that infant baptism imparts salvation.

<sup>10</sup> We do not address our differences here regarding the biblical mode of baptism, which is by immersion, and the practice of paedobaptists, which is by sprinkling. That is another matter for another time.

after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised; <sup>11</sup>and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you. (Gen. 17:9-11)

But God also made promise of His salvation with Abraham's spiritual seed. ***The God made provision for Abraham and his spiritual descendants in the promise of the covenant of grace that was to be received through faith in Jesus Christ.*** The Apostle Paul declared that God made the promise of the covenant of grace with Abraham's seed—singular—meaning with Abraham's seed Jesus Christ. God's promise of the covenant of grace was not to Abraham's physical descendants, his "seeds." This is declared in Galatians 3:16, "Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' who is Christ."

And so, reformed Baptists have believed that God's covenant with Abraham's physical descendants was a covenant of works. But God's covenant that He promised to Abraham and His seed (Christ) was the promised covenant of grace. When God made a covenant of works with Abraham and his physical descendants, He had bound them to keep His law (works) as was the condition to receive His blessing. This was hinted at in God's statement regarding Abraham in Genesis 18:19. God declared,

"For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what He has promised him." (Gen. 18:19)

When God had commanded Abraham to circumcise all the males that were in this covenant, He was committing them to keep the whole law of God, which would later be revealed in its fulness through Moses. As Paul wrote to the Galatians, "I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law" (Gal. 5:3). But even in that covenant, God was revealing and affirming the promised the covenant of grace, which Abraham's spiritual descendants would embrace in faith.

At this point we call your attention to the passage we read in the beginning. Paul declared of Abraham's two sons in Galatians 4 that each of them and their mothers were symbolic of the two covenants—the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. Here again is that passage that we may now read after giving consideration of these matters:

Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not hear the law? <sup>22</sup>For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman. <sup>23</sup>But he who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise, <sup>24</sup>which things are symbolic. For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar— <sup>25</sup>for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children— <sup>26</sup>but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all. <sup>27</sup>For it is written:

"Rejoice, O barren,  
You who do not bear!  
Break forth and shout,  
You who are not in labor!  
For the desolate has many more children  
Than she who has a husband."

<sup>28</sup>Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise. <sup>29</sup>But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, even so it is now. <sup>30</sup>Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman." <sup>31</sup>So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman but of the free.

The covenant of grace is illustrated by Abraham's promised son, Isaac. Simply being physically born to Abraham did not enable Ishmael to be in the covenant of grace. One must be a child of promise, as Isaac. And Paul declared that not only he, but all the Gentile believers to whom he was writing were all "born according to the Spirit." He had written, "Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise." It is only those who have the faith of Abraham who are the promised children of Abraham (Rom. 4:16). But our paedobaptist friends claim that it is the physical descent of a believing parent that qualifies the child to be in the covenant of grace, to be a "covenant child." They therefore confer the sign of the covenant, which they claim to be baptism. The result of this is that they believe membership of the local church is not to be restricted to disciples only, but to anyone who is a believer or who is parented by a believer.

But not only do reformed Baptists assert that the relationship of God and Abraham's physical descendants was a covenant of works, but we also understand the Mosaic covenant to have also been established as a covenant of works.

Based on the laws, the promises, and the threats of the covenant, the Mosaic Covenant was a covenant of works for life in the land of Canaan... Insofar as Israel obeys the Mosaic law, they will enjoy the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant. Insofar as Israel disobeys the Mosaic law, they will experience the guaranteed curses of the covenant.<sup>11</sup>

We differ from our paedobaptist friends who say that the Mosaic covenant was a different administration of the covenant of grace. No, it was clearly a covenant of works that God made with the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Although God initially delivered Israel from Egypt and brought them to possess the Promised Land due to His promise to their fathers, the covenant that God made with Israel through Moses was a covenant of works which would be the basis of their security and the enjoyment of God's blessing and continuance in the Promised Land. Again, here is the language of the covenant of works which God declared through Moses:

"Now it shall come to pass, if you diligently obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments which I command you today, that the LORD your God will set you high above all nations of the earth. <sup>2</sup>And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, because you obey the voice of the LORD your God:

<sup>3</sup>"Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the country.

<sup>4</sup>"Blessed shall be the fruit of your body, the produce of your ground and the increase of your herds, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flocks...

<sup>9</sup>"The LORD will establish you as a holy people to Himself, just as He has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of the LORD your God and walk in His ways. <sup>10</sup>Then all peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the LORD, and they shall be afraid of you. <sup>11</sup>And the LORD will grant you plenty of goods, in the fruit of your body, in the increase of your livestock, and in the produce of your ground, in the land of which the LORD swore to your fathers to give you. (Deut. 28:1-4, 9-11)

God promised blessing if they obeyed His law. . But He also pronounced His judgment upon their disobedience. This is a covenant of works

"But it shall come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments and His statutes which I command you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you:

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<sup>11</sup> Samuel Renihan, **The Mystery of Christ; His Covenant and His Kingdom** (Founders Press, 2019), p. 110.

<sup>16</sup>“Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the country.

<sup>17</sup>“Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl.

<sup>18</sup>“Cursed shall be the fruit of your body and the produce of your land, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flocks.

<sup>19</sup>“Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out.

<sup>45</sup> “Moreover all these curses shall come upon you and pursue and overtake you, until you are destroyed, because you did not obey the voice of the LORD your God, to keep His commandments and His statutes which He commanded you. <sup>46</sup>And they shall be upon you for a sign and a wonder, and on your descendants forever. (Deut. 28:15-19, 45-46)

And yet in God’s dealings with the physical descendants of Abraham according to the covenant of works, God continued to put before His people of the Mosaic covenant the promise of the coming Redeemer, who would bring them salvation through grace.

But in addition, reformed Baptists also understand the covenant that God made with King David and His promise of an everlasting dynasty was also a covenant of works. God had told Solomon:

<sup>4</sup>Now if you walk before Me as your father David walked, in integrity of heart and in uprightness, to do according to all that I have commanded you, and if you keep My statutes and My judgments, <sup>5</sup>then I will establish the throne of your kingdom over Israel forever, as I promised David your father, saying, ‘You shall not fail to have a man on the throne of Israel.’ <sup>6</sup>But if you or your sons at all turn from following Me, and do not keep My commandments and My statutes which I have set before you, but go and serve other gods and worship them, <sup>7</sup>then I will cut off Israel from the land which I have given them; and this house which I have consecrated for My name I will cast out of My sight. Israel will be a proverb and a byword among all peoples.

Reformed Baptists emphasize the importance of interpreting the Old Testament typologically, that is, according to typology. The Old Testament is filled with *types* that foreshadow and portend the *antitypes* that are declared in the New Testament. The Old Testament contains *symbols* that represent what is true in the New Testament (Gal. 4:23). The Old Testament contain many physical events that are *examples* to understand spiritual truths under the New Testament (1 Cor. 10:13). The Old Testament is filled with *shadows* that foretell the arrival of their realities under the New Testament (Heb. 10:1).

Through all of God’s covenants in history, even those that we have shown to be according to the covenant of works, God was preparing a people and preparing the way for the coming of Jesus Christ, who is the center of all of Scripture. It is in His blood (His death) that the promise of the new covenant is realized and established for those who believe solely on Him as Lord and Savior. Being the physical descendant of anyone will not bring you into God’s favor, but only through the individual’s faith in Jesus Christ is salvation secured.

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## **Questions that might be asked of our Paedobaptist friends**

1. If having a believing parent qualifies one for baptism, why did John the Baptist refuse having Abraham as one's "father" as a legitimate qualification for baptism? John declared, "Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham" (Matt. 3:8f). Repentance qualifies one for baptism, not one's parentage.
2. Can it be imagined that John the Baptist would not baptize unrepentant Jews, but would he have then baptized the children of parents that had shown repentance even though the children had not? John declared, "And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore *every* tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Matt. 3:10). This is the message of the New Testament age.
3. Basic to covenant theology is the understanding that a person is either in Adam or in Christ, relates with God according to the covenant of works or the covenant of grace. How can they say that a child of a believing parent is a "covenant child", if he or she is an unbeliever? How can that unbelieving child be in two covenants at the same time? This is not a biblical possibility.
4. The Word of God declares that every member of the the new covenant, even "from least of them to the greatest of them", is in a saving relationship with Christ. Every one of them "knows the Lord" (Jer. 31:34; Heb. 8:11). How, then, can paedobaptists claim that the uncovered children of believing parents are "covenant children", members of the new covenant, when they do not know the Lord? They cannot be declared as such until they themselves give evidence of new life in Christ through repentance and faith.
5. If a family came to a paedobaptist church and the parents were then converted, not only would the parents be "baptized", but also the children. What if the family had many children and they ranged from a very young age to adulthood, say a son or daughter 18 or 20 years old? At what point, if there is one, in which the church would require the older children themselves to become believers before the church would baptize them? Or would they be qualified even though they are older and responsible because their parents are Christian?
6. Why could an adult not appeal to a paedobaptist church to baptize him if he could show that his parents were true believers, even though he is not a believer? In other words, what is the age or condition of a son or daughter when the believing parent no longer qualifies him or her for baptism?
7. If God regards all children of believing parents as "covenant children", does that not make the basis of God's choice due to race and not grace? And if this were so, why was Ishmael a covenant child? But even though Abraham was his father, he was to be "cast out", not to be included among the people of God.
8. Only male children could be circumcised in Israel, how, then, does circumcision translate into infant baptism to male and female children of believing parents?
9. If children of a believing parent are qualified to be baptized because they are regarded as "holy" due to the believing parent, why is it that the unbelieving spouse is not also qualified to be baptized since he is also "sanctified" by his believing spouse? Paul wrote, "For the unbelieving husband is sanctified (regarded as holy) by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy (sanctified)" (1 Cor. 7:14).

10. How can a paedobaptist church experience and enjoy true fellowship among its membership if evidence of regeneration is not a condition for baptism and membership? Paul wrote of both the impossibility of fellowship between the regenerate and the unregenerate as well as the responsibility of the regenerate to separate from the unregenerate in their church relations in order that the church body may experience and enjoy fellowship with God:

Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? <sup>15</sup>And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? <sup>16</sup>And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said:

“I will dwell in them  
And walk among them.  
I will be their God,  
And they shall be My people.”

<sup>17</sup>Therefore

“Come out from among them  
And be separate, says the Lord.  
Do not touch what is unclean,  
And I will receive you.”

<sup>18</sup>“I will be a Father to you,  
And you shall be My sons and daughters,  
Says the LORD Almighty.” (1 Cor. 6:14-18)

I would argue that in a free society in which there is only volunteer church attendance, a reformed paedobaptist church would probably have most of its members to be regenerate because they are drawn to the doctrine and life of the church. However, in lands in which there is a state church that practices infant baptism, there is little possibility of true, spiritual, biblical fellowship in the churches. This was the situation in all Protestant countries until the U.S. first separated church from state.

11. How is not the practice of paedobaptism and the message of their churches very conducive to produce and maintain nominal Christianity? Now granted, many Baptist churches baptize spurious converts and many within their ranks are nominal Christians, but the practice of baptizing disciples of Jesus Christ who have demonstrated true repentance and obedience as the prerequisite to baptism and church membership, is the guarantor (not guarantee) of a local church of true Christian membership.

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