

Moved to Obeying God's Stipulations Regarding His Covenant's Sign Genesis 17:1-27 (text)

13 December 2020, Reformed Church of Wainuiomata 10:30 am

Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

It still happens that, even in our Reformed churches, young believing parents do not bring their babies for baptism.

And I think the reason is simply that they do not yet understand God's stipulations regarding the covenant sign of baptism!

But the message of our text is clear: Believing parent, why wait? Come, bring your child so that he/she can receive God's gracious covenant sign!

Our text allows for us three points...

- **Covenant Promises** Fulfilled
- **Stipulations** Regarding the Covenant Sign
- **Obeying** God's Stipulations Regarding the Covenant Sign

Covenant Promises Fulfilled

My brother & sister,

As early as the Garden of Eden, God promised a Saviour from the seed of the woman (Gn 3:15)

Then, centuries later, at the time of our text, God showed that He remembered that first promise in Paradise. So, God comes to Abraham and "beefs out" that first promise! Yes, as God graciously enters into a covenant with Abraham, He "colours in," as it were, that first promise!

And God "colours" that first promise in by making at least four promises to Abraham.

Question: Has God, by now, fulfilled those four promises He made to Abraham?

Yes, He did!

When?

Well, when, in Christ, God ushered in the New Covenant! You see, it was in Christ's death and resurrection that God fulfilled every promise He had made in His covenant with Abraham. And that's exactly what John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, confirmed when the Holy Spirit came upon him and he sang these words (in Lk 1:69-73) ...

"He (God) has raised up a horn of salvation for us...

.... to remember his holy covenant, ⁷³the oath he swore to our father Abraham..."¹

Well, here's the **first promise** God made to Abraham, and which He has now fulfilled.

You see, in verses 4 and 5, God promised that He would make Abraham into *the father of a multitude of nations!*

When did God fulfil this promise?

Well, when Christ rose from the dead and then commanded His disciples to go make disciples *of all nations!* (Mt 28:19)!²

¹ Lk 1:69-73 *He has raised up a horn*

of salvation for us in the house of his servant David ⁷⁰*(as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),* ⁷¹*salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—* ⁷²*to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant,* ⁷³*the oath he swore to our father Abraham...* ([The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Lk 1:69–73). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan).

² Cf. Mt 28:18-20, *Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the*

Here's the **second promise** God made to Abraham, i.e., that *kings would come forth from Abraham* (v.6).

Has God fulfilled this promise?

Yes, He has, when not just King David and all David's royal sons came out of Abraham's line, but when God, in His perfect timing, sent Abraham's great Son, Jesus Christ, who proved to be not just *a* king, but the **King of kings!**³

Here's the **third promise** God made to Abraham, i.e., that God would be *Abraham's God*, and God *for all of Abraham's offspring* (v.7); yes, God would be *their God* (v.8)!

Has God fulfilled this promise?

Yes, He has! Remember what God said through Jeremiah who lived about 1,500 years after Abraham. God said that that He would make "***a new covenant with the house of Israel***" to be "***their God***" (Jer 31:31, 33).⁴

Then, in Jesus (God's own Son), God did come and fulfil that prophecy when Jesus reconciled all God's people with Him. And God did become *their God* – also your & my God, for, as God's Word says (in Gal 3:29),⁵ all who are in Christ are children of Abraham – also you & I!

Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ ***and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age***" (Emphasis mine).

Also cf. Rm 4:16-17 ***Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.*** ¹⁷ ***As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations." He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.***

Also cf. Rm 15:8-12 ***For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs*** ⁹ ***so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy, as it is written:***

***"Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles;
I will sing hymns to your name."***

¹⁰ ***Again, it says,***

"Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people."

¹¹ ***And again,***

***"Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,
and sing praises to him, all you peoples."***

¹² ***And again, Isaiah says,***

***"The Root of Jesse will spring up,
one who will arise to rule over the nations;
the Gentiles will hope in him."***

³ Cf. Rv 19:16 ***On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.***

Also cf. Rv 17:14 ***They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful.***

⁴ Jer 31:31-33 ***"The time is coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,"***

declares the Lord. ³³"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the Lord. "I will put my law in their minds

and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people" (NIV 84; emphasis mine).

⁵ Gal 3:29, ***"And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise"*** (Emphasis mine).

Well, here's the **fourth promise** God made to Abraham, i.e., that God would give the Land of Canaan to Abraham's offspring (v.8)!

Has God fulfilled also this promise?

Yes, He did – through Joshua and all the judges!

But look, God is fulfilling this land-giving promise on an even grander scale!

How?

Well, in the fact that all who have received Christ – yes, all who are meek – will, on the last day, as Christ has promised, inherit the new earth (Mt 5:5)!⁶

And so, these are the four promises God made to Abraham – four promises which He fulfilled!

My brother & sister, can you/I really imagine how much in awe of God Abraham must have been!?

I mean, think of it: Verse 1 tells how *God Almighty* (El Shaddai)⁷ – the Creator of the Universe – out of His own initiative & grace, stoops down (condescends) and talks to a tiny human being, even entering with him into a contract/covenant, and promising him such great things!

No wonder Abraham was in awe! No wonder Abraham instantly obeyed God – as we will see under point 3 of this sermon.

Question: If Abraham was so moved by God's condescension and promises made personally, why would you & I (and every New-Covenant believer) who have seen God's fulfilment of those promises – why would we not (as Abraham) also fall on our knees and instantly obey God's commands!?

You ask, "But what are God's commands?"

Well, that brings us to point 2: "God's Stipulations Regarding the Covenant Sign."

Stipulations Regarding the Covenant Sign

In no uncertain terms, God commanded Abraham & his offspring to keep God's covenant stipulations (verses 9-14)!

What's the first & foremost stipulation?

Well, that Abraham had to administer the sign of God's covenant on himself and on his whole household. That means, God included all of Abraham's household (those born from Abraham and those who were not born from him – yes, even slaves that Abraham had bought)! Indeed, God's covenant with Abraham included them all! On all males in his household Abraham had to administer God's covenant sign!

What was that sign?

Circumcision

At what age did Abraham's household need to receive that sign?

Well, God clearly stipulated (in v.12) that all males should receive that sign at the age of eight days old!

Also cf. Rm 4:11 where Paul writes about Abraham that, "***So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them.***"

Also cf. Rm 4:12, 16; [ch. 3:22]; See Luke 19:9

⁶ Mt 5:5 "***Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth***" (ESV; quoting Ps 37:11).

⁷ אֱלֹהֵי שָׁדַי

What grace that God even allowed His covenant sign for babies! I mean babies can in no way have any understanding of God's Word, God's will & God's instructions! But God graciously included them in His covenant with His people!

Question: Did this circumcision (Old-Covenant sign) mean that the mere outward receiving of the covenant sign would make the baby right with God?

No! That sign was just to say that that baby belonged to God's covenant people! Of course, *that in itself* held many (and untold) blessings for that baby!

Another question: Could an Old-Covenant person carry the sign of belonging to God's covenant, yet at the same time not belong to God (not be right with God)?

Yes!

I mean, have we not seen how God often used to call His Old-Covenant people to not only have the *outward* circumcision sign, but to also have a "circumcision of the heart"?⁸

And is this not also why the Apostle Paul wrote (in Rm 2:28-29) ...

For he is not a Jew (i.e., believer) who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew (i.e., believer) who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter...⁹

See how it was possible to carry/bear the covenant sign of circumcision (yes, the sign of having the privilege of belonging to God's *people*) and yet *not* belong to God *Himself*?

Question: Would you say that, in such case, the covenant sign was wasted?

Yes & no!

- Yes, it was wasted, in the sense that the bearer of that sign did not receive the full meaning/blessing of that sign – because, sadly/ironically, such person did not belong to God – only to God's people!
- And yet, the answer is also "No, that sign was not wasted" because, if someone did receive the outward sign of the covenant, but never loved God, such a sign will still have a function – (scary thought!!) i.e., to witness against such person on the Day of Christ!

Here's another scary part: What if any of Abraham's offspring were unwilling to even receive that important covenant sign, or that parents were slack in giving it to their children?

It would be like throwing God's grace back into His face!

That's why God says (in v.14 of our text), that an uncircumcised person "***shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My (God's) covenant.***"¹⁰

⁸ Cf. e.g. Dt 10:16 ***So circumcise your heart, and stiffen your neck no longer.***

Dt 30:6 ***Moreover the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live.***

Jer 4:4, ***"Circumcise yourselves to the Lord
And remove the foreskins of your heart,
Men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem,
Or else My wrath will go forth like fire
And burn with none to quench it,
Because of the evil of your deeds."***

⁹ [New American Standard Bible: 1995 update](#). (1995). (Ro 2:28–29). La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

¹⁰ [New American Standard Bible: 1995 update](#). (1995). (Ge 17:14). La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

My brother & sister, see God's stipulations regarding the administration of the Old-Covenant sign?

Question: You & I are no longer in God's Old *Covenant*. So, do we still need to obey *all* God's stipulations regarding the Old-Covenant *sign*?

The answer is "yes" and "No."

- It's "no," because God's New Covenant, in which you & I are included, has a new sign – it's no longer a sign for which we need a knife in order to administer it.

After all, God replaced the Old-Covenant by a more fitting sign – baptism! Why? Well, the Old-Covenant sign involved the shedding of blood! But now that Christ has come and has shed His own blood for the forgiveness of our sins, a covenant sign of blood is no longer needed – would have no function! Instead, the New-Covenant sign involves water – pointing to the washing away of our sins in Jesus Christ who fulfilled the Old Covenant! That's why Christ gave the New-Covenant sign when He said (in Mt 28:19), ***Make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.***"

No wonder, when the Apostles met together in Jerusalem for that first Synod (Acts 15), the Holy Spirit led them to the following conclusion, i.e., that it was no longer needed to burden Christians (God's New-Covenant people) with circumcision!¹¹

So, the answer is "no," we don't need to obey *all* of God's stipulations re the Old-Covenant sign, i.e., we no longer need a knife to administer the covenant sign!

¹¹ Cf. Acts 15:5-11 for the "yoke" which believers from the party of the Pharisees wanted to lay upon the Gentile Christians – a yoke-laying which Peter then refuted: "***Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, 'The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.'***"

⁶ *The apostles and elders met to consider this question.* ⁷ *After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: 'Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe.* ⁸ *God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us.* ⁹ *He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.* ¹⁰ *Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?* ¹¹ *No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.'"*

Also cf. Acts 15:19-21 for the words James spoke at that Synod: "***It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.*** ²⁰ *Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood.* ²¹ *For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.'"*

Also cf. Acts 15:28-29 for the contents of the letter which the apostles then drafted and sent out to the churches (in which most members would have been Gentiles): "***It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements:*** ²⁹ *You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.* Farewell."

- But the answer is also “Yes, we still need to obey all the other stipulations of the covenant sign” for, although the two covenant *signs* are not the same, ultimately, they do *signify* the same thing.

Here is how...

You see, although God’s covenant with Abraham included earthly blessings (like land, many descendants, and kings), it also included a *spiritual* blessing, i.e., the promise of redemption/justification (being made right with God). And in this sense, it cannot be said better as that *circumcision in the Old Testament was a sign pointing towards the Gospel of Jesus Christ*.¹²

Why so?

Well, *because whatever else circumcision was* (whatever else circumcision stood for), *circumcision was the sign of the covenant, and the heart and soul of the covenant is the promise of God to provide redemption for His people – and Abraham believed that promise and was counted righteous by God*¹³ (Rm 4:3, from Gen 15:6).¹⁴

See how even the Old-Covenant (as well as its sign!!) signified the same thing as the New Covenant and its sign – they both point to justification in/through Christ!?

After all, when it comes to justification (being made right with God), you and I must understand that God does not work differently with His Old-Covenant and New-Covenant Church. No, He works in the same way, i.e., that salvation (that which the covenant sign *at least* signifies) is by grace through faith in God who provides a substitute as sacrifice. And although the sacrifice in the Old Testament was an *animal* whereas in the New Testament it is *the Son of God*, all Old-Testament sacrifices received their power of forgiveness only through the complete sacrifice – Jesus Christ, Son of God!

So, if in each *covenant* (Old & New) God works salvation (justification) *in the same way as in the other*, why would He then have different instructions for the *sign* of each covenant?

And so, seeing that the New Testament does not explicitly *prohibit* baptising babies of believing parents, I (together with Reformed Theologians) am persuaded that if God wanted to change the stipulations re the covenant sign, He would have told us explicitly, “Now, from the beginning of My New Covenant, I command you to *no longer* administer My covenant sign to *children* of believers; I want you, from now on, to only administer it to adult believers.” However, God did not do that!

Therefore, I gladly accept that it is not just OK/right to baptise babies of believing parents, but it is how God still desires and commands it to be.

And, let’s face it, is this not a wonderful indication of the extent of God’s gracious love? Which parent would not grasp it with both hands!?

Well, on this note, we come to the last point...

¹² cf. Sproul, R.C. at <http://www.gty.org/resources/articles/A361/case-for-infant-baptism-the-historic-paedobaptist-position>

¹³ Sproul (ibid)

¹⁴ Also cf. Rm 4:9 ***Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness.***

Rm 4:22 ***That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.”***

Gal. 3:6 ***Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith—⁶ just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”?***

James 2:23 ***and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God.***

Well, those who have the correct & biblical understanding of covenant baptism, and those who have (like Abraham) been moved in their hearts by God's grace, by which He has included the babies of believing parents into His covenant!

And although the covenant sign of water which little Pieter received this morning did not make him right with God, we understand that one day (when through training in the Scriptures and by the working of the Holy Spirit) Pieter gets born again, this very sign which he received this morning will blossom into its fuller meaning, i.e., a sign of the washing away of His sins!

And we pray that God will do this for all our congregation's children; yes, that they all will be born again as they receive Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord!

AMEN (2,402 words excluding footnotes)