

2.2 Covenant children: evaluative comments and implications

Introduction

In what sense are the children of NT saints heirs of the promises? In reformed theology, the promises (the statements of anticipation as a list) now belong to NT believers just as they once belonged to Abraham, and they include the children of NT believers just as they included the children of Abraham. The biblical basis emerges by putting a NT Gentile saint in the place of Abraham because “those of faith are blessed along with Abraham” (Gal 3.9). We can read Genesis 17.7 this way: “And I will establish my covenant between me *and you NT saints* and all your offspring after *you NT saints* throughout their generations.” This is how the Belgic Confession puts it, “our children have the same promises that God gave to the children of Abraham” (*Reformed Confessions Harmonized* 218).

1A. What are the promises to Abraham and his offspring (Gen 12.1-3; 17.1-10)?

In summary, God promised Abraham a seed, land, and blessing.

1) Regarding Abraham’s children and his children’s children

a) A son by Sarah

b) Many children as the sand and stars

c) A saved remnant by election

d) The saving seed of Eve by election: Christ

e) Kings will come from you

f) I will be their God (to you and your offspring *in all their generations*)

2) Regarding the land

a) The land of Canaan

b) The world that the land signified

3) Regarding the blessing

Blessing to all families of the earth through Abraham’s seed, especially, through Christ

2A. Do the Gentiles inherit all the promises God made to Abraham?

1B. Can we simply substitute the NT saint for Abraham in Genesis 17?

We have to say no because God does not bless NT saints (NT children of Abraham) with the saving seed of Eve, nor does He give them the land of Canaan. This makes us think that we are asking the wrong question or that the question is ambiguous. It is not that the Lord restates the promises to Abraham now to the Gentiles, but that the Gentiles receive what God promised to Abraham for them. It is not the case that we can list all the promises to Abraham and then move that list over to the Gentiles so that now it is their list (or their list too). To use the language of Galatians 4.29, the Gentiles are not “heirs of the promises” (heirs of the list of promises that God gave to Abraham), but they are “heirs according to promise.” They are not heirs of all the statements of anticipation, of all the promises that spoke about and anticipated the great things to come in the NT through Christ. Instead, they are heirs of the things promised; they are heirs of fulfillment. They receive the blessing to all families of the earth that God promised to give to Abraham through his seed, especially, through Christ.

What can we conclude about the promise to be God to Abraham’s offspring in all their generations (Gen 17.7)? When Gentiles become the children of Abraham, do they receive this promise? Does God promise each NT Gentile saint that he or she a) will have offspring? Does He promise b) that the offspring will multiply like the stars, and c) that God will be God to them for all their generations? On one hand, these questions suggest that the promises to Abraham as

such, as statements of anticipation, are unique to Abraham. On the other hand, on the side of fulfillment, God made Gentiles heirs according to what He promised when He said, “I will make you [Abraham] a blessing to all families of the earth” (Gen 12.3).

2B. Of what are the Gentiles heirs per the context of Galatians 3.29?

It has to include oneness in Christ (with no Jew or Greek, 3.28), sonship-adoption to God by faith (3.26; 4.5-7), life (3.21-22), the promised Spirit (3.14), redemption (3.13; 4.5), justification (3.6-9), and knowledge of God (4.9). These things define the blessing that God promised to give to the families of the earth through Abraham’s offspring. The Gentiles are heirs of these things *according* to promise (3.29). Therefore, those of faith are the sons of Abraham (3.7), and blessed with Abraham (3.9) through faith (3.14) as his offspring (3.29). This inheritance defines the sense in which even Gentiles (all people that are “not my people”) are the children of Abraham by faith.

3A. Therefore, the promises to Abraham are unique

How does Romans 11.16 help us understand the uniqueness of the promise to Abraham and his offspring in all their generations (cf. the citation of this text in WLC, 166)? The text says, “If the root is holy, so are the branches.” The holy root refers to Abraham and the branches refer to his descendents (Rom 11.1). The point is that when God set Abraham apart within redemptive history, He set his descendents apart within redemptive history (the rejected are still His people, v. 1). One way this works out is in the saving of a remnant in the present time (11.1-5). Another way this works out is in the fact that even Israel’s rejection brings reconciliation (blessing) to the world (11.15). Finally, it works out in the fact that their acceptance will bring life from the dead or even greater blessings to the world (11.15). In other words, God is still God to Abraham’s offspring in all their generations. Even when He judges them, He fulfills His promise to make them a blessing to the world. Thus, even though they are enemies of the gospel, God still fulfills His promise through them because of His promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (11.28). Therefore, the promise to Abraham and his offspring in all their generations is something unique and by which all other families of the earth receive the blessings of God.

We have to appreciate this uniqueness when we think covenantally from OT to NT, when we think about the covenant people of the NT.