

“Tiny Christians”
Sermon follow-up
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My desire in the sermon was to be more pastoral than polemical. Obviously, this is a sensitive issue amongst Christians in our day. I do not want to alienate our Baptist brethren. This is not an issue to break fellowship over (obviously, given our relationship with BPBC), and we would gladly receive Baptists into membership and at the communion table.

That being said, as your pastor, I do believe these “paedo” issues are of great significance to the church in our day. We have gotten these issues wrong for a long time in American evangelicalism and we continue to pay a steep price, as generation after generation fails to receive comprehensive enculturation and discipling. I believe God is still working with household as households; I believe his promises still apply to households; and I believe household baptism demands household religion.

As I said towards the end of the sermon, this no merely academic matter. It is crucial to the mission and ministry of the church; it is vital to the health of our families. When we consider what we know about child development from the Bible and even from experience (e.g., science, psychology, observation, etc.), nothing makes more sense than paedobaptism. The whole notion of “tiny Christians” may seem utterly foreign to us in our democratized, individualized culture. But our presuppositions are clearly not those of biblical times or the biblical writers. Would the notion of a “tiny Jew” have made sense to ancient Jewish parents? Would Israelites have thought of their children as fellow Israelites? Or did their children need to grow up and “make a decision” to become a member of Israel? To ask these questions is to answer them (if we have any historical knowledge at all). If we say “That was this then, this is now. The old covenant worked that way, but the new covenant does not,” we are pitting the old covenant vs. the new covenant in an illegitimate way. While the new covenant is certainly different in a variety of ways, to exclude infants from the covenant people, or from a relationship with God (Gen. 17) would make the new covenant markedly less gracious than the old covenant. Everything in the NT Scriptures screams the opposite. Besides, when we take this approach, we end up drawing contrasts when the NT draws parallels. In the NT, there is still a corporate (e.g., household, familial) dimension to religion, as we see throughout

the book of Acts. Moreover, the NT uses explicit typologies that include children in a way analogous to the old covenant (e.g., 1 Pt. 3; 1 Cor. 10).

Again, all this makes sense if we reflect upon “the nature of things.” God designed kids to share the religious heritage and posture of their parents. Not inalienably, of course – there are numerous examples of children in Scripture who grow up only to fall away, whether through lack of nurture and/or personal rebellion. Kids are not “naturally” Christians in a fallen world. We believe in original sin. But we also know that grace restores nature – and that means grace is restoring the covenant family. If we hedge on that point, we are going to misread and misappropriate huge swaths of Scripture. When we consider the way family life works in “real life” infant baptism squares with everything else we see. Nothing makes more sense than the view that Christian parents should bring their children to the church and to Jesus’ earthly representative to be baptized by him. To not do so would be to go against the grain of the way God made the world. Even most conscientious Baptist parents end up treating their kids *as if* they were baptized Christians, e.g., praying with them and teaching them to pray. Baptist parents still know intuitively that they should say with Joshua, “As for me and my house we will serve the Lord.” Ancient Jews did not treat their children as pagans or as religiously neutral until they got old enough to make a private, individual decision in favor of YHWH. Why should Christian parents do any different? Nothing about the death and resurrection of Jesus, or the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, changes that practice – and there is loads of evidence in the NT itself to support it. The new covenant is a new chapter in the story of God’s people; it is a transformation and transfiguration of the old covenant. But there is not a shred of legitimate evidence that that transformation makes a “tiny covenant member” (that is, a “tiny Christian”) an impossible or anomalous reality.

Just as the way of salvation remains the same in all eras of history, so the duties of parents and the promises made to parents remain the same as well. In every epoch of history, God’s people are called to raise up their children as children of God, in his fear and admonition. Given the way God has made the world, parents inevitably impose some religious identity on their children; there is no religious neutrality. The only question is whether or not that will be a Christian identity, or some other religious perspective.

If parents are going to disciple their children (and I think all Christian parents more or less agree on that task in practice, if not in principle), then it makes perfect sense for their children to become disciples in baptism (Mt. 28) in their

infancy. Infant baptism begins the process of Christian parenting, which is a specialized form of discipleship, as we train our children to be faithful followers of Christ. This religious nurture and enculturation happens right alongside other forms of social and cultural nurture. The forming of Christian character in our children happens as God restores and transforms the natural, creational means of child-rearing. A consistent Baptist position, however, places the Christian nurture of the child outside of these ordinary means and the normal processes of growth and maturation. Discipleship becomes something added to the child's cultural life at a later point (hopefully), rather than the transformation and renewal of that life from the beginning. I have a hard time seeing how a Baptist parent with an infant in the home could say, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

Some anecdotes, first from William Willimon (*Remember Who You Are*, 46f):

In the past few years, I have met a number of parents who have gotten the notion that, while parents should train their children in academic and vocational skills, they should not "impose" ethical or religious values upon their children.

"We simply tell our children what we believe, but we also tell them they are free to make up their own minds," some of these people will say. There was also the father who told me, when I asked why his 12 year old son was not in church one Sunday, "Well, he doesn't seem to care too much for church, and after all, you can't force him to go. Can you?" This same father, I noted, had no problems with forcing his child to go to baseball practice, junior high school, piano lessons, and Boy Scouts. I assume he "imposes" these activities upon his son because he, as a parent, is sincerely convinced that participation will make for a richer and more satisfying life for his son in the future. Why not feel the same way about the church?

Of course, we have all seen the victims of the parental approach which forced children into patterns of belief and behavior which were unrealistic for the child's needs and abilities. We all know that, in spite of a parent's best efforts, a child may not follow a parentally chosen path. But there is a marked difference between saying, "This is our family's faith, and the faith we have promised to give you, and therefore we want you to participate in this faith"; and saying, "As far as your faith is concerned, that's a matter we completely leave up to you. We have nothing to pass on

to you, no experience of our own to share with you, no vision for your future" ...

My wife and I seriously discussed delaying the baptism of our children until they were old enough to decide about baptism for themselves. But we decided that this would be less than honest about our own expectations and commitments for them. Even though our children, when they grow up, would be as free as any other adults to decide for themselves about their own belief and behavior, while they were under our care, we intend to do our very best to live our lives before them in such a way that they might see the faith in us. Certain options would be unavailable to them because they were our children... We intend to live our lives in such a way as to say, "This is who we are and are trying to be. Therefore, this is who you are. This is our family's way of doing things. This is the witness to the truth which we have received and which we now, with God's help, pass on to you."

My question: In the American South many Christian parents do not give their kids a choice when it comes to which college athletic teams they will root for. From infancy, they dress their kids in clothes and jerseys with the logo of mom and dad's alma mater. They teach the fight song, the traditions, and do everything they can to inculcate loyalty to the team. But if there is no "neutrality" when it comes to sporting allegiances, why do we pretend that there is religious neutrality? Why do some parents believe they can cultivate loyalty to a school's team from the beginning of life but not to the Lord? I know Auburn and Alabama fans who would never, ever take the approach, "My kid can grow up and decide for himself which team to pull for." But those same parents essentially take that approach when it comes to the vastly more important issue of loyalty to Christ. They insist on taking their kids to games, but they do not insist on taking their kids to church. This is ridiculous.

From Leonard Vanderzee (*Christ, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper*, 129):

It is often insisted that one must be able to give testimony to a moment or time of conversion in order to be baptized. Even in those churches that do not practice infant baptism, however, there is an apparent level of discomfort with the idea that their children before "conversion" do not have a relationship with Christ and his church. In most of these churches, babies are "dedicated" to the Lord, which some have impishly called their "dry cleaning." It is also a rather common feature in Baptist churches that

children as young as 5 and 6 years old are baptized upon profession of faith. It seems to me a bit of a stretch to see these baptisms as valid just because they follow upon conversion and profession of faith. One imagines the conversion on mother or father's lap as the little one "accepts Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior." But faith at that stage in life is so immersed in the family's life and identity that it hardly qualifies as conversion in the usual way in which the term is used, a radical transformation of life and commitment. For many who grow up in Christian families, all their faith decisions are interwoven with family structures and identities. Few [I would say "none" – RL] can claim that their faith is a purely independent decision. As T. M. Lindsay puts it,

[The Baptists'] demand for such a conscious, intelligent, strictly individualist act of faith sets aside some of the deepest facts of human nature....Is it possible in all cases to trace the creative effects of the subtle imperceptible influences that surround children, or to say when the slowly dawning intelligence is first able to apprehend enough to trust in half-conscious ways? It is a shallow view of human nature that sets aside all such considerations and insists on regarding nothing but isolated acts of knowledge or of faith...

[I]nfant baptism is not valid unless it is the very same as the baptism of adults. There is no unique institution called "infant baptism"; there is only one baptism. The problem remains that however you look at it, in infant baptism there appears to be an additional feature that distinguishes it from adult baptism, and that is, that parents or some other responsible person, along with the whole congregation, stands in for the baptized person to affirm faith in Christ. Doesn't this proxy character of infant baptism make it fundamentally different from the baptism of adults? The bottom line is that someone makes the choice on behalf of the infant, which is not the case for adults.

The idea of the expression of faith by proxy seems rather odd to us, especially in our modern American religious context with its strong emphasis on the personal and independent decision of faith. The fundamental issue here is the nature of baptism and its relationship to human faith. If we are assuming of an adult baptism that it is primarily a testimony to that person's faith and conversion, then we have a serious

difference between the two forms of baptism. But we have affirmed all along that, while the association of faith and baptism is an important one, baptism is primarily a sign and seal of God's action in Christ for the person baptized. The sacrament points to God's faithfulness more than to human faith...

Nor is the idea of parents and godparents and the whole congregation speaking for the child (or, as we might say, the child speaking through them) as odd as it may appear at first glance. When parents speak for their children in baptism, it naturally and beautifully expresses a simple fact of human life. Parents make all kinds of decisions for their children, where they will live and go to school, what they will eat, who they will associate with. Even more fundamentally, parents decide, as Joshua did, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." This does not remove the child's own responsibility to decide also, but it acknowledges and honors the ways in which that decision is made. Michael Green says,

There is nothing at all artificial about the idea of the child speaking through its [parents or] sponsors. It is not only a regular legal device, but it is in fact the way in which little people develop in a home. They learn from climate about them. And if that [climate] is one of repentance and faith, in which Christ is honored as Lord, then there is every reason to expect that they will exhibit the same qualities. Just as there is no known moment in the natural life of child when consciousness starts, so it is with many in their spiritual lives. They have never known a time when they did not trust and obey the Lord who is worshipped by their parents and comes at his own initiative in baptism to offer them the precious gifts of new birth, membership in his family, pardon for sin, the indwelling of his Holy Spirit.

Peter Leithart's essays "Do Baptists Talk to Their Babies?" and "The Sociology of Infant Baptism" are excellent analyses of the way in which infant baptism "fits" with God's creational design. In the former essay, Leithart writes:

Given this background, we can return to the question of infant faith. Here, "faith" is the human response trust to God in a personal relationship. The question of infant faith is not: "Are infants capable of receiving this jolt of divine power?" The question is: "Can infants respond to other persons?"

Do infants have personal relations?" And the answer to this question is obviously yes. Infants quickly (even *in utero*) learn to respond to mother's voice; infants quickly manifest "trust" of their parents; infants quickly distinguish strangers from members of the family. If infants can trust and distrust human persons, why can't they trust in God? Behind the denial of infant faith is, apparently, an assumption that God is less available to an infant than other humans. But this is entirely wrong; for no human being is nearer than God. And it is wrong because God's presence is mediated through His people. When parents say to their newborn, "Jesus loves you and will care for you," they are speaking God's promises.

Parents, moreover, establish relationships with their infants through symbols. We talk to our infants, and we show our love through gestures and hugs and kisses. If there is nothing irrational or absurd about humans' establishing personal relationship with infants through symbols, there is nothing irrational about God's doing the same. As we establish loving and trusting relations with our infants through symbols, so God speaks to infants and establishes a relation with them through the "visible word" of baptism. Thus, the question "Should we baptize babies?" is of a piece with the question "Should we talk to babies?" Paedobaptism is neither more nor less odd and miraculous than talking to a newborn. In fact, that is just what paedobaptism is: God speaking in water to a newborn child.

Let me take this a further step. If the child cannot understand what a parent is saying, is it rational for the parent to speak to him or her? Baptist parents as well as others speak to their infants, and do not expect the child to understand or to talk back for many months. They see nothing irrational in this. They speak to their children, that is, they employ symbols, not because they think the infant understands all that is being said or because they expect an immediate response. They speak to their children so that the child will learn to understand and talk back. So too, we baptize babies not because they can fully understand what is happening to them, nor because we expect them to undergo some kind of immediate moral transformation. We baptize them, and consistently remind them of their baptism and its implications, so that they will come to understanding and mature faith.

The sociologically consistent Baptist should, it seems to me, follow the Peekabo Street theory of child training. Peekabo Street was the American Olympic skier, whose parents, as I recall the story, were so very trendy and liberal that they did not want to "impose" an identity on their little

girl, so they allowed her to choose her own name, with obvious results. Karl Barth, who loudly protested the “violence” of imposing a Christian identity on a child through infant baptism, would undoubtedly be pleased. In fact, the Streets were not so liberal after all, for in spite of themselves they apparently did teach Peekaboo to speak English, rather than giving her the freedom to choose a language or make one up on her own. Baptist parents, so far as I know, are not consistent either; they do impose a language and a name on their children, a language and a name that cannot be religiously neutral; they do, in spite of themselves, often treat their children as Christians, teaching them to sing “Jesus loves me” and to pray the Lord’s Prayer. And if they do all this, what reason remains for resisting the imposition of the covenant sign?

In the latter, Leithart adds these thoughts, comparing the respective “sociologies” Baptist and paedobaptist practices:

Among modern Christians, including many who practice infant baptism, the Baptist position seems obvious and commonsensical, while the paedobaptist position seems to run against the grain of human life. *Of course*, one enters a religious community only when he consents to it. It violates our sense of the voluntary character of religion and morality to suggest that infants can be introduced, without their consent, into a religious life...[T]he obviousness of the Baptist position depends upon assumptions about the nature of Christianity and the relationship of religious and cultural nurture...Once these assumptions are challenged, and they *are* open to challenge, the illusion that the Baptist position is obvious begins to fade...

What does *infant* baptism tell us about the “mechanism” that the Spirit employs to remake us, translating us from the image of Adam to the image of Christ?

In general, we can answer the question as follows: The Baptist position implies that this reshaping begins “outside” ordinary means of nurture and development, and chronologically after this ordinary nurture has begun. Baptist parents do not consider their children to be fully Christian until they have reached a certain age and made a decision. The nurture of their early years may indeed involve Christian training...but this is not seen as the nurture of a *Christian* child. Initial nurture travels along tracks that will, the parents hope, eventually lead to conversion, but it is the

nurture of a pagan or unbelieving or neutral child. The child's Christian life begins only at a later stage, and begins with an experience that is, to some extent at least, external to the normal processes of growth and maturation...From that point, the nurture of the new Christian child will take place along the tracks of instruction and involvement in the church but these tracks are supplementary and additional to the tracks of original nurture.

Infant baptism, by contrast, implies that instilling of Christ-like character runs along the tracks established in creation, for the Christian training of the child, of a *Christian* child, begins immediately upon his birth. God does not form a Christlike character by laying a second set of tracks but by restoring and transforming the "natural" tracks. From the beginning, consistent paedobaptists treat their children as Christian, so that the social and cultural nurture of the child is simultaneously his or her nurture in Christian character and faith. This simultaneity recovers the condition of the original creation...

Infant baptism is thus consistent with the more general Reformed insistence that redemption is a renovation of creation spoiled by Adam rather than a new creation *ex nihilo*...

That is my general contention: that there are analogies between Christian nurture and "inculturation" or "socialization" into a particular way of life. Or, more neatly, Christian nurture is initiation and inculturation into the Christian culture of the church...

Infant baptism imposes a religious identity that the infant *has not chosen*. As Rowan Williams puts it, it pushes choice to the side. Far from being a weakness, this is one of the strengths of infant baptism for Reformed theology, since it shows that God's approach to us precedes any response we make. The Divine Gardener loves us, waters us, cares for us, tends us before we can produce a thank offering in return. Infant baptism thus highlights the prevenience of grace...

The fact that infant baptism is unchosen forms the burden of Barth's early opposition to the practice, as he complains about the "violence" of imposing a religion on the infant without his or her consent....A moment's reflection reveals the palpable naiveté of this objection. Everyone is born to someone, into some social setting, and there are always not only social

“givens” but religious ones as well. All parents have some religious leanings, even if they are only the leanings of indifference; the liberal parents who leave their child to decide his own religion are inculcating a religion of toleration and pluralism, and a corresponding intolerance of exclusive religions like Christianity. Infants are never brought up in a religiously neutral setting, having *no* religious identity or biases imposed on them. If imposing religion on an infant is violence, *every* child is a victim of violence. Unchosen limits are, providentially, built into everyone’s initial situation...Personal identity and character are *always* and permanently shaped by the relations, loyalties, circumstances into which we are thrown...

Does this culture [of the church] include people in every stage of life, or does it only include those who have reached a certain level of maturity? Is the church a new *humanity* that includes humans of all levels of intelligence, maturity, and giftedness, or is it more an organization for the religiously interested or the religiously mature?

John Edwards, erstwhile Senator and Democratic Presidential candidate, provides a stark contrast with the views offered here. From Boston.com’s website, during October, 2006:

[The candidates] were asked about a controversial incident in Lexington, Mass., where a second-grade teacher, to the dismay of several parents, had read her young students a story celebrating same-sex marriage. Were the candidates “comfortable” with that?

“Yes, absolutely,” former senator John Edwards promptly replied. “I want my children . . . to be exposed to all the information . . . even in second grade . . . because **I don't want to impose my view**. Nobody made me God. **I don't get to decide on behalf of my family or my children**. . . . **I don't get to impose on them what it is that I believe is right.**”

If parents do not impose their views of right and wrong on a child, who will? How does this square with the biblical mandate to “impress” God’s commands upon the hearts of our children (Dt. 6)? And isn’t the imposition of some form of morality, whether from parents or another source, *inescapable*? Indeed, Senator Edwards is imposing all kinds of personal views on his children from what to eat to what political party they should prefer. Isn’t it obvious that the educator in the public school classroom incident that occasioned the question was imposing her pro-homosexual marriage view on the children? The teacher wasn’t even

pretending to be neutral, nor did she provide a variety of viewpoints! (Can you imagine what would have happened in that classroom if the teacher had read a book condemning same-sex marriages as a violation of the created order? Would Senator Edwards have given the same response? It's scary to consider that there are some socialist regimes in the world today where the government has all but taken moral and religious training out of the hands of parents by force of law.)

Frankly, the view of child-rearing espoused by Senator Edwards is consistent with Baptist principles. If Senator Edwards had his children baptized, hopefully he understands that God *wants* him to impose an identity and ethic upon his children. If Baptists object, "Oh, but we do believe our children should be taught biblical morality and a Christian worldview," the question naturally follows: "If you're going to teach them to live by Christian standards and hold to Christian truths, why not put a foundation under those practices by giving them a Christian baptism?" Our children are either pagan or Christian; there is no middle ground. We need to decide what the Bible teaches about the identity of our children and then rear them accordingly.

As I said in the sermon, household baptisms imply and demand household religion. This has several practical ramifications for the way parents handle their children.

It means there needs to be a regular pattern of family worship in the home. We need to be reading, studying, praying over, and singing the Bible. Doing these things together is vital to the child's spiritual development. By starting at an early age, we enable our children to have a testimony like Timothy's who knew the Scriptures from his infancy.

It also requires discipline. There is no discipleship without discipline. We must require our children to obey, to love, to be kind, and to speak with respect.

Our children are church members – tiny members, but still members. They're Christians – tiny Christians, but Christians nevertheless. They are part of your Christian household and you must raise and treat them accordingly.

Luther instructed his students and children to "swim in their baptisms" – and that's what parenting is all about. We're giving our kids swimming lessons!

We're training them to live out of their baptisms, as we help them become faithful and mature Christians.

Our baptized children are not seed of the serpent, but seed of the woman (and of God). To be sure, that status is not irrevocable – some branches on the vine get lopped off if they don't bear fruit (Jn. 15) and some branches on the olive tree get cut off if they don't stand in faith and repentance (Rom. 11). But that is not our expectation when God gives us children.

As our kids grow up, the world tells them all kinds of lies about who they are. Even their hearts can lie to them. We need to say to them, "Those feelings aren't telling you the truth about who you are. Your baptism tells you who you are – you are a chosen and beloved child of God, precious in his eyes."

Again, when Luther would struggle with doubt, when he was assailed by a guilty conscience, he would not tell himself, "I have believed," but "I have been baptized." Even when he was unsure of his own faith, there was no doubt God had baptized him and made him his very own child. That's all he needed to know. May we teach our children the same!

Growing up Christian is not without its challenges. There are temptations to worldliness and rebellion that come from outside the faith, but there are also challenges that come from inside the faith. Most especially, we need to guard our children against presuming upon God's grace and looking down on others in haughty self-righteousness. Presumption was a sin the old covenant Jews committed on a wide scale. They assumed that because they were God's people, they could get away with murder (quite literally, in the case of Jesus). Because they had circumcision, they believed they could pretty much live as they pleased (at least in private) without eternal repercussions. Of course, that was and is false. We will all reap what we have sown, and to whom much has been given much will be required. We dare not cheapen God's grace by taking it for granted.

How do we keep our righteous kids from becoming self-righteous? How do we keep our holy kids humble? There are many ways. Obviously, we need to keep reminding them of the gospel. They aren't saved because they're better, but because God in his gracious providence placed them in a home where Christ is known and proclaimed. I also think that as children, it is important to make mercy and mission core aspects of their lifestyle. If we get our children

continually around those who have tremendous needs, we show them just what they've been given. Of course, for this to work, parents have to be striving for a lifestyle of kindness and generosity. Andrew Murray puts it this way:

Many people wish to help the poor...but they do not do anything because they do not know how to go about it. One of the highest goals of Christian education is to make deeds of kindness the chief aim in life. Our desire should be to live to make those around us better and happier. This can only be attained as the parents teach themselves and cultivate the virtues they seek to instill in their children.

I need to say a little more about circumcision in Genesis 17.

When God appears to Abraham in this chapter, it's the first time in 25 years God has spoken to him. (God spoke to Hagar in Genesis 16, but there is no record of speech to Abraham.) Abraham is now 99 years old. He's been waiting – waiting on God, waiting on the promised seed. And most likely, he's been wondering – wondering when God would act and the promises would be fulfilled. (Indeed, from Genesis 17:18, it seems that Abraham simply assumed that Ishmael must be the seed even though he also had to know there were obvious problems to that “solution.”)

There are two names for God in Genesis 17 – YHWH (LORD) and El-Shaddai (Almighty God). The full meaning of YHWH is not disclosed until later, at the time of the exodus (Ex. 3; 6). El-Shaddai refers to God as the Almighty, promise-making God. YHWH reveals God as the righteous promise-keeping God. Thus, the name of YHWH comes into its own when God makes good on his covenant pledge by bringing the people out of slavery and into the promised land. El-Shaddai points to God's sovereignty over his creation; YHWH points to God's covenant love and loyalty as he rescues his special people from ruin and oppression. El-Shaddai suggests God is powerful enough to keep his promises; YHWH is the name that properly belongs to God when he has acted to deliver his people. El-Shaddai is the name of God given to the patriarchs; YHWH is the name given to God in the Mosaic era. While the name YHWH is used with Abraham, this name is not fully experienced until later in history.

The covenant God makes with Abraham is a gift: "I will *give* (or: *gift*) you with my covenant..." The covenant is not a bargain struck by two negotiating parties. Rather, it originates with God. He organizes and structures the relationship. Thus, the covenant includes both God's promises and Abraham's duties, but is completely circumscribed by divine grace. Each party has obligations under the terms of the covenant. There are two sides; there is an "As for me..." part of the covenant and an "as for you..." part.

God commands Abraham: "Walk before me and be blameless." Obviously, this entails living in accord with God's commands. "Walk" is a regular biblical metaphor for one's total way of life. But the language is not as threatening as it might sound. It actually describes Abraham's status: To walk before God is to hold a position of the highest honor and dignity. In the ancient world, the king's slaves and captives would walk *behind* him, but his friends and advisors would walk *before* him.

To be "blameless," understood biblically, is not a matter of sinless perfection, but of covenant loyalty. It describes a lifestyle of faithful obedience. Thus, in Genesis 25:27, Jacob is described as a "blameless" man. The word "blameless" actually means "rounded out," "mature," "complete."

Abraham falls on his face before this glorious theophany (17:3), just as other saints who saw a visible manifestation of God's glory (e.g., Samson's mother, Ezekiel, Daniel, John).

God promises Abraham he will be the father of many nations, which occasions his name change from Abram ("great father") to Abraham ("father of a multitude"). (Sarah also gets a new, exalted name in Genesis 17:15, "glorified princess." In both cases, the new names had to be accepted on faith since they did not yet have any children of their own!) The multitude is the *goyim*, the Gentile nations. Abraham will not only be father of the newly established nation of Israel (demarcated by circumcision from this point forward), but also of the Gentile peoples. Of course, Paul unpacks all of this in Romans 4. Abraham's family will be a nation of priests and missionaries, ministering blessing to the other nations.

Circumcision is not a mark of salvation in and of itself. There are numerous unsaved people in the OT after Genesis 17 (these people are known as God-fearing Gentiles; the most immediate example, obviously, is Ishmael, who is blessed by God even though he is not part of the messianic seed line).

Circumcision singles out Abraham's family (Israel) as God's special missionary/priestly people in the people. They were not *exclusively* his people; rather, they were his *priestly* people. Circumcision is a sign of faith in the promise – righteous (another word for covenant rescue, or salvation) comes via grace and faith, not human works or strength (cf. Rom. 4:11-12).

What, then, is the meaning of circumcision? In all of God's ordained rites, the symbolic action and elements matches the theological meaning. For example, in the new covenant, baptism is performed with water. Why? Because water washes, and baptism is given for cleansing. Why do we consume bread and wine in the Lord's Supper? These things are ordinarily given for nourishment and celebration; in the Supper, the elements perform those functions in a deeper, Spiritual way. Why, then, circumcision? What does the cutting of the male reproductive organ mean? What is the theological meaning of the rite?

The rite involves a cutting of the flesh. The covenant is "in" the flesh. The flesh is representative of what man can do. Of course, because of sin, the flesh has been weakened to the point of impotence (cf. the use of "flesh" language in Romans 8 and elsewhere). If flesh = man's attempts to do things in his own (pretended) strength, the cutting of the flesh is the cutting off of man's power. It leaves man impotent before God. It removes the fig leaf, so to speak. Thus, circumcision is a sign that all hope for salvation must come from the Spirit, not the flesh.

Remember the narrative context in which circumcision was instituted: right after Abraham tried to produce the promised seed in his own strength with Hagar. The sequence of Gen. 15-16-17 is critical. Abraham schemed to bring in the seed in the strength of the flesh; now that same flesh must be cut. God "weakens" the male organ of generation to remind Abraham that it is God's power, not his own, that will bring about the fulfillment of the promise. Salvation is of the Lord, not of the flesh. (Note all the "I wills" in the divine speech in Genesis 17!) In the book of Genesis, circumcision is simply the male equivalent of female barrenness. It was a symbolic castration. It was a bloody rite, and therefore sacrificial (e.g., the circumcised person becomes a living sacrifice), marking a new beginning.

The very act of receiving circumcision in Genesis 17 would have been a radical demonstration of trust. Abraham had a massive household, so for all the men to submit to circumcision was a testimony of his faith to them. In essence, Abraham was incapacitating his entire fighting force for upwards of a week. They had to rely on God to care for them and protect them. It is easy to see why Paul would so constantly link circumcision with Abraham's faith.

In Joshua 5, the wilderness generation is circumcised. (They did not act as a priestly nation in the wilderness so they did not circumcise.) This took place at Gilgal, which means “rolled away.” The flesh is “rolled away” in the event – and thus, the “reproach of Egypt” (probably a reference to what Abraham did with Hagar since she was Egyptian) is removed.

Now that God has provided the true promised seed, Jesus Christ, through the ultimate barren womb, that of a virgin, circumcision is obsolete. “Flesh” (e.g., Joseph) played no role in his conception. To go on circumcising (for covenantal purposes, of course) is a denial that Jesus is the promised seed. It is a denial that the new age has come. Circumcision, in the nature of the case, can no longer possess any religious significance for God’s people. The irony is that while circumcision should have been a continual call to humility and self-abandoning trust, the Jews managed to turn it into its opposite – into a sign of Jewish pride and privilege. And so Paul rightly tells those who want to go on practicing covenantal circumcision to go the whole way and castrate themselves (Gal. 5:12).

Jesus’ death is called a circumcision in Colossians 2. On the cross, he “rolled away” the reproach of the law and destroyed the flesh once and for all. There are no more bloody rites in the new covenant because the final blood sacrifice has been offered. Whereas old covenant rites were connected with death, the new covenant sacraments are focused on life.

The eighth day is also significant. Circumcision begins a new life for the child. He is in liminal state, caught between Adam and Abraham, until the eighth day. Circumcision is the decisive event that brings him fully into the Abrahamic covenant; without it, the child is treated as an Adamic covenant breaker. All of this is fulfilled in Jesus’ eighth day resurrection, when he finally inaugurates the new creation.

Of course, the most notable feature of the covenant promises in Genesis 17 for our purposes is the inclusion of children. God says, “I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you...to be a God to you and to your descendants.” This is really the core and center of the covenant. It is the seed promise of Genesis 3:15 in new form. All of God’s promises are rolled up into the promise of a seed. What do our children get in the covenant? They get God himself! He makes himself their God. He blesses this seed and promises to make them a blessing to the whole earth.

Nevertheless the covenant is conditional. If a male member of Abraham's family is not circumcised on the eighth day, that child is cut off from the covenant relationship. He is regarded as an apostate. The terms are clear: Either "cut it off" or be cut off. And once a child is circumcised, he still has to live out the meaning of that covenant sign, e.g., he must have a circumcised heart, he must live by faith in the covenant promises, and he must walk blamelessly before God. All of this can be transferred over to baptism and the new covenant, making appropriate epochal adjustments.