

2.1 Covenant People OT to NT: who are the children of the covenant?

Introduction

The comprehensive theme of the covenant leads naturally to reflection on the covenant people in three basic ways: in the eternal covenant, in the OT, and in the NT. One concern here is the relation of Israel to the church, and within that topic, another concern is the matter of the children of Abraham or covenant children (this is where the question of infant baptism surfaces).

What comes to mind when people speak of covenant children? How do different people use this language? What is a Scriptural way to use it? We need to be conscious of both the Scriptural context and the theological (doctrinal) context.

1A. How is the language of covenant children used?

1B. The descendants of Abraham through election per the eternal covenant

The most important verse here is Hebrews 2.16 in the context of the brothers, the congregation, and the children that God gave to Christ before He became incarnate to become their merciful and faithful high priest. He helps “the offspring of Abraham.” Here the seed of Abraham refers to the children of the eternal covenant; they are God’s covenant children.

2B. The descendants of Abraham through Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob

Broadly, if we think the context of the OT, then covenant children refer to all the descendants of Abraham (whatever may be the make up of the people of God at any given time, say, in Joshua’s day, including children, women, and men). Infants are covenant children and adults are covenant children. In this context, for infants to be covenant children means that they are the children of Abraham through Sarah.

Thinking about the shift from OT to NT, we may say that covenant children are still the children of Abraham (Acts 3.25, you are the sons of the covenant through whom all families of the earth will be blessed). Even in their disobedience and fall, disobedient Israelites are beloved for the sake of their ancestors (Rom 11.28). Beloved must mean something like, “loved as the children of Abraham because of the covenant with Abraham.” They are covenant children still.

3B. The descendants of Abraham through Christ, believing Jews and Gentiles

However, in the movement from old to new, and in the judgment on the children of Abraham, there is another sense to the language of “children of Abraham” (and thus of covenant children). Here the remarkable point is that people of all nations who belong to Christ are the children of Abraham. This fulfills the promise to Abraham and his descendants that they would be a blessing to the nations, and remarkably that comes about even through judgment that makes Abraham’s descendants “not the people of God” (not my people, not my children, not my covenant children).

The promise to Abraham and his descendants was that they would be a blessing to the nations, but here they cease being the covenant children and *the nations become the offspring of Abraham!* In addition, remarkably, when God draws a new covenant people from the nations, the not my people, *Israelites are among them as not my people*, thus, God brings them back into the family as children of Abraham along with the Gentiles. Thus, the new covenant people of God, the children of Abraham, covenant children include Jews and Gentiles alike in one body.

In this context, covenant children refer to all who are of the faith of Abraham.

This leads to the right of Gentiles to the sacraments if we think of that right from the OT forward:

Children of Abraham have the right to the sacraments

NT believers including Gentiles are the children of Abraham

NT believers including Gentiles have the right to the sacraments

a) We need this argument because of the inclusion of Gentiles

Important in this argument is the inclusion of Gentiles as children of Abraham (as covenant children, as the people of God) along with Jews who believe.

b) It is also important to note the emphasis on faith; the *Jews must come by faith to become* the children of Abraham; they must come in the way of faith just as the Gentiles. In this

way, both inherit the promises to Abraham of blessing in restoration from the fall (back to the promise to Eve and forward through David).

c) This is the presupposition of faith as a requirement for partaking the NT rituals.

d) Among those holding to reformed theology, it is at this point that a major difference exists since the Reformation. All agree on the baptism of adults by faith, but differ on the baptism of infants.

On the subjects of baptism, debate during the Reformation led to a defense of infant baptism, the practice of the Catholic Church. The reformers appealed to ancient tradition, but in conflict with the Anabaptists who denied the validity of infant baptism (Catholic infant baptism), they defended infant baptism along the lines of the covenant, particularly, from the command to circumcise the children of Abraham (Gen 17). This was a new line of defense and it continues to the present in reformed churches (cf. *Reformed Confessions Harmonized*). In this context, the language “covenant children” has a narrower and more specific usage, which takes us to the next point.

4B. The descendents of Abraham through NT believing parents

Covenant children refer to children of believing parents with an accent on infants: believers are the children of Abraham *and so are their children*. In the debate over the subjects of baptism (should we baptize the infant children of believing parents?), this usage of covenant children is central. For example, note how the WLC puts it:

Unto whom is baptism to be administered? A. Baptism is not to be administered to any that are out of the visible church, and so strangers from the covenant of promise, till they profess their faith in Christ, and obedience to him, but infants descended from parents, either both or but one of them professing faith in Christ, and obedience to him, are, in that respect, within the covenant, and to be baptized (166)

Infant children of at least one believing parent are not “strangers from the covenant of promise.” Instead, per their descent from a believing parent, they are “in that respect, within the covenant.” This specific usage is most predominant among those who practice infant baptism in a covenant framework that does not defend baptismal regeneration. Is this interpretation correct?

2A. How can we think of our children as covenant children?

1B. Are children of NT believers “the children of Abraham”?

One way to see the debate surrounds this question: Are the children of NT believers the children of Abraham? Since the parents are the children of Abraham, then does it follow that their children are the children of Abraham too?

Based on the citation of Galatians 3 in relation to Genesis 17, the Westminster divines conclude that the descendents of NT believers are within the covenant, which in turn mandates their baptism.

And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. ⁸ And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.” ⁹ And God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations (Gen. 17.7-9)

So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. ¹⁰ For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.” ¹¹ Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.” ¹² But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.” ¹³ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us- for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”- ¹⁴ so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith (Gal. 3.9-14).

By “within the covenant,” they must mean that the children of believers are “covenant children” or specifically the children of the Abrahamic covenant because of the reference to Genesis 17. They must mean that these children are the children of Abraham. Is this interpretation correct?