

Perhaps you are a Christian parent doing your very best to bring up your children according to the Bible so that they too become Christians. Perhaps you have lots of questions in your mind like:

“Does God care about whether my children become Christians or not?”

“Are my children any more likely to be saved than those of unbelievers?”

“Am I at all responsible for whether my children come to faith or not, given that I cannot change their hearts?”

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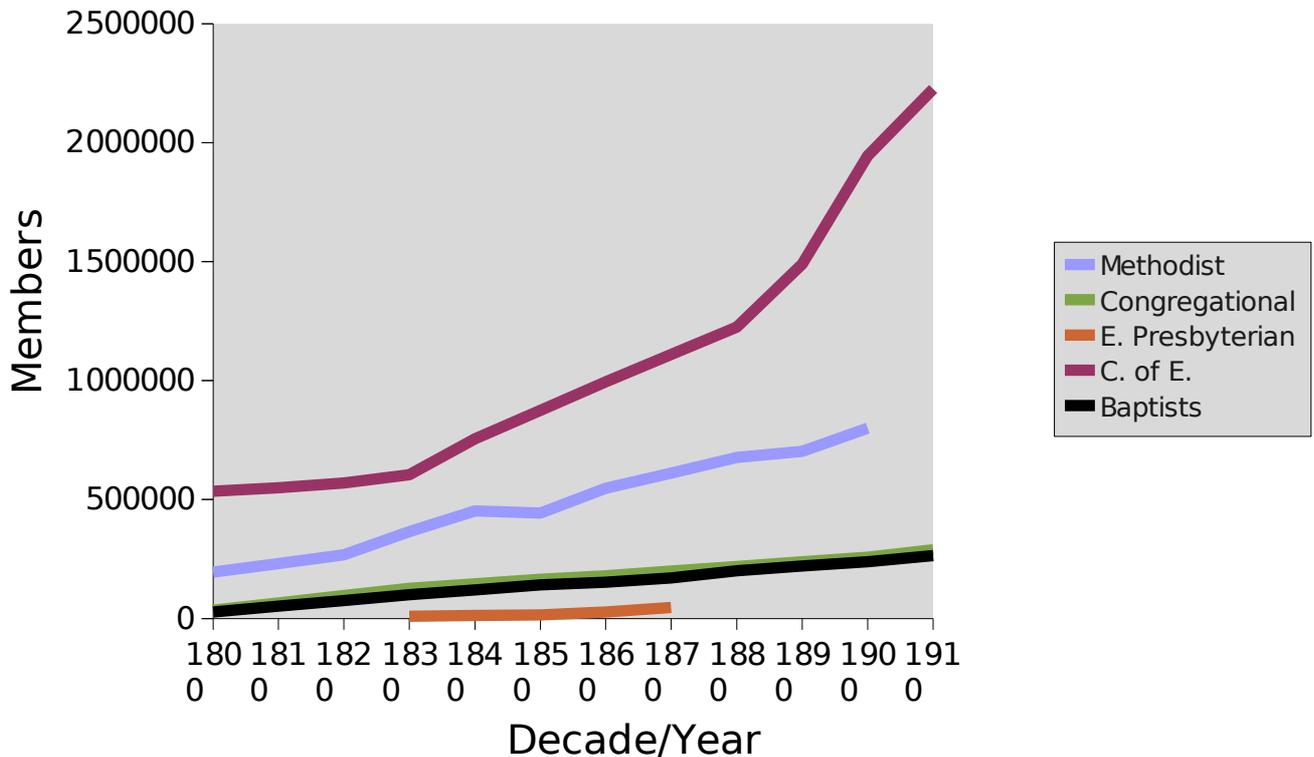
9.6 Teach Biblical and Covenant Theology

1. The Gap between Theory and Practice

It is often said that before attempting to change people's behaviour, it is necessary to engender a sense of need, without which sense, nothing will be achieved. Therefore, before turning to what both the theory and practice of godly child upbringing should be, let us first look briefly at what has been happening in the U.K. over the last 200 years, that is, the gap between the theory and the practice.

The number of Evangelicals in the United Kingdom at any point in time is difficult to estimate, partly because the raw data do not correspond precisely to Evangelicals, but also because the definition of 'evangelical' is hotly contended. However, if we crudely assume that the 19th Century denominations Methodist, Congregationalist, Particular Baptist and General Baptist were broadly evangelical, then Graph 1 below charts their approximate growth in membership throughout the century [1]. Also shown in Graph 1 is the trend for

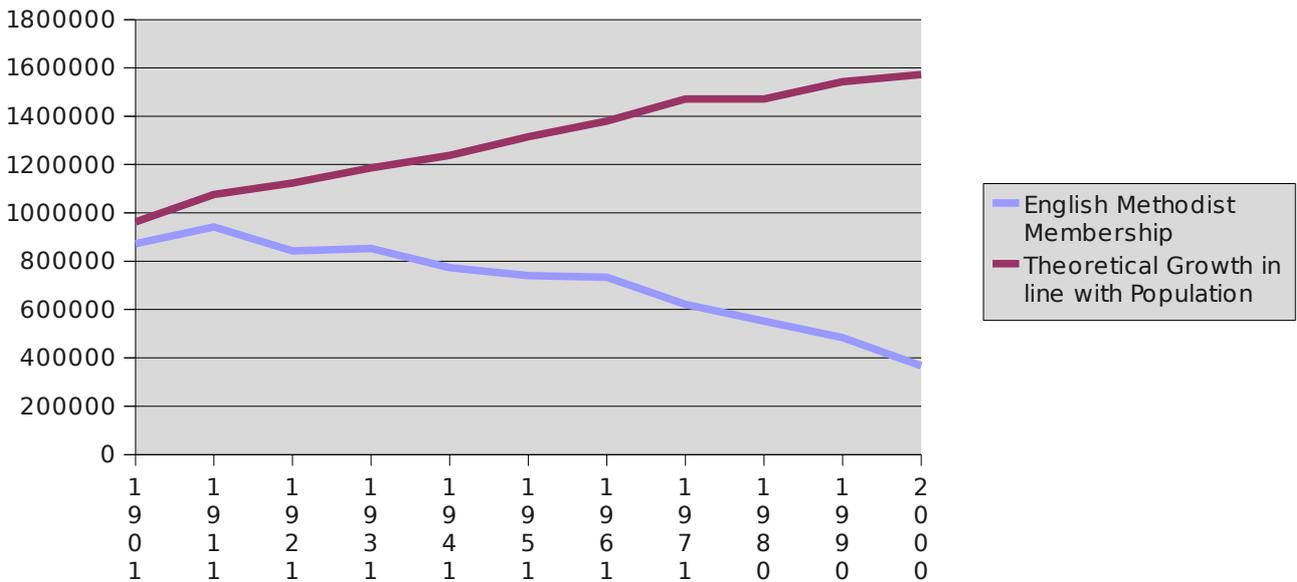
Graph 1 - 19th Century Protestant Church Growth



the Church of England Easter Sunday communicants over the same period. Many of these would be regarded as Evangelical. Together, growth over the course of the 19th Century exceeds 200%. If the C. of E. growth is taken out of the equation, the figure exceeds 300% (these figures relate almost exclusively to England.)

The immediate question is: How does 19th Century compare with 20th Century? The answer, according to the valuable book *Operation World* [2], is that the number of protestants in the UK has been declining since the early 1900s, with evangelical church membership now standing at 2,000,000 people. His definition of 'evangelical' is, of necessity, *prima facie*, but this seems no cruder than the one implied above.

Graph 2 - Methodist Decline/Population Growth



The growth of the 19th Century has not been maintained during the 20th. In fact, the growth has been reversed, as shown in Graph 2. This graph shows English Methodist growth during much of the 19th Century, but decline throughout the 20th (figures based on [3]).

Evangelical groups of churches such as the Methodists, Baptists and Congregationalists started to dilute their evangelicalism during the middle of the 19th century, but continued to grow apace until the beginning of the 20th Century. Some examples taken from [3] will illustrate this: Baptist Union membership rose from 239,114 in 1900 for some years before declining through most of the 20th Century, the 1995 membership being 158,000. The Congregationalist picture is more complex because of the merger with the English Presbyterian denomination 1972, but well over 300,000 Congregationalists and English Presbyterians in 1900 eventually merged to become the 177,900 members of the United Reformed Church in 1995. A loss of evangelical distinctiveness was accompanied by a loss of members eventually.

In approximately the same time period, the population of the U.K. went from 30 million to nearly 60 million. If the number of Evangelicals had grown in line with normal population growth during the 20th Century, we would expect there to have been a 100% increase in church membership. This would be a similar shape to the upper line in Graph 2 above (bearing in mind that Graph 2 only covers the Methodists.)

Therefore, if 20th Century evangelicals had at least managed to direct their children after them in the faith, even without adding outsiders to the church, there would now be more than twice as many evangelicals as in 1900. Instead of that 100% growth, we have a 60% decline. Instead of 200% of the 1900 membership, we have something like 40%.

What are we to think of these statistics? We could simply conclude that God does not care about Christians' children any more than non-Christians', and that he has therefore saved fewer and fewer of them in each successive generation.

2. The Importance of the Family or Household

And yet, to say that God does not care about Christians' children is hardly a satisfactory understanding of the statistics, because it fails to take into account both observable trends and God's stated opinion on the subject: Time and time again, he spells it out in the Bible that he wants godly children. For example, he explained through the prophet Malachi:

2:15 ... he [the LORD] was seeking godly offspring.

In Deuteronomy 6:2, he says:

... so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the LORD your God as long as you live ...

Clearly, the 19th Century statistics are God-honouring, the 20th Century ones are not. In the light of the following verses from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, both Christians and their children have been failing by a long way to obey God's revealed will.

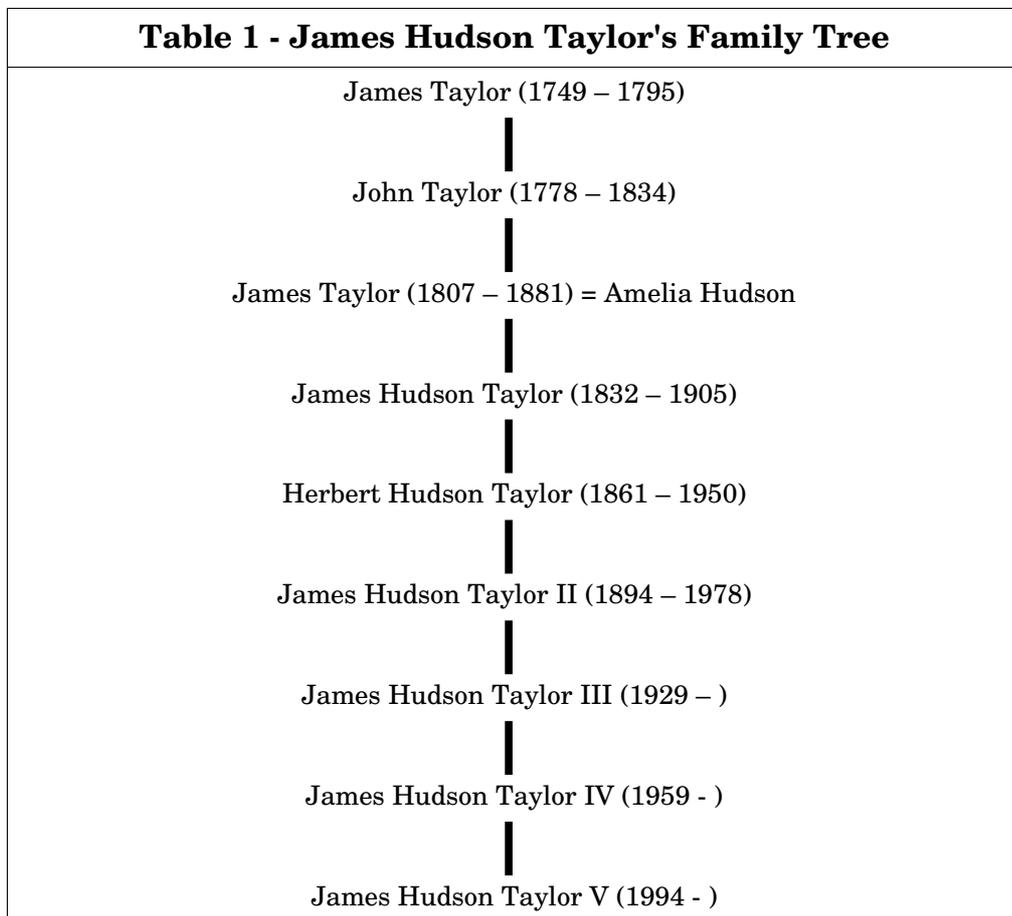
6:1 Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.

...

6:4 Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

The vital combination of parents bringing up their children to be godly and of children responding in godly obedience is all but unrecognisable in the 20th Century church statistics. And yet, anecdotal evidence is clear that often Christian parents do manage to bring up their children in such a way that many or all of them embrace Christ and profess him lifelong. Furthermore, many churches contain "dynasties" where particular families have been largely Christian for many generations. Although such families are commonplace, an example seems in order. I recently purchased a book about the family of the well known James Hudson Taylor, missionary to China and founder of the China Inland Mission. The title of the book is '*God's grace to nine generations*' [4]. See Table 1 below.

Table 1 - James Hudson Taylor's Family Tree



Sometimes, as per Ephesians 6:1, children as *individuals* are held personally accountable for obeying their parents. This is one way in which God relates to humans; on the one hand he relates to individuals, not just to groups of people. Another example: He holds us responsible for our own individual behaviour:

Ezekiel:18:4 The soul who sins is the one who will die.

Thankfully, God also offers grace to individuals so that they need not 'die'.

The Bible also tells us ways in which God relates to *nations* (see the book of Obadiah), to *churches* (Rev 1:11ff, Ch. 2, Ch. 3) and to *households*. The concept of the household is usually the same as that of the family in the Bible. Nowadays in the West, it is different because not many families have servants, but in Bible-times, servants were commonplace and formed part of the family. So when Abram lamented the fact that he had no son who would inherit all God's blessings to him, he naturally concluded that all his wealth would be inherited by his chief servant (Gen. 15:3), so firmly were servants regarded as being part of the family.

Gen. 15:3 And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir."

So in what ways does God relate to families or households? Here are some examples from the Bible.

a) God *separates* families from the World and saves them, either physically, spiritually, or both.

Acts 11:14 "He [Simon Peter] will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved."

Gen. 7:1 The LORD then said to Noah, "Go into the ark, you and your whole family, because I have found you righteous in this generation."

Acts 16:31 They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved - you and your household."

Other examples include the families of Rahab and Zacchaeus.

b) He expects *godly* families to live up to his standards, to be different from the World around them:

Col. 3:

v18 Wives, submit to your husbands, ...

v19 Husbands, love your wives ...

v20 Children, obey your parents ...

v21 Fathers, do not embitter your children, ...

v22 Slaves, obey your earthly masters ...

Jos. 24:15 But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

c) God *blesses* and protects certain households. Notice how the blessing given to the individual is graciously extended to cover the whole family.

2 Sam. 6:12 Now King David was told, "The LORD has blessed the household of Obed-Edom and everything he has, because of the ark of God."

2 Tim. 1:16 May the Lord show mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, because he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains.

d) Households are not only blessed, sometimes they are cursed or afflicted directly by God.

Points a) to d) above, when collected together, show us how God relates to families or households. He chooses them and sets them apart from the World, making promises to them. He saves them from their sin, enemies and destruction. He expects them to be faithful to him and keep his rules. He blesses and protects them, but also afflicts them. They must respond in obedience and faith. All these amount to the practical outworking of what the Bible calls 'covenants'. All of the above verses were written or spoken because God entered into a covenant relationship with certain families or households. All the major Biblical covenants have to do with families.

3. Covenants and Genesis

Many words have been expended to answer the question of what a covenant is; see for example *The Christ of the Covenants* by O. Palmer Robertson [6]. Often, learned and theological definitions of what a covenant is turn out to be so narrow that they exclude obviously covenantal relationships (*such as* marriage, for example) from being classed as covenants. The following definition attempts to avoid the problem of over-complication.

Definition of Covenant:

A covenant is a *relationship* that is formally expressed in terms of one or more of the following: *Promises, Obligations and Signs*. So, for an everyday example, a marriage is based upon a marriage covenant. The man and woman formally *promise* fidelity to each other; the man is *obliged* to love his wife; a ring is given as a public of *sign* (and 'seal') of the relationship.

Sometimes, not all three elements are present in a covenant, but often they are. For example, in God's covenant with Abraham in Gen. 17, there are many parts including *promises* ("to be your God ... v. 7"), *obligations* ("walk before me and be blameless v. 1") and a *sign* (or 'seal')("circumcision ... the sign of the covenant v. 11"), such that all three basic elements are present in force. (Where the term 'seal' is used together with 'sign', it means that the sign not only symbolises the covenant, but also guarantees it too. More on seals in Section 8.5)

In order to understand the Bible, it is necessary to understand about its covenants. If we do not understand the covenants in the Bible, we cannot understand its structure or detail. In particular (for the purpose of this paper: the bringing up of children), it is necessary to be clear about the importance of God's covenant with Abraham. Many behave as if had been obliterated first by the Old Covenant and then by the New Covenant, buried under at least two archaeological layers, irrelevant. The following passage from Galatians explains that God's covenant with Abraham cannot be set aside; its purpose is to bring blessing to the Gentiles, i.e. nowadays, and that subsequent covenants, for example 'the law', could not make it redundant.

Gal. 3:14 He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles ...

¹⁵ *... Just as no one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case.*

...

¹⁷ *What I mean is this: The law [that is, the Old Covenant], introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise.*

Most versions of the Bible make both the Abrahamic Covenant and the book of Genesis seem irrelevant:

- They label the first two thirds of the Bible 'The Old Testament'. Because a testament sounds similar to a covenant, this accidentally suggests that Genesis and the Abrahamic Covenant are part of the Old Covenant which has been superseded (see later). "Genesis is interesting history that can be ignored nowadays", is implied. "You may find some helpful principles in there and some good stories, but it's obsolete."
- The first book is named 'Genesis', meaning 'beginnings'. This is a most unhelpful title because the contents of the book are absolutely fundamental to the understanding and correct application of the whole Bible. A much better title might have been 'Foundations' or 'Origins' as per Philip Eveson's commentary on Genesis [6].

There is an organisation called 'Answers in Genesis'. The fact that such a name is required illustrates how the book of Genesis has been misunderstood, side-lined and generally considered unimportant. Because of this malaise and as an antidote to it, the importance and relevance of the Book of Genesis cannot be overstated. In it we find both the Covenant of Creation and God's covenant with Abraham. These major covenants are foundational to the

covenant structure of the Bible. See Reference [7] for Dr Golding's historical survey of covenant theology.

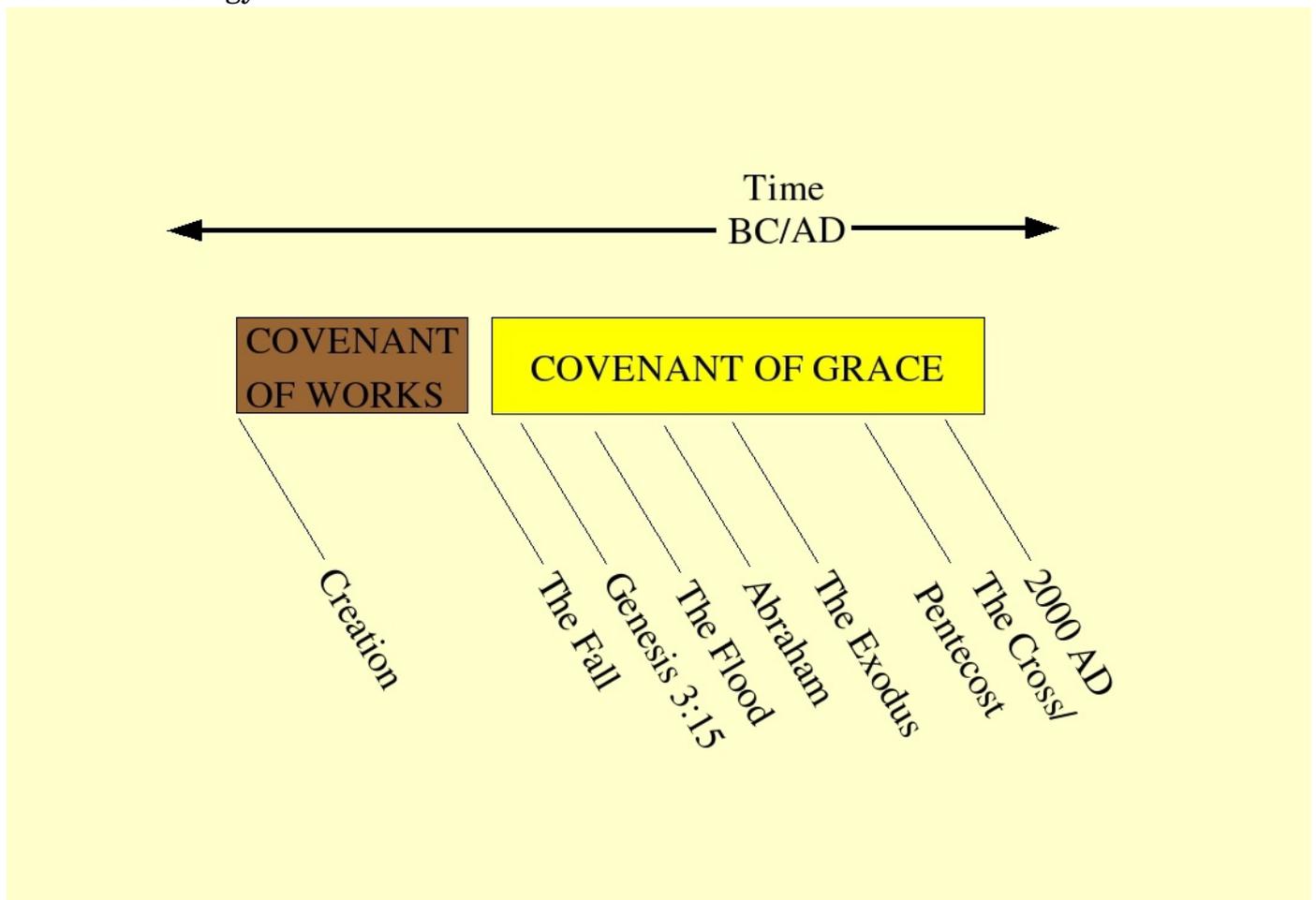


Illustration 1: Summary of Biblical Covenants as per Savoy Declaration 1658

Whereas the 1658 *Savoy Declaration* [8] (Chapter 7 - Of God's Covenant with Man) breaks down God's relationship with man into just two separate covenants, the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace (see Illustration 1), 20th Century writers have recognised that there is a fundamental *Covenant of Creation* which is the basis of God's relationship with man, for example O. Palmer Robertson, in *The Christ of the Covenants* [5].

William Dumbrell, in *Covenant and Creation* [9], takes this idea further and states (page 43) that there is 'a covenant implied by the fact of creation itself ... There could only be one biblical covenant, of which the later biblical covenants must be sub-sets.' In Chapter 1 ([9] op. cit.) he also demonstrates that God's covenant with Noah is in fact a confirmation of the Covenant of Creation, not a separate covenant: He writes 'the evidence of Gen. 9:9-17 strongly implied that the covenant which was confirmed with Noah had been brought into existence by the act of creation itself.'

This paper argues that there are five main covenants in the Bible that give it structure and coherence (Illustration 2). There are other covenants that compete for inclusion in the top five. Also, most of the five major covenants can be broken down into a number of smaller covenants, revealing more detail, but that would complicate the overall picture unnecessarily.

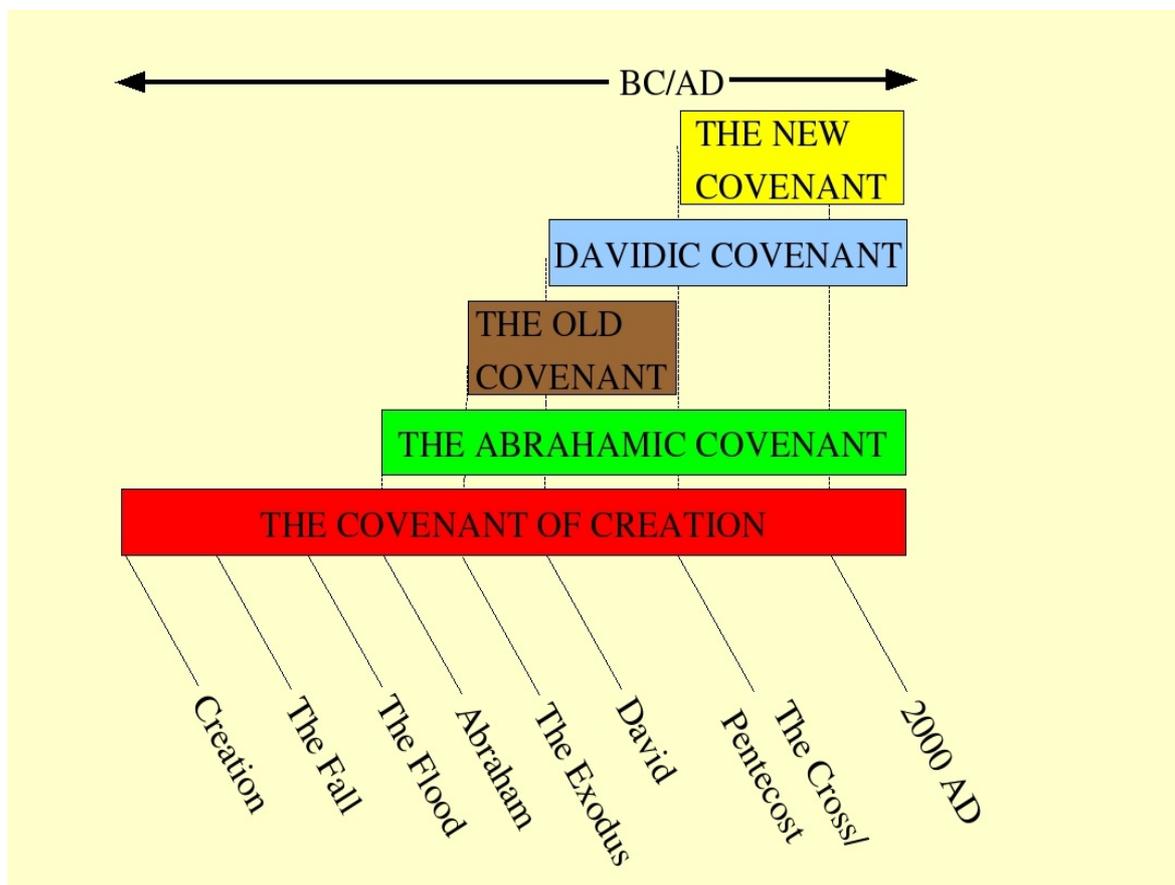


Illustration 2: The Persistence of Covenants

At any point in time, in Illustration 2, we can draw a vertical line through the covenants. All the covenants with which the line intersects are legally binding on people alive at that point in time. For example, when Jesus explains about the origin of circumcision, he does not say that the reason people should have been circumcised was because Moses said so, that is because of the Old Covenant. He seems to correct(!) himself:

John 7:22 Yet, because Moses gave you circumcision (though actually it did not come from Moses, but from the patriarchs), you circumcise a child on the Sabbath.

Although Jesus and the Jews were legally bound by the Old Covenant, he is showing us that the Abrahamic Covenant was still in force, and that actually circumcision came from Abraham ("the patriarchs") not from the Old Covenant ("Moses").

It is also necessary to have in our minds the notion of a '*Controlling Covenant*'; this is always the covenant on top (in Illustration 2). The Controlling Covenant has the effect of redefining some of the details of the underlying covenants. For example, if we draw a vertical line down through the new Covenant, we might be concerned that the Abrahamic Covenant, still being in force, tells us to be circumcised! However, this is not necessary, because the Controlling Covenant, that is the New Covenant (the one on top), has converted the sign of circumcision into baptism (as per Col. 2:11-13).

¹¹ *In him [Christ] you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, ¹² having been buried with him in baptism ...*

The Controlling Covenant can never cause God to be unfaithful to any of his previous promises, but it can relax obligations (i.e. circumcision becoming less bloody now that it has been turned into baptism). The Controlling Covenant can also expand previously given promises, so that for example, the promised land given to Abraham becomes the New Earth

under the New Covenant. In the same way, the Creation Covenant's Sabbath is converted into the Lord's Day under the New Covenant. The day of the week changes, and the regulations are relaxed a little, e.g. no death penalty for non-observance, as there was under the Old Covenant (Exodus 35:2).

Therefore, Illustration 2 above presents a complete but simplified (abstracted) picture of the covenant structure in the Bible.

The remainder of this paper describes the five major covenants, only touching briefly on the Davidic because it is not within the scope of the main argument.

- The Covenant of Creation
- The Abrahamic Covenant
- The Old Covenant
- The Davidic Covenant
- The New Covenant

4. The Covenant of Creation

As part of creating the World and everything in it, God created Mankind and gave the whole human family the following obligation:

Gen. 1:27,28 So God created man in his own image, ... God blessed them and said to them, ... "… fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over ... every living creature ..."

The creation of man in God's image provides the immediate context for giving Mankind the obligation to have dominion over Creation. As Genesis 1 and 2 unfold, the mystery of how finite Man can possibly 'image' the Infinite Creator is gradually revealed. There are three main things that Mankind is obliged to do:

- a) Mankind must image God by ruling over the Earth (Gen. 1:26).
- b) Mankind must image the Creator by working six days and resting on the Sabbath (Gen. 2:3; Exo. 20:10, 11).
- c) Men and women must image God in his relationship to his people through marriage (Gen. 1:27; 2:18; Eph. 5:31, 32).

To be sure, there are many ways in which Man is like God and can therefore be said to have been made in his image. But much more important, when it comes to considering the Covenant of Creation, is the notion that Man must image God functionally ([10] and [9] page 34). That is, not only are we like God, but we must also behave like he does. Hence, a), b) and c) above must be seen as the main obligations that form the Covenant of Creation. To summarise the Covenant with respect to Man and his obligations, we could simply say "Man must 'image' God". To this basic obligation were added some signs and also some promises.

At first sight, the Covenant of Creation may not look like a covenant. Indeed, as already mentioned, traditionally authors describe something called the Covenant of Works. What they identify as a whole covenant amounts to little more than God's command to Adam that he should not eat the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. To say that the Covenant of Works satisfactorily describes God's initial relationship with Mankind fails to take into account most of the information given in Genesis 1 and 2 (Indeed William Dumbrell completely disposes of the idea of the Covenant of Works in [9] - see the summary on page 43 and the Excursus on page 44). A more substantial covenant can clearly be identified in

those chapters by stepping back from the chapters a little and establishing precisely what God's relationship was with Mankind, and by summarising it in terms of Obligations, Promises and Signs.

The two covenant obligations that are most under attack today are:

- The Sabbath, and
- Marriage,

so what follows are some thoughts on these obligations and some applications for today.

Although it is helpful to look to later passages of Scripture for explanations of the details in the Covenant of Creation, the writers and speakers in the later passages always appeal to Genesis 1 and 2 for the authority behind what they are explaining. For instance, the Sabbath aspect of the covenant is explained in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:9), but the authority is shown in verse Exodus 20:11 by appealing to Genesis 2:3.

... but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. (alluding to Genesis 2:3.)

In the same way, the 21st Century people of God must accept the authority of Genesis 2 and ensure that a Sabbath's Day's rest is observed in the family. Not only will this form good habits in the rising generation, but it will also provide opportunity to spend time in spiritual activity with them, showing how in practice we call the Lord's Day a delight (Isaiah 58:13).

Genesis 1:27 makes it clear that man and woman together must image God.

"in the image of God he created him; male and female"

But, the fact that this is through the marriage relationship only becomes clear in 2:18 where God, in effect, says that for man to image God adequately, he needs to have "a helper suitable for him". This doctrine is unfolded gradually through the rest of the Bible, reaching fulfilment in Rev. 21 as the bride of Christ is presented to the Lamb, but the basis for it all is found in Genesis 1.

The Covenant of Creation is *everlasting*. After the Flood, this covenant was formally confirmed and added to in the presence of Noah and his family (Gen. 8:15-9:17). It is initiated in Genesis 1 and 2 but also ratified formally as a covenant in Genesis 9:9 (again, see [9]). When God confirms and adds to the Covenant of Creation in Genesis 9, he makes it clear that the covenant is *everlasting*. It is important to note that it is more than God's promise not to flood the Earth again that is *everlasting*; it is the whole covenant. So, in Illustration 2, the Covenant of Creation is shown as persisting throughout all time including the present day, when the subject of Man in the Image of God is being challenged by atheism, humanism, evolutionism, feminism, alternative lifestyles, antinomianism etc. Atheism says that Man has created God in his own image. Humanism says that Man is the measure of all things; forget God. Evolutionism says that we are all here by accident, not with the purpose of imaging God. Feminism strikes at the rôle women in imaging the relationship of God's people to God in marriage, by saying that marriage is outmoded, wifely submission is degrading and that women are not meant to help their husbands. Meanwhile, so-called alternative lifestyles attempt to tear apart marriage by pretending that men don't need women and that women can ignore men. Into all this confusion, the Covenant of Creation speaks, saying "No, you must image God in the ways he has prescribed in Genesis 1 - 9."

Those are the obligations of the covenant; what of the promises and signs? The signs appear to be the two trees and, in particular, whether Adam and Eve would eat from them or not. They were there to crystallise the two alternatives built into the covenant promise. Alternative number one was the promise of eternal life as signified (and possibly imparted) by the Tree of Life. Alternative number two was death. The Tree of Knowledge was clearly stated to be out of bounds by God in Genesis 2:17, and connected with death.

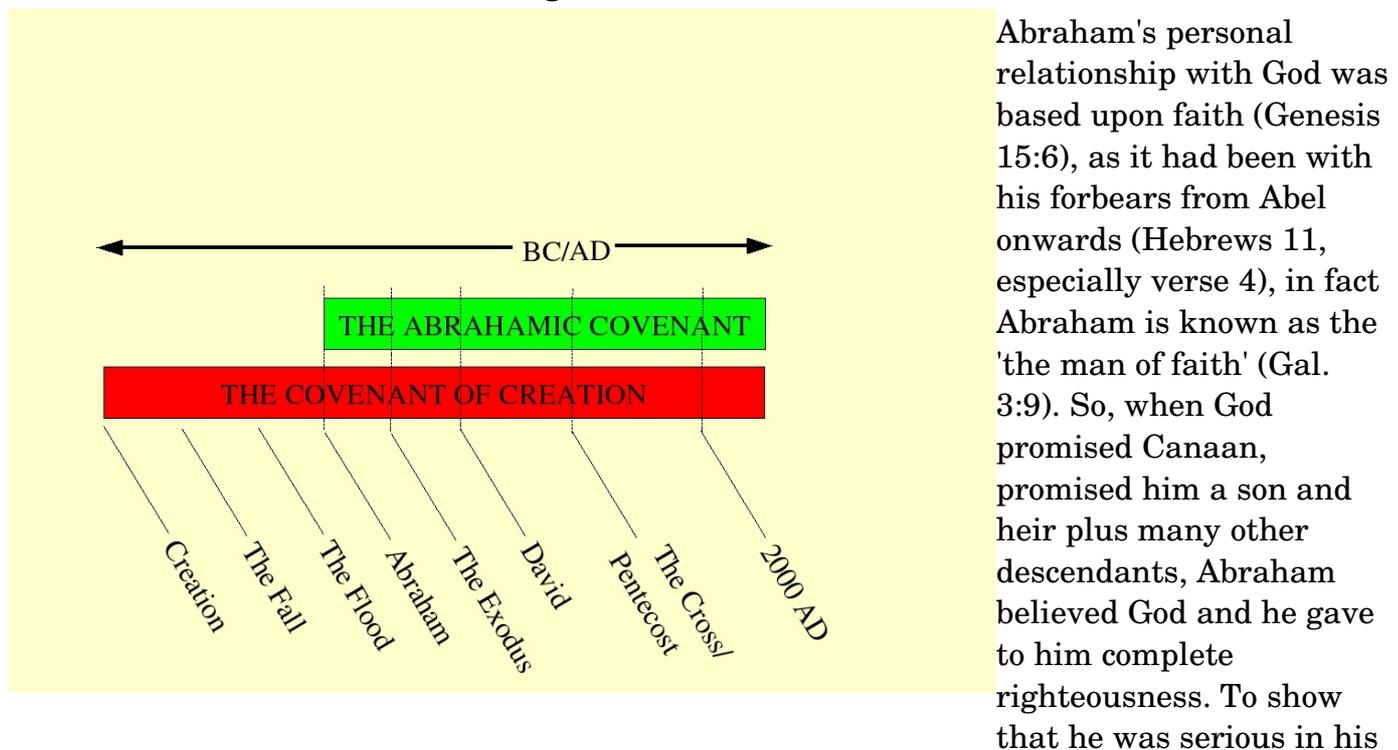
By letting part of Creation (the serpent) get the better of them, by rôle reversal of the husband and wife, Adam and Eve failed to image God. Less subtly, they also broke a direct command of God by failing to believe him, because even before the Fall, faith was a basic part of Man's relationship with God. So, for the first time, a failure to believe God's promises (i.e. a lack of faith) led to a failure to image God and to a broken covenant. The translation of Hosea 6:7 is not indisputable ([9] page 45), but would appear to support a view of covenant theology that includes the Covenant of Creation:

Hos. 6:7 Like Adam, they have broken the covenant - they were unfaithful to me there.

5. The Abrahamic Covenant

After the Fall, a pattern of selection and rejection emerges: God selected Seth and rejected Cain the murderer; he selected Noah and his family, but rejected everyone else in the Flood; he selected Shem, but rejected Ham and Japheth soon after the Flood. Finally, God selected Abraham and his descendants and rejected nearly everyone else in order to establish a people for himself. Although there had previously been godly lineages, for example that of Seth, God had never established an identifiable godly nation before. This, he decided to do, through Abram, renaming him Abraham which means 'father of many.'

Illustration 3: The Everlasting Abrahamic Covenant



promises to Abraham, and to ratify the covenant, God gives him a vision which is described in Genesis 15. Some animals were cut in half, and God passed between them as if to say: "If I do not keep my covenant, may I become like these dead animals". So Abraham could be in no doubt that God was going to keep his promises and covenant. This all happened when

Abraham was aged between 75 and 85 years.

God first promised Abraham children in Genesis 12:2 when he was 75 years old, and God's covenant with him is revealed mainly in Chapters 12, 15 and 17. The fullest 'cutting' of the covenant is in Chapter 17 when Abraham was 99 years old. He didn't become father of the promised son until a year later when he was 100 years old. So, Abraham has to wait 25 years for God to keep his promise. What happens in the other chapters, 13, 14 and 16? Why does the writer bother with them? Why didn't he just merge 12, 15 and 17 to give us a neat can-do summary of the covenant?

In chapters 13 and 14, we see Abraham, man of faith, trusting God, acting righteously and bravely, in contrast with Lot who is weak and only trusts God feebly. But then in Chapter 16, disaster strikes when Abraham wobbles in his belief of one particular promise. He has been waiting 10 years for the promised son and, all of a sudden, Abraham and Sarah replay what happened in the Garden of Eden: Rôles are reversed when Sarah takes the initiative and presents Abraham with her maidservant Hagar to act as a surrogate mother for the son of promise [whoever said the Bible was not up to date?] Abraham temporarily loses his grip on God's promise and a different son is born instead of the Son of Promise.

So when the covenant is re-established in Chapter 17, God tells Abraham to "walk before" him "and be blameless", adding a new covenant sign, circumcision. On the positive side, circumcision speaks of trusting God (Rom. 4:11) and being devoted to him (Gen. 17), also of regeneration (Rom. 2:29; Col. 2:11). On the negative side, the selection of the particular organ for circumcision served to remind Abraham of its misuse in Chapter 16. Also the shedding of blood in circumcision was part of a long pattern of blood-letting that started in Genesis 3:21 and continued for thousands of years with animal sacrifices, many subsequent circumcisions, and the Cross. In this way, the blood of circumcision reminded Abraham and his descendants of sin, and of how we come into the World as sinners for whom blood must be shed, for without the shedding of blood there can be no remission of sin (Hebrews 9:22).

Table 2 below shows how the Abrahamic Covenant is both an everlasting covenant and a family covenant. In fact, all the major biblical covenants without exception are family covenants. All but one are everlasting.

Obligations	Promises	Signs
<i>walk before me and be blameless. v. 1</i>	<i>I will greatly increase your numbers. v. 2</i>	<i>I will confirm my covenant between me and you ... v.2</i>
<i>you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants ... v. 9</i>	<i>You will be the father of many nations. v. 4</i>	<i>your name will be Abraham v.5</i>
<i>Every male among you shall be circumcised. v. 10</i>	<i>I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. v. 6</i>	<i>You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. v.11</i>
<i>Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant. v. 14</i>	<i>... an <u>everlasting</u> covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. v. 7</i>	<i>My covenant in your flesh is to be an <u>everlasting</u> covenant. v.13</i>
	<i>I will be their God." v. 8</i>	<i>For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money ... v.12</i>
	<i>I will bless her [Sarah] and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her. v. 16</i>	<i>her name will be Sarah. v.15</i>
	<i>your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an <u>everlasting</u> covenant for his descendants after him. v. 19</i>	
	<i>And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation. v. 20</i>	
	<i>But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year. v. 21</i>	

Table 2 - Summary of God's Covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17

6. The Old Covenant and the Davidic Covenant

By this stage, a pattern should be becoming clear: Covenants do not just evaporate and disappear when a newer covenant appears, they persist for ever. However, there is one exception to this. One covenant was intended to be temporary and it is the Old Covenant, sometime referred to (confusingly for us) as the 'First' or 'Former' Covenant.

Heb. 8:13 By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and ageing will soon disappear.

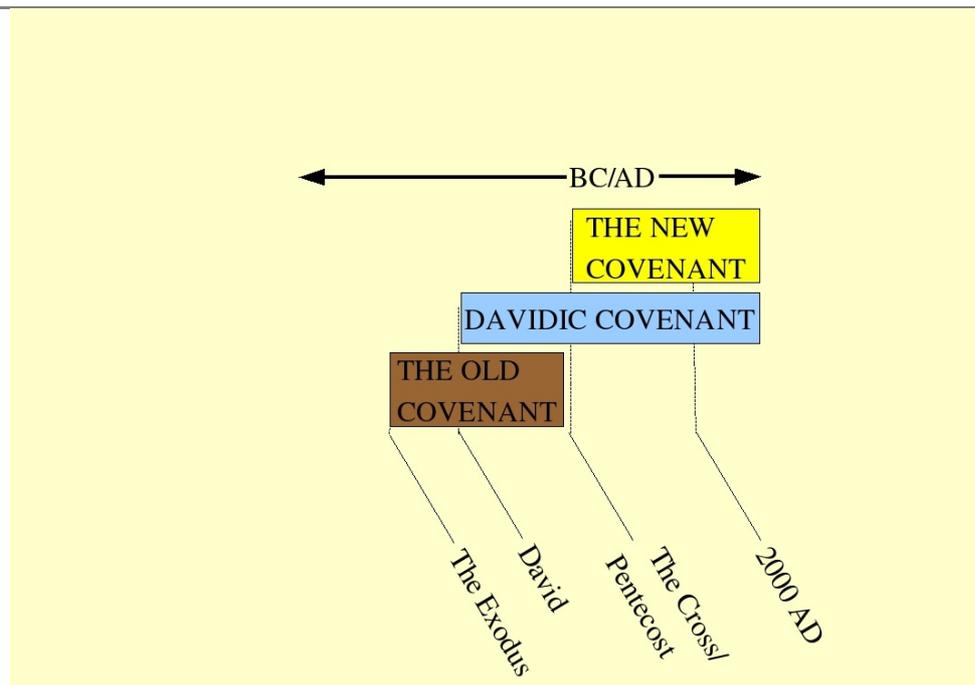


Illustration 4: The Old and Davidic Covenants

It was never intended by God to permanent, although many of its themes carry on into the subsequent covenant, the New Covenant. For examples, the redemption of the people from Egypt, the sacrifices offered and the office of priest all make their way into the New Covenant. The redemption from Egypt becomes redemption from sin and enemies; the animal sacrifices are perfectly and finally fulfilled by Christ's sacrifice; the office of priest is partly fulfilled by Christ in his mediatorial rôle, and partly by the priesthood of all believers. The dietary rules in Leviticus, however, are not binding upon modern Christians. As 1 Cor. 10 makes, clear, the themes of the Old Covenant serve as examples for New Covenant believers.

1 Cor. 10:6 Now these things occurred as examples ...

That is why, despite being obsolete and without direct binding power over Christians, the Old Covenant is rich in examples, principles and pictures which provide a wealth of spiritual food and direction. It occupies the largest portion of the Bible. What Christian would want to dispense with the Psalms? Nevertheless, pieces of the Old Covenant have to be understood in their original context, the essential principles or ingredients extracted, then those same essential truths must be re-applied in the New Covenant way, because the New Covenant is the 'Controlling Covenant'. Without such an approach to, say, the Psalms, precious verses can be read and scandalously disregarded. For example, who would want to lose this promise just because it originated under the Old Covenant?

Ps. 103:17 But from everlasting to everlasting the Lord's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children- with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts.

The Kingdom of Israel was a prototype of God's later Kingdom. The covenant obligation placed upon the people was to exemplify and image God's eternal kingdom primarily through keeping God's law. If they are faithful to the covenant, God will live with them (signified by the temple) and they will remain in the Promised Land. However, before the Old Covenant is finished and over, another important covenant makes an appearance.

6.1 The Everlasting Davidic Covenant

Because it arises in the context of the Old Covenant, and in the same frame of time, it is necessary to deal with the Davidic Covenant in parallel with the Old Covenant. A kingdom is incomplete, of course, without a king. The various Jewish kings are sometimes good, sometimes bad, types (pictures) of Christ the King who will come and bring his spiritual kingdom with him. After one bad king, Saul, God raises up David, a good king "after his own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14). Although David's kingdom will eventually crumble, be divided into two and be taken off into exile, God makes an everlasting covenant with David. This is the Davidic Covenant in 2 Samuel 7:

7:16 Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever."

What makes this covenant everlasting (like all the others except the Old Covenant) is its fulfilment in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Luke 1:32 "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

This is why Illustration 2 above has that slightly odd shape, with the Old and New

Covenants not simply butting up to each other, but being separated by the Davidic Covenant.

6.2 The Failure of the Old Covenant

The principle new sign introduced for the Old Covenant is that of the Passover. This is because the basis of the Old Covenant is the people's redemption from Egypt (Heb. 8:8, 9). They were passed over by the Angel of Death because of the sacrificed passover lamb; the Egyptians were punished because they chose to remain outside God's covenant. All these elements are clearly adopted by the New Covenant, but not before the Old Covenant has been seen to fail.

Israel rejected God, broke his laws, worshipped idols and eventually lost the Promised Land. Although a remnant made it back to the Promised Land, it was not long before they were conquered by successive empires. By the time of the Roman Empire, a new covenant was needed, because of the failure of the people to keep the old one (Heb. 8:8).

Heb. 8:8-11 But God found fault with the people and said : "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. ⁹ It 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 did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord. ¹⁰ This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ¹¹ No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.

7. The New Covenant

It is important to realise that the New Covenant is not a replacement for everything that went before, it a replacement for the Old Covenant. All the other covenants are still in force, see Illustration 5 below.

Some might think, at this point, that Heb. 8:11 is teaching that children cannot be included in the New Covenant until they come to faith for themselves "they will all know me", but:

- a) the prophet is not talking about children in the passage: "No longer will a *man* ..."
- b) the phrase "the least of them" is talking about people's social class, not their age.
- c) the writer is describing the essential difference between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant as being how the New will be better than the Old because it is a spiritual covenant. Instead of being redeemed merely outwardly in their bodies from Egypt, the people will now be redeemed spiritually so that they know God, not through outward ceremonies, but in their hearts (v. 10). They will obey his law because they want to and are enabled to by regeneration. Many of God's Old Covenant people grew up to be unbelievers, but they still remained members of his covenant people, often for many generations. Under the New Covenant, this is no longer true, because those who grow up to be unbelievers forfeit their covenant membership (Rom. 11:22). This is the contrast that the passage is making (more on Romans 11 later).
- d) the previous discussion of the Abrahamic Covenant shows that it is still in force and 'everlasting', so Gen. 17:7 and 2 Cor. 1:20 still apply to believers' children nowadays; God still promises to be their God. Otherwise Heb. 8 would, somehow, be undoing the Abrahamic Covenant!

- e) Many Old Testament prophecies make it clear that the New Covenant will hold blessings for the children of God's people (Isa. 49:22, 23, 25, Jer. 32:39-41). In verses *such as these*, Old Testament imagery is used to portray future New Testament spiritual blessings for believers and their children.
- f) the New Testament makes it clear that believers' children are not relegated to mere Gentile status, but are holy even if only one parent is a believer (1 Cor. 7:14).

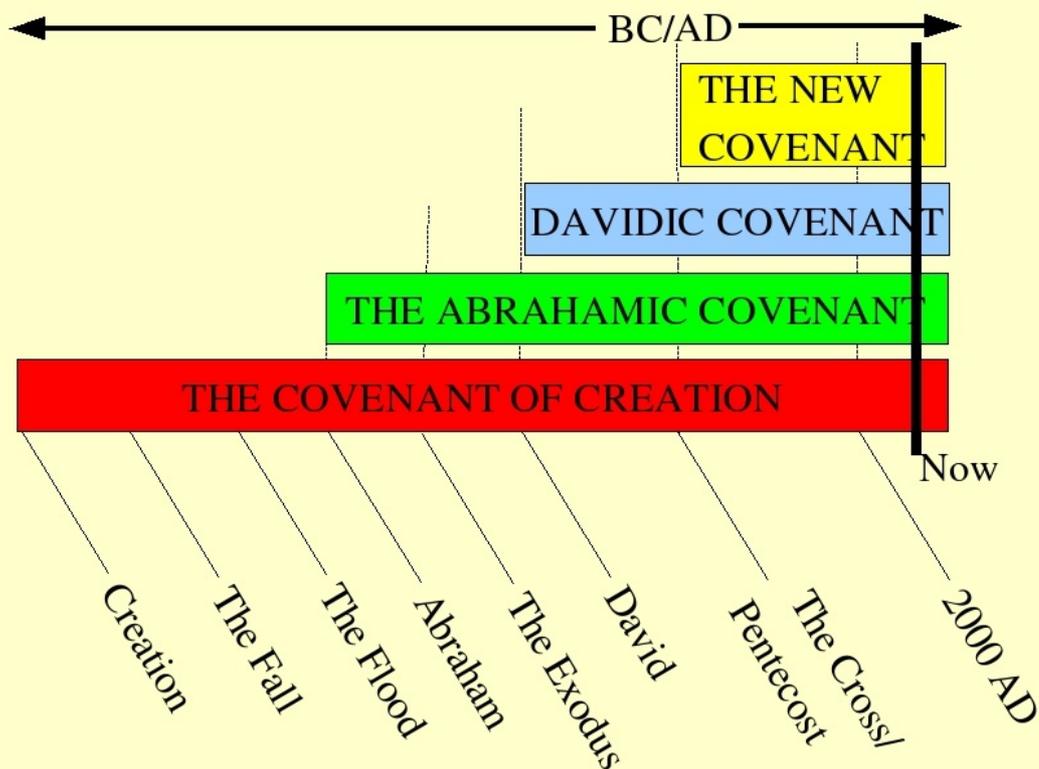


Illustration 5: Covenants Now in Force

An unbiblical attitude to 'covenant children' was exhibited by Jesus' disciples in Mark 10:13, 14.

People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

Some would say that this passage illustrates Jesus' love of all children in a purely sentimental way, but in the light of verses such as Ps. 137:9, such a view is just theologically vague (if politically correct). Jesus loved those particular children because they were covenant children, children of his people. Jesus was committed to blessing them because of his promises to Abraham such as Gen. 22:17, and the passages mentioned above from Isa. 49 and Jer. 32.

The next objection is that "such as these" in Mark 10:14 merely means that we need to be like the little children (as is explained in v. 15). This is a mistake because it means that the reader has failed to apply v. 14 before moving on to the next verse, and has confused the separate meanings of the two verses. Perhaps, such an objection merely shows an unwillingness to believe Jesus' gracious statement concerning the status of the covenant children? What Jesus was actually saying was that these children were examples of people who were enjoying the benefits and privileges of being in his kingdom. The fact that Jesus makes reference to the "Kingdom" where he could have used the term "covenant" makes it absolutely clear that he is placing the children under the care of the New Covenant, not the Old. This is because the Kingdom of God is really a New Covenant concept. The Kingdom was modelled, imaged and typified warts and all under the Old Covenant, but only under the

New Covenant is it realised and completely fulfilled.

The New Covenant makes possible what was impossible under the previous covenants (see Illustration 2). The failure to image God under the Covenant of Creation is turned around, and now God's people are able to image God by living in a Christ-like fashion. The formation of a pure and spiritual people of God that was only partially achieved under the Abrahamic Covenant is made achievable under the New Covenant. The pictures and examples provided by the Old Covenant come to fruition under the New. By the time the New Covenant culminates in the Resurrection and establishment of the new Earth, all the themes of all the covenants will have been fulfilled under the banner of the New Covenant. This is even true of the Promised Land which was lost because of the people's failure to keep the Old Covenant. By the time that the New Covenant has finished its work with the Promised Land it will have grown to become the whole New Earth (Mt. 5:5, Rom. 4:13).

Circumcision, the sign and seal of the Abrahamic Covenant which was retained under the later Old Covenant, is replaced by something less bloody, baptism (Col. 2:11-13). A much neglected, but indisputably biblical notion, is that baptism also pictures the divine cleansing promised of the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:47, Mt. 3:11). For the believer, God promises through the sign and seal of baptism that he forgives (washes away) his sin and will cleanse him inwardly through the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, God promises to wash away his people's children's sin (Acts 16:31-33) and give them the Holy Spirit too (Acts 2:38, 39). All that is required is to believe the promises and put them into action (see later). We have to be very careful here, because the essential New Covenant obligation is to believe *verses such as the ones* in this paragraph. If we try to wriggle out of believing them by explaining them away, that is unbelief, and will result in us missing God's blessing. Think also of Jesus' indignation in Mark 10:13, 14.

2:38 Peter replied, "Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off-for all whom the Lord our God will call."

An example of misinterpretation is the way that Acts 2:39 is sometimes divided up. It is possible to read the verse in *such a way* that it seems to be talking about three separate groups of people: "you", "your children" and "all who are far-off". But, this would be to fail to recognise that Peter is restating God's covenant promises by using the language of the covenants as in Deut. 1:39; 4:9; 6:7; 12:28; 30:2 (Old Covenant), Gen. 17:7 (Abrahamic Covenant), also 1 Cor. 7:14, Eph. 6:1-3 (New Covenant). Consequently, a correct division of Acts 2:39 is into two groups of people as follows: "you and your children" (Jews), and "all who are far-off" (Gentiles). With the correct division, it is then unthinkable that the second group of people would exclude their children, thus the promise of the Holy Spirit is identical for Jews and Gentiles. Not only is this interpretation of the verse intellectually satisfying, but it also honours the covenant context of Peter's sermon, and ties in neatly with what Paul explains in Eph. 2:11-13.

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body by the hands of men)- remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.

8. The Persistent Themes of the Covenants

Each covenant consists of features that do not necessarily find their way unchanged into subsequent covenants. However, each feature can readily be understood to be part of a much broader 'theme'. These themes persist from one covenant to the next, for example the theme of Eternal Life, is very important(!) and recurs in various shapes and forms throughout all the covenants until it is fulfilled for ever. The recurring promises, obligations and signs are show in Table 3 below.

The remainder of this section covers a sample of five important recurring themes:

- The Promise of Eternal Life
- The Promise of Salvation for Children
- The Obligation to Believe God's Promises
- The Obligation to Obey God and Produce Godly Offspring
- The Signs and Seals of the Covenants

Covenant	Promises	Obligations	Signs
Creation	Eternal Life or Death.	Image God through World Dominion, the Work and Rest, and Marriage. Believe God. To bring up godly offspring. Mal. 2:15	Tree of Life. Tree of Knowledge.
Abrahamic	God would be his God and the God of his descendants. Heir of the World (Rom. 4:13) The Promised Land. Resurrection. Many descendants. Blessings for descendants.	Take possession of the Promised Land. Believe God. Walk before God and be blameless. Direct his family in God's ways.	A new name 'Abraham'. Stars and sand on the seashore. A sacrificial vision. Gen. 15 Animal sacrifice. Circumcision. Gen. 17
Old	To be Israel's God. Blessings for them and their children. Ps. 37:25 Remaining in the Promised Land.	Take possession of the Promised Land. Believe God. Keep God's law. Teach God's law to their children. Dt. 6:7 Keep the Sabbath Ex. 20:8	The Passover. Circumcision. Animal and other sacrifices. The Temple. etc.
New	Inherit the New Earth. Resurrection. Eternal Life thereon. Be with God for ever. God's Law written on hearts by the Holy Spirit. Salvation for children. Is. 49:25	Be Christ-like. Believe God (Rom. 4) Keep the Law of Christ. Whole of life a sacrifice. Bring up children to be godly. Observe the Lord's Day. Rev. 1:10	The Lord's Supper. Baptism.
Final Fulfilment	Christ's sacrifice. Resurrection to eternal life or eternal death. God's people live with him for ever. God's people inherit the New Earth (including the Promised Land) God's whole family complete. The wedding of Christ and his people. Sinlessness for God's people. God's people, at last, in the image of God.		

Table 3 – Themes of the Main Covenants

8.1 The Promise of Eternal Life

The promise of eternal life first appeared in the Garden of Eden when God gave Adam and Eve two trees as signs of the Covenant of Creation. The Tree of Life promised eternal life to them if they would keep God's covenant. Because they broke the covenant and ate from the other tree, the Tree of Knowledge, this did not mean that the promise of eternal was suddenly abandoned by God. However it had to be delayed and modified since Adam and Eve were now bound to die. So, the promise of eternal life became the promise of the Resurrection. Although hinted at earlier in the Bible, the promise of resurrection really

becomes clear with Abraham.

Romans 4:13 Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world

Hebrews 11 also makes it clear that Abraham was expecting to be resurrected.

Hebrews 11:16 Instead, they were longing for a better country - a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God ...

Hebrews 11 suggests something that is proved elsewhere - that eternal life and the resurrection of the body are an integral part of the most basic promise of all, the promise that God will be our God (Gen. 17:8). This is proved in Mark 12:26 where Jesus refutes the Sadducees (who did not believe in the resurrection so they were sad-you-see.)

Mark 12:26 Now about the dead rising - have you not read in the book of Moses, in the account of the bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'?

In this single sentence, Jesus proves the doctrine of the bodily resurrection from the simple statement that God was Abraham's God. In other words, when God promised in Genesis 17 to be Abraham's God, he was also guaranteeing his resurrection and his eternal life. In this way, both the Covenant of Creation and the Abrahamic Covenant were both affecting God's relationship with Abraham, the former because it had been broken and meant that Abraham had to die, the latter because it will reverse his death through the Resurrection and restore eternal life to him, as offered in the Covenant of Creation. This is roughly the same situation that we are in today, regretting the broken Covenant of Creation (Rom. 3:19), but inheriting the promises made to Abraham (Gal. 3:14), because both of these covenants are still in force (Imagine drawing that vertical line through all except the Old Covenant in Illustration 2). In the same way that God being Abraham's God meant that the promise of resurrection was his, so it guaranteed all God's promises. The covenant statement "I am your God" is taken by Jesus as an irrevocable indefatigable covenant commitment.

We see complete continuity between the covenants. What is undone under one covenant is later repaired. The details change, but the essential ingredients of God being his people's God and giving them eternal life are preserved.

Another thing to observe is that the fate of the children is bound up with that of their parents. Under the Covenant of Creation, Adam and Eve's descendants were plunged into sin and death. Under the Abrahamic Covenant, Abraham's descendants were promised that God would be their God with the implied bodily resurrection and eternal life.

Abraham himself never received the fulfilment of the promise in Romans 4:13. In fact, he never even inherited the Promised Land (not yet, anyway), which represents just a small portion of the world. This is because God has planned that all his people will inherit the new Earth together one day after the Resurrection (Heb. 11:16, 40). In the mean-time, Abraham had to content himself with a token of God's promise. He lived in the Promised Land and was buried there in anticipation of the Resurrection (Gen. 50:13). The token of living in the Promised Land is adopted into the Old Covenant where it is first won, then lost, regained and lost again. Under the New Covenant, Jerusalem and the temple are destroyed one last time, and the occupation of the Promised Land is replaced by explicit New Covenant (Controlling Covenant) teaching about the Resurrection. It becomes clear that God's people will, one day, inherit the new Earth (2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1 ff).

In this way, the thread of inheriting the Earth starts under the Covenant of Creation with Adam and Eve losing it. It then becomes just the promise of inheriting the land under the Abrahamic Covenant. Under the Old Covenant, God dwells with his people in the Promised Land. Only under the New Covenant does it become totally obvious that the whole new Earth is intended for God's people. Once on the new Earth, redeemed humanity will keep the Covenant of Creation by filling the Earth, subduing it and ruling over creation. They will enter God's eternal Sabbath rest (Heb. 4:9). Even the marriage part of the Covenant of Creation will be fulfilled with the wedding of the Lamb and his bride (Rev. 19:9).

8.2 The Promise of Salvation for Children

It can readily be seen from scripture that God's dealings with mankind overflow to their children. This is first hinted at in Genesis 3:15, but is most clearly expressed in Genesis 17:

Genesis 17:7 I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.

For God to be Abraham's God was a promise of complete commitment to him by God. It promised salvation to him. The fact that God also promised to be the God of Abraham's descendants means that he promised to save them too. We have seen previously that this promise had conditions of faith and obedience attached to it (Section 5), but this should not be allowed to detract from the magnanimity of the promise.

Furthermore, we have seen previously that God's covenant with Abraham was an everlasting covenant. This means that it is still in force today and that the New Covenant, currently in force, is built upon it (see Illustration 2). All through history, God has been saving Abraham's descendants. And nowadays everybody knows of a Christian family that has Jewish roots (whether they realise it or not) because there are so many of them. It is obvious both from Genesis and observation that God is keeping his promise.

It is also edifying to note that there are numerous other passages in the Bible that show God's saving blessings to parents being shared with their children, his covenant promises of salvation benefiting the children. Isaiah 49:22 says "*See, I will beckon to the Gentiles ...*", demonstrating that the passage is referring forwards to New Covenant times. The chapter then talks about God saving his people's children (v. 25). That the passage really is talking about children (and not just affectionately about adult offspring) is obvious because of verse 23, which talks about the Gentiles bringing with them *foster children*. It talks about them being *nursing mothers*. So, Isaiah 49 predicts the continuation of the Abrahamic Covenant into New Covenant times, i.e. now.

To Jeremiah is revealed that God will propagate godliness down through the generations. He defines the essential difference between the Old Covenant and the New in chapter 31, but talks about an everlasting covenant in chapter 32.

32:38 They will be my people, and I will be their God. ³⁹ I will give them singleness of heart and action, so that they will always fear me for their own good and the good of their children after them. ⁴⁰ I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them, and I will inspire them to fear me, so that they will never turn away from me.

Both parents and children will receive God's spiritual blessings (v. 39). This will be

consummated in the inheritance of the promised land by God's people, including their children. Again, this can only be talking about the New Covenant (v. 40). Once more, unity with the Abrahamic Covenant is shown (v. 38).

Since these promises are clearly conditional, does the Bible distinguish between covenant children who are saved and those who are not? Roman 11 explains how salvation for *such* children is not automatic.

Romans 11:17-19 ... some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in."

The picture here is of Jewish families being replaced by Gentile families. Note that the branches being broken off are not individuals, they are families or the unbelieving parts of families. Individuals who trust Christ cannot be broken off as is taught elsewhere (John 10:28), however, their unbelieving family members can, as is explained in v20:

11:20 Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. 11:21 For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.

In Romans 11, to have your branch 'cut off' means in practice that your children grow up to be non-Christians, whereupon they surrender their covenant blessings and become like the heathen. However, God's gifts and his calling are irrevocable, so ...

11:23 And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again.

The claiming of God's promises, repentance and earnest prayer can remedy any situation. But exactly what is the problem that might lead to our children not being saved?

8.3 The Obligation to Believe God's Promises

Covenants are broken outwardly when we fail to follow God's commands. However, it is always the case that failure to obey God is preceded by a failure to take his promises seriously and by a failure to believe those promises properly, i.e. a lack of faith. For example, Adam and Eve's outward breaking of God's covenant was preceded by their failure to take seriously his promise that those who ate from the Tree of Knowledge would certainly die.

In contrast Abraham the man of faith believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. His descendants, however, failed to take God's threats in Deuteronomy 4:25-28 seriously and so they lost the Promised Land. Threats, after all, are just negative promises.

Similarly, if we today fail to believe God's promises, we too will break his covenants and regret it. And yet, there is every encouragement to believe all the promises that we find in the Bible:

2 Cor. 1:20 For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ, ...

Therefore, if we want to obey God's commands such as "*Eph. 6:4 Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord*", the first thing we should do is to believe God's promises inasmuch as they affect child-rearing. 2

Corinthians 1:20 assures us that they are all still relevant to us today. For example:

Pro. 22:6 Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.

Unless we see the promise in the verse, our child-training will have no power because we will not be doing it in faith. Without faith it is impossible to please God. Genesis 17:19 is of no value to us when we pray for our children unless we take hold of the promise contained in the verse and argue with God that the “*everlasting covenant*” must still be in force today, insisting that God be God of our children as he has promised. We need to put verses such as 2 Cor. 1:20, Gal. 3:14, Gen. 17:8, Jer. 32:39-41 together. We need to believe them, and pray for our children in the light of such verses. If, instead, we are sceptical and try to think of subtle reasons why these verses may be inapplicable, then the decline of the 20th Century will be repeated in the 21st. Reading the Bible is not primarily an intellectual activity; it is a spiritual battle against our own unbelief.

8.4 The Obligation to Obey God and Produce Godly Offspring

That godly people must keep God's commands, and that there are blessings and benefits therein is beyond dispute. However, the connection between obeying God and him blessing us and our children is not so obvious. Verses like Deut 5:29 and the following chapter establish the principle that whether God blesses us and our children depends upon whether we obey him or not.

Deut. 5:29 Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever!

The above connection between godliness and blessing for our children is established in the Bible, so does this mean that our behaviour must be perfect in order to ensure their salvation? Surely not, or nobody's children would ever be saved! We sin constantly. And the sins we do constantly are not little ones but big ones. The Law says “*love the Lord your God with all your heart ...*” Which of us has even started to do that? Therefore, we are always all guilty of breaking the greatest commandment all the time. This means that any idea of there being a direct and absolute connection between our godliness and the salvation of our children is ruled out.

Furthermore, we glimpse the exact opposite in Genesis 27 - the story of the dysfunctional covenant family! Isaac was sinning by showing favouritism and deliberately trying to bless the wrong son. Rebecca was sinning by engineering a daring deception by the right son. Jacob, was lying to his father. Esau had despised his birthright, and was failing to honour his agreement with Jacob. Yet amidst all the direct and obvious sin, Isaac was relying on God to keep his promises. By so doing, the writer to the Hebrews tells us that Isaac blessed both sons (Hebrews 11:20). In particular, he passed on God's blessing of Abraham on to Jacob. So seriously did God take Isaac's faith, that he even blessed the right son, the promised son, without Isaac realising it until afterwards!

How can we possibly reconcile this contradiction? On one hand God says he will bless godliness to our children; on the other he seems to bless Jacob purely because of his father's faith and nothing to do with his behaviour (which was despicable). The only sensible reconciliation would appear to be that God blesses us on the basis of Christ's atoning sacrifice. Faith in Christ gives us all the basic blessing of the covenants. That same faith also produces godly behaviour. Godly acts, when performed in faith, are the means of God blessing still further. So there is a virtuous circle that relates faith to godliness and

godliness to blessing, and blessing to faith in the rising generation.

Teaching our children to obey God's commands when combined with a reliance on him to change their hearts produces godly children. Training children in a faithless way may produce only rebellion from natural sinful hearts, but training them whilst trusting God's promises is a means of God's grace entering their lives. Read in this way, it is obvious that Ephesians 6:4 is expecting the children mentioned to become Christians. God's grace produces the heart-change, teaching the Gospel and training the child are the means of the grace arriving. Faith in God's promises unleashes the grace and motivates the godly father to do Ephesians 6:4. John Stott is well worth reading on Eph 6:1-3 [11].

Similarly, Malachi 2:15 teaches us that it was God's intention from creation that marriage should produce godly children. Obeying God's commands, in this case by not divorcing your wife, results in a stable marriage and a happy home where Ephesians 6:4 can be done successfully. This alone would reverse many of the bad 20th Century trends.

The converse is to fail to obey God's commands. This always results from a failure to believe God's promises as shown in the previous section. Unbelief leads to disobedience. Disobedience means that the channels for God's grace are dammed up. No grace, no salvation.

When God unfolds his covenant to Abraham, offering blessing for him and for all his descendants, he starts by telling Abraham that he must walk before him and be blameless (Genesis 17:1). A little later, in Genesis 18:19, the Lord explains that he chose Abraham specifically so that he would do Ephesians 6:4. Thus is demonstrated real unity of God's purposes and promises in the Abrahamic Covenant, the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. Add in Malachi 2:15, and the set of covenants is complete with the addition of the Covenant of Creation. All four covenants work together through promises, faith, grace and obedience to produce salvation for God's people and their offspring.

8.5 The Signs and Seals of the Covenants

Every biblical covenant has its signs, or seals, that is ceremonies or objects that picture and guarantee the covenant blessings to the recipient of the particular sign. In the case of the Covenant of Creation, the signs would appear to be the Trees of Life and Knowledge (although this is not altogether indisputable). For the Abrahamic Covenant, the main sign was circumcision, which was carried forward and adopted into the Old Covenant. To it was added the Passover. Upon the arrival of the New Covenant, some fresh signs were needed to distinguish the new wine from the old. Thus, the Passover was replaced by the Lord's Supper. Instead of looking backwards to a corporeal redemption from Egypt, this now looks back to a spiritual redemption bought by Christ, and to on-going fellowship with him. In the case of circumcision, it has been replaced by baptism. Without delving into the precise meaning of Col. 2:11, 12, it can readily be seen that these verses teach the equivalence of the two signs.

Col. 2:11, 12 In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism ...

Furthermore, that circumcision and baptism are equivalents, can be seen from Table 4 below

which summarises their main meanings.

Circumcision	Baptism
Regeneration (circumcision of the heart) by God.	Regeneration by the Holy Spirit.
The need for blood to be shed for the remission of sin.	Washing away of guilt with no more need for blood shedding.
Belonging to God.	Belonging to God through unity with Christ.
Principle sign and seal of the Abrahamic Covenant, administered once upon entry to the blessings of the covenant.	Principle sign and seal of the New Covenant, administered once upon entry to the blessings of the covenant.
Given to the males of God's people and to their male descendants.	Given to all God's people and all their descendants, both male and female.
Given to Abraham's family plus proselytes.	Offered to anyone who believes the Gospel.

Table 4 – Comparison of Circumcision and Baptism

Q. What is the purpose of the signs and seals of God's covenants?

A. To help us to believe God's promises.

When we believingly baptise both converts and our children, God promises to forgive their sin through unity with Christ's, and to cleanse away their sin by the Holy Spirit. This is conditional, as previously discussed, but is nevertheless a real promise. Circumcision of the heart has become a New Covenant phenomenon, as pictured by baptism (Romans 2:29). With the coming of the New Covenant, the Holy Spirit is poured out on all peoples (Joel 2:28). That the Holy Spirit being poured out is spoken of in baptism cannot be doubted because of what the Authority on baptism stated of Jesus:

Matthew 3:11 "I [John the Baptist] baptise you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

See also Acts 10:47 and Acts 19:1-5. Circumcision looked forward to the shedding of blood for the remission of sin. That blood has now been shed, so baptism looks backwards only briefly to the cross and the baptism of suffering that Jesus endured (Mark 10:38), because it now pictures the washing away of guilt. The Old Covenant sprinkling of blood has been replaced by the New Covenant washing with water.

Circumcision, sealing the "I will be your God" and "you will be my people" of Genesis 17, is replaced under the New Covenant by being baptised into Christ (Romans 6:3), or baptised in the names of the Trinity (Matthew 28:19).

Circumcision marked entry to the Abrahamic Covenant and all its blessings and responsibilities, so seven days after a son was born he was circumcised. Nowadays, around 2000 AD, when a child is born to a Christian, he or she also enters the covenant community with all the blessings and responsibilities of the various covenants as shown in Illustration 5. The book of Acts and others of Paul's writing tell us that whole households were baptised when they entered into a covenant relationship with God (Acts 16:15; 18:8, 1 Corinthians

1:16). In the same way, a new child who is born into the covenant community cannot be denied the sign and seal of the blessings and responsibilities. Such a child already has the reality of the covenant relationship; how can he be denied the sign of it? Faced with the awesome responsibility of bringing up a child in the training and instruction of the Lord, believing parents need all the help they can get to trust God and believe his promises, putting them into practice on a day-to-day basis. This is where infant baptism comes in. Conceptually, it has no theological existence of its own; its forms a logical part of the principle of household baptism. It is done to help Christian parents produce godly children in fulfilment of the Covenant of Creation (Malachi 2:15), demonstrating again the basic unity of all the covenants. Notice how, in the Acts and 1 Corinthians passages cited, we are not even told whether there were any children in each household. Common sense says that there were, but the question is beside the point because the principle being exemplified is that of household baptism (not just infant baptism). Therefore, the whole family was baptised including slaves, children and any other dependants. This is the precise equivalent of when Abraham was circumcised: So were all the males in his household, regardless of whether they had yet come to share Abraham's faith.

Notice also, how everything only gets better under the New Covenant: females are now allowed the covenant signs as well as males; all nations are being drawn to Christ, not just the Jews. The painful bloody business of circumcision which went hand in hand with messy destructive blood sacrifices is done away with. The small company of Jews who entered Egypt have now become like the sand on the sea shore and are rapidly becoming like the stars in the night sky. The outward formal religion of the Old Covenant is replaced by the internal Holy Spirit religion of the new. It is inconceivable that those who were previously covenant children should now be 'excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise' as Paul explains in Ephesians 2:12.

2:12 ... remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise ... [but no longer!]

9. In Practice Nowadays

9.1 Faith and Baptism

As a New Covenant parent, if you don't make use of the covenant sign of baptism, you still have to keep the obligations of the covenant to bring up your children for God, but it is much harder to do. It is like not employing, say, a plumber to do a difficult job; he has the right tools to do the job, makes good use of them, and finds it easy. The alternative is that painful 20th Century experience known as DIY. God forbid that we should be DIY parents!

Q. Why should a covenant sign such as baptism make a difference to keeping the covenant?

A. Because, the sign correctly understood and viewed through the eyes of faith causes God to respond with his grace. Even where God's promises are only glimpsed faintly, the visible sign is used by the Holy Spirit to inspire faith in God's promises. Even if we are illiterate and backward, we can visualise the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and observe the picture of the washing away of sin.

Our attitude should be the same as that of the believing parents whom Jesus commended in Mark 10:13ff. as they brought to him their little children for him to lay his hands on them and bless them. Are you now thinking of some way to explain that the passage does not apply

to you? Beware for “the kingdom of God belongs to *such as* these.”

9.2 Prayer

The most obvious corollary of believing God's promises and understanding God's covenants is that we turn to prayer. Take, for example, King David in II Samuel 12:

¹⁵ After Nathan had gone home, the LORD struck the child that Uriah's wife had borne to David, and he became ill. ¹⁶ David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and went into his house and spent the nights lying on the ground.

Suddenly, David was presented with the prospect of having to achieve a whole life-time's parenting in just seven days. What is the only thing he can do? Prayer. And did God hear David's prayer? The answer seems to be "yes" and "no".

12:²³ But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me."

The child's life was short, but David is confident that they will meet again one day. Prayer is the fundamental way of putting into practice our faith in God's covenant promises.

Table 5 - The Christian Parents' Prayer

Father in Heaven, we feel the awesome weight of your first covenant at Creation where you gave us the responsibility of imaging you in front of the heavenly beings, where you created marriage so that godly parents would in turn produce godly offspring.

We recognise not only our own fallen nature, but also the sinful nature of our children, and feel the frustration that we can do nothing to circumcise their hearts so that they will love you.

At the same time, we thank you that you promised Abraham our father that you would be his God and the God of his children. We thank you that now by faith, not only Jews, but all who are in Christ inherit that same promise, that you will be not only our God but also the God of our children, for all your promises are “Yes” in Christ.

We understand that for you to be our God means that we must be holy, but we also understand that you have provided the way for us to be holy. You provided cleansing of our sin through your Son. You provide cleansing of our hearts by your Spirit.

We thank you for the visible seal of your cleansing that is applied to both us and our children, namely baptism, and ask that you give us the grace by your Spirit to bring up our holy children in the training and instruction of the Lord.

Do not allow this branch of your holy olive tree to be cut off. Rather grant that this family would stand by faith in you and your promises.

And we rely on you, Jesus Christ, Lord of the covenants, to be very jealous for your own reputation, faithful to your promises and powerful to save, so that our children may follow in the footsteps of their parents in every way that is good.

We rely on your perfect life and atoning sacrifice to cover up our sins and failings as parents,

so that your grace and faithfulness may be shown to the next generation, that our children might bear your image.

“To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

9.3 A Godly Example

A lasting memory from my own childhood is the way that some professing Christians treated others. It must be difficult for a child to see through the poor behaviour of Christians to the unchanging holy God that such Christians carelessly misrepresent. So, as we relate to each other, we should always bear in mind the effect that we are having on young observers who miss nothing, remember everything, and draw their own conclusions. They should be regarded as our spiritual nephews and nieces, and factored into both our prayer and exemplary behaviour (in both senses!)

9.4 Grandchildren and Grandparents

Though parents tend not to realise it at the time, when they are busy bringing up their own children, they are also doing something else: They are actually teaching their children how to bring up their grandchildren. Therefore, not only do adults need to be taught how to bring up their children, so do our children.

Psalm 78:5 He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our forefathers to teach their children, ⁶ so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children.

A very obvious and vital grandparental rôle is that of prayer for your grandchildren. Psalm 78 (above), however, shows that concern for our grandchildren starts before they are born, and is of greatest importance even as we start to bring up our own children.

Another way in which Christian grandparents need to start their rôle before actually attaining grandparenthood is in preparing to be a good example to our grandchildren. Good habits formed while we are young will pave the way for setting a good example when we are old; the converse is true of our current bad habits: They must be dealt with before the almond tree blossoms, for the sake of those 'yet to be born'.

9.5 Parenting Courses

Many churches offer parenting courses as a kind of pre-evangelism event. These are aimed at current unbelievers with a view to breaking down barriers and building on friendships formed at mother and toddler groups for example. However, churches in America are ahead of Britain in that many offer parenting courses and marriage courses to church members. What possible reason could there be for not doing this? Such parenting courses present an opportunity to address issues that only affect parents, going into them deeply and in ways that might not appropriate when little Johnnie is sitting there in the congregation next to his parents.

9.6 Teach Biblical and Covenant Theology

After people are converted, the years pass and many become aware that they do not really understand much of the Bible and are making no progress with it. Some revisit the same comforting verses again and again and stick strictly to the New Testament. They are failing to understand the sovereignty of God throughout all history and to relate it to the big issues

of life, like bringing up children for God.

Teaching Systematic Theology through preaching, catechisms etc. is tremendously valuable, but Covenant Theology really belongs under the heading of Biblical Theology. Therefore, we must make sure that children and adults are taught Biblical Theology, including Covenant Theology. Otherwise, they may know the *mechanics* of bringing up children, but they will not *understand* where it all fits in biblically.

Final Remarks

So am I saying that the decline of the 20th Century is entirely due to us failing to baptise our infants? Certainly not. If you have skipped to the end without reading the first eight sections, you'd better go back.

Bringing up children for God is a matter of understanding, believing and applying covenant theology. This is the responsibility of the whole church family: parents, grandparents, spiritual aunts and uncles, and children themselves. It is based upon faith in God's covenant promises. This works itself out in the following of the biblical instructions on prayer, baptism, teaching and training.

References

- [1] The figures were taken from *Religion and Society in Industrial England* by (A.D. Gilbert, 1976, Longman), and have been interpolated in places to provide the visually appropriate continuity that is required for graphical presentation of the available data.
- [2] *Operation World* [2] (Patrick Johnstone, 1993, O.M. Publishing).
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- [5] *The Christ of the Covenants* by O. Palmer Robertson, P&R Co, 1980
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The Internet version of this paper is here: <http://www.davidlegg.org.uk/>

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