

HERALDS
OF THE
KING

CHRIST-CENTERED SERMONS
IN THE TRADITION OF
EDMUND P. CLOWNEY

EDITED BY DENNIS E. JOHNSON

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Heralds of the King: Christ-Centered Sermons in the Tradition of Edmund P. Clowney

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PREFACE

This is a gift from preachers to preachers, and to all God's children who gather, Sunday by Sunday, hungry and thirsty to hear afresh their Father's declaration of love for them and triumph over their enemies through Jesus, his beloved Son. Its development has been our labor of love for two persons: *first, proximately*, for our dear (and sometimes daunting) teacher, mentor, and model, Dr. Edmund P. Clowney, through whom each of the contributors, at various points in our Christian pilgrimage, became captivated in wonder over the glory and grace of Jesus the Christ. Jesus is that *second, supremely* worthy Person whom we love, to whom we offer these efforts to proclaim his Word as our thank offering, first for his saving grace and then for his gifts to his church, including a pastor and teacher such as Ed Clowney. We love because Christ first loved us and gave his life to make us his own. As you will discover in the introductions to the sermons, each of us whose paths crossed Ed's realize how much he would want this little book to deflect attention away from himself and instead to rivet our admiring gaze solely on the Savior. He would be particularly pleased, I suspect, that our publisher insisted on inserting "Christ-centered" in the original subtitle that I had first proposed, so that "Christ" comes before "Clowney" there, as he should everywhere!

Our aim is twofold: first, we are eager to share with you the burning passion to preach Christ from all of Scripture, which we

“caught” from Ed. As you will see, this infectious eagerness to attune our ears to hear the Holy Spirit’s witness to the Son in every text of the Bible, from every era of redemptive history, was something that we contracted not only from Ed the homiletician or Ed the exegete and biblical theologian, but also from Ed the sinner saved by divine grace, who himself stood amazed and humbled at the mercy shown him at Christ’s cross. As you read the chapter introductions, each composed without reading the others, you will be impressed by the consistency of our impressions of Ed’s humility and contagious wonder at the glory of Christ radiating from every page of God’s Word. Perhaps most striking are the testimonies of students from different generations at different institutions who found themselves so overwhelmed in worship as Ed opened the Word in the classroom that they could not take notes on the lecture-turned-paeon-of-praise.

We cannot now take you back with us into a seminary classroom or church sanctuary, to share precisely our experience of “burning hearts” (Luke 24:32) as we were led in the discovery of the Christ who suffered and entered into glory throughout the Scriptures. As of March 20, 2005, Ed stands before the throne of the Lamb, singing the praises of the singing Savior whose grace he had preached to struggling sinners on earth for more than sixty years. (You can, however, hear almost one hundred of Dr. Clowney’s sermons and lectures online through the audio collection that has been assembled by the Edmund P. Clowney Legacy Corporation at http://www.sermonaudio.com/source_detail.asp?sourceid=epclegacy.) We hope that our introductions to the sermons will give readers a taste of the person that Ed was (by grace alone, he would always insist!), thereby reinforcing the point that preaching Christ from all the Scriptures is not an automatic product of an abstract hermeneutic method (though it entails sound interpretive principles and practices) but rather grows from a heart that feasts daily in fellowship with the Savior through his Word.

Our second purpose is to show that *one does not have to be Ed Clowney* to see Christ revealed on every page of Scripture and to broadcast the good news of his redemptive achievement in your own ministry, whether your calling is that of a pastor charged to shepherd God’s flock or that of one bearing informal witness among family,

friends, and coworkers. This case is easier to make today than it was in 1952, when Ed transitioned from pastoral ministry into teaching practical theology at Westminster Theological Seminary.

It was almost a half century ago that his *Preaching and Biblical Theology* appeared.¹ That slight (121 pages) but groundbreaking volume, the first that Ed wrote for publication,² engaged issues raised by the “Biblical Theology” movement then current in historical-critical circles, and it touched on the pre-World War II debate in the Netherlands over redemptive-historical versus “exemplary” preaching. Ed harvested the rich legacy of Reformed covenant theology, of Protestant predecessors in the sober exploration of biblical typology such as Patrick Fairbairn, and especially of Geerhardus Vos’s insights into the implications of the fact that God embedded his written Word into the unfolding of his plan of redemption in history. Affirming the unity of God’s redemptive deeds in history and his inerrant words in Scripture, which attests and interprets those deeds, Ed mapped a homiletic that draws its authority from the God who speaks and saves, its content from the whole Bible (in its temporal, thematic, and formal diversity as well as its theological, christocentric unity), its vividness from a sensitivity to the dramatic, flesh-and-blood concreteness of God’s engagement in Israel’s and our struggles, and its motivating power from the savoring of divine grace that transcends our wildest imagination.

Preaching and Biblical Theology would eventually be followed, when Ed’s responsibilities as seminary president and professor abated somewhat and his service to the church permitted, by other contributions on the theme of Christ-centered preaching, informed by Scripture’s redemptive-historical character: “Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures” in the anthology *The Preacher and Preaching* (1986), *The Unfolding Mystery: Discovering Christ in the Old Testament* (1988), *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture* (2003), and *How Jesus Transforms the Ten Commandments* (2007).³ Less visible

1. Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1961; London: Tyndale, 1962).

2. Edmund P. Clowney, *Eutychus (and His Pin)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960) appeared the previous year, but it was a collection of articles originally written for the periodical *Christianity Today*.

3. Samuel T. Logan Jr., ed., *The Preacher and Preaching: Reviving the Art in the Twentieth Century* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1986); Edmund P. Clowney, *The Unfolding*

on his résumé but probably more influential for the progress of the gospel and the health of Christ's church have been the hundreds of pastors—heralds of the King—whose hearts have been set on fire by Ed's example in the pulpit and whose minds have been honed by his incisive coaching and critique in the Homiletics classroom.

Today others are catching the vision and passing the spark along, both in pulpit and in print. Some have been Ed's students or colleagues in person: for example, Charlie Drew, one of our contributors, has authored *The Ancient Love Song: Finding Christ in the Old Testament* to lead thoughtful Christians along the paths by which God drew his people in hope and longing toward their ultimate Champion and true Husband.⁴ Iain Duguid, another contributor, has explored the Old Testament's witness to Christ in such studies as *Living in the Gap between Promise and Reality: The Gospel according to Abraham*; and in *Hero of Heroes*, he has set Jesus' Beatitudes in the context of our Lord's self-disclosure, showing that these "blessings," too often experienced either as sentimental idealism or as guilt-imposing impossibilities, in fact point our hearts toward the Blessed Hero who inaugurated God's kingdom through his innocent suffering and victorious resurrection.⁵

Other homileticians who are advocating Christ-centered preaching informed by Scripture's redemptive-historical structure have not been Ed's students or associates, but they give evidence of acquaintance with his thought. These include Bryan Chapell, Sidney Greidanus, and Graeme Goldsworthy.⁶ Series such as *The Gospel in the Old Testament*⁷ and the *Reformed Expository Commentary*⁸

Mystery: Discovering Christ in the Old Testament (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1988); Clowney, *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003); Clowney, *How Jesus Transforms the Ten Commandments* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007).

4. Charles D. Drew, *The Ancient Love Song: Finding Christ in the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000).

5. Iain M. Duguid, *Living in the Gap between Promise and Reality: The Gospel according to Abraham* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1999). Duguid, *Hero of Heroes: Seeing Christ in the Beatitudes* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001).

6. For example, Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (2nd ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005); Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999); Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming); Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture: The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000).

7. Raymond B. Dillard, *Faith in the Face of Apostasy: The Gospel according to Elijah and Elisha* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1999) and later volumes.

8. Philip G. Ryken, *Galatians* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2005) and later volumes.

provide a growing body of resources and modeling for preachers who are catching a passion to preach Christ in all of Scripture. We rejoice that the rich tradition of Christ-centered preaching, to which we hope that this little book will contribute, is far wider than Ed Clowney's circle of influence (even as it is far older⁹).

One Christ, one gospel of grace . . . but many heralds sent out by the King of kings to announce his victory. The preachers who have contributed sermons to this volume are representative of the variety of messengers whom Christ has captured and chiseled to declare God's glory among the nations. Some of us, as you will see, were dragged "kicking and screaming" to the realization that each and every one of the Bible's sixty-six books, given to God's people over a millennium and a half, has a single integrating center, a single Hero, Jesus the Messiah, on whom pivots God's whole agenda to recapture his rebellious realm and re-create his sin-cursed handiwork. Others drank in the Christ-centered character of Scripture just as dehydrated pilgrims in a blazing desert rush to quench their thirst in streams of cool water. Some of us preach in large churches; others in congregations of modest size. Some pastor urban churches; others serve in suburbs or small towns. In some congregations, maturing believers in stable families are in the majority; in some, a significant number of curious but uncommitted non-Christians are present each week. Our congregations are located across the United States: in the Northeast, the Mid-Atlantic, the Midwest, the South, the Southwest, and the West Coast.

The sermons in our collection themselves illustrate the diversity of the Scriptures' witness to Christ. When I contacted these preachers, I asked each to nominate from among his sermons that message that best exemplified the influence of Dr. Clowney on his understanding and proclamation of God's Word. I also asked for the texts of a couple of alternative sermons, in the event that two preachers chose the same Scripture text. Happily, not only was there no such duplication (so every contributor submitted his first choice) but also the passages were distributed nicely across the biblical canon:

9. See Dennis E. Johnson, *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 62–125.

four from the Law of Moses, three from the Prophets,¹⁰ one from the Psalms, two from the Gospels, and one from an Epistle. Discovering the Bible's focus on Jesus and his mission from start to finish illumines both the Scriptures that anticipate his coming and those that testify to his achievement and draw out its implications.

As editor I want to express thanks to several people who have helped bring this project to completion. Thanks first to the Clowney Legacy Corporation board members who envisioned this collection, invited me to serve as editor, suggested names of contributors, and offered helpful advice along the way. (In the fall of 2007, as I sent "When God Promises the Impossible" to my fellow contributors, I also sent it to the members of the board. Not long thereafter I received a hand-written note from Jean Clowney, Ed's widow and a member of the board, expressing appreciation for this first installment of the collection . . . along with a list of insightful editorial corrections that would make the sermon and introduction better! Jean joined Ed in the presence of Christ on June 7, 2008.) Thanks particularly to Helen Holbrook, a member of the Legacy board, for transcribing sermons from audio recordings into text files, greatly facilitating the editing process. Deborah J. Dewart, legal counsel for the Clowney Legacy Corporation board, helped greatly as the Corporation clarified agreements with each preacher who contributed material to this project. As noted in the introduction to the late Dr. Conn's sermon on Isaiah 55, we are grateful to Dr. Conn's daughter, Mrs. Beth Conn Neikirk, for permission to publish his sermon posthumously and for her editorial review of both the sermon and the introduction that I wrote for it. Thanks also to Grace Mullen, assistant librarian and archivist of Westminster Theological Seminary's Montgomery Library, and to the staff of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia for providing access to audio-recordings of Dr. Conn's sermons, from which "Thorns and Fir Trees" was selected. Finally, many thanks go to Allan Fisher, senior vice president for

10. When Jesus affirmed to his disciples "that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled" (Luke 24:44, *esv*), his reference was to the threefold division of the Hebrew Scriptures (only partially reflected in our English versions, which follow the categories of the Greek Septuagint), in which the Prophets included not only Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Minor Prophets, but also the historical narrative books Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings.

book publishing, and the editorial staff of Crossway for venturing to publish this book. As Al has observed, *Heralds of the King* forms a fitting complement to and extension of *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture*, published by Crossway in 2003, since the heart of that work is thirteen of Ed's classic, widely-loved expositions of Christ and the glory of his grace "in all of Scripture." We here join our voices to Dr. Clowney's in extolling the mighty and merciful Redeemer!

Now, listen for the voice of the Good Shepherd, as he calls his sheep by name from the pages of his Word, through heralds whom he has seized by invincible mercy and sent in joy, bearing his message of good news.

I

LIVING WITH A GAP

Genesis 17:1–14

Joseph V. Novenson

Introduction

This message was first preached in Lexington Presbyterian Church in Lexington, SC, as a portion of a Genesis series. It so caught my own heart and mind that I have returned to it to “mine” the riches of the text again and again.

This message has since been delivered in various contexts and edited according to those with whom I would be studying the passage. Believing the issue of living with this gap between our condition and God’s calling is an important and oft disregarded reality of Christian living, I have spoken on this topic to Christian educators, to graduates from theological institutions, to parents who are trying to be faithful in their role of discipling children, to student service providers in academic institutions from around the country, and to university students in various contexts. The responses to the sermon have been mixed, but Christians’ identification with a gap and its

accompanying spiritual and personal ambiguities has been fairly consistent. Believers in Christ seem consciously or unconsciously beleaguered by a growing sense of the enormity of the gap in virtually every context within which we serve. This consistency has served as a bit of a test. I have found this true within both contexts sympathetic to the Reformed tradition and those quite cynical about it. The soul cries out for sovereign grace that the redeemed sinner knows he or she cannot live without, even when the intellect scoffs at its particularities.

I found in Edmund P. Clowney a model of the Christlikeness commanded in Genesis 17 both in his preaching content and in the life he lived, and this made listening to his lectures and sermons stunningly compelling. It was his pleasure in the Old Testament's wonderful disclosing of Christ that I found most compelling. I remember him taking a passage in which I saw little or nothing of my King; and then faithfully he opened it in a way consistent with the text, consistent with the larger story of the narrative, and consistent with all of Scripture—portraying Christ in such a way that I was at times breathless and unable to take notes in class or in worship when he was preaching. I remember going up to him one time after a lecture that had left the realms of academia and entered the glories of preaching. My notes literally degenerated from sentences and concepts connected with the progress of his exegesis, to simply writing, "Glory! Glory! Glory!" When I went up to Dr. Clowney, I simply said, "Please don't give us a test on the lecture today because I couldn't take notes. I was too busy worshipping in light of the Scripture." He simply smiled knowingly as if to say he, too, was equally blessed by the privilege of being taught by the Word of God that he had simply been permitted to expound before us.

I always sensed that Dr. Clowney saw himself as a privileged steward of the mysteries of God. He regularly seemed amazed that he too had been entrusted with the unspeakable glory of preaching, though he never felt worthy in himself to handle the Word of God. He modeled before me this posture: he knew he could not preach the Word without the help of grace through the Spirit's ministry. That overwhelming sense of privileged delight was evident in him and magnetic for me.

I suppose Dr. Clowney's love for the redemptive historic model of preaching is rather well known. But the man himself, whom such a vibrant grasp of truth produced, has perhaps influenced me more than the manner of exegesis and homiletics that he taught. Dr. Clowney was simultaneously one of the most brilliant and gifted men I have ever known, and one of the most thoroughly unimpressed with himself. He was simply swept off his feet by the wonder of his Savior and his salvation, and the meeting of those realities in his life made him a theaterplace for God's glory. I have met few people like him. He walked like his Master because he walked with his Master and talked of his Master with little or no attention to himself. When I was still quite cynical about the particularities of Reformed theology, I remember thinking, *If that man (meaning Ed Clowney) is what Reformed theology produces, then I want to understand it.* I listened to others in the Reformed tradition and watched them and got the impression that Reformed theology fostered becoming a "brain on a stick." I listened to still other proponents of Reformed thinking and got the impression that to be "Reformed" was to become a warrior with a weapon, or that it was erudition plus scholarship plus obscurity, wed to formality, which produced eccentricity. In Dr. Edmund P. Clowney, I saw that God's truth more fully understood would make someone more fully like Christ as one more fully understood his Person and work in the wonder of the preached Word of God.

One experience of note has been memorable to me through the years of my privilege of opening the Word of God. I remember standing in front of Dr. Clowney in an early preaching class. When the sermon was over, he gently asked me, "Where was my Savior?" My memory has likely edited the experience significantly. But what followed seemed to be an interminable silence on my part and on the part of the rest of the students in the room. The reality of my having opened the Word of the Savior, designed to disclose the Savior, and having not spoken of the Savior settled on us all. I could only stammer and stutter, and Dr. Clowney very kindly removed the obvious agonizing pressure of conviction that was cutting me to the quick and politely asked to speak with me privately. He then quickly invited the next student to stand and preach, and the moment passed. But when I spoke with him privately, he pressed home the

fact that I must never miss any occasion of preaching to proclaim the person of Jesus.

Often now when I enter a pulpit, I quietly ask, “Where is my Savior?”

I will be Ed Clowney’s debtor for the first several billion years of eternity for having shown me much of what it means to be a pastor and a preacher who is truly in the Reformed tradition.

The Scripture: Genesis 17:1–14¹

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, “I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.”

Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as a 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. The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.”

Then God said to Abraham, “As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. 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 from a foreigner—those who are not your offspring. Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”

1. Scripture citations in this sermon are from the NIV.

The Sermon

I was in India during one of the most stirring cross-cultural mission experiences I have ever known. While I was speaking in southern India to the General Conference of the St. Thomas Evangelical Church, the police arrived and vigorously opposed, in their native tongue, my preaching the gospel. Seeing that I was confused due to my linguistic ignorance, an Indian translator calmly explained to me that the police did not want me to continue. Fear immediately shot through me like electricity as I found myself confronted by official opposition to my carrying on ministry. Actually, “terror” seems a reasonable description of my emotional state. With that terror I sensed afresh the enormous gap between my spiritually fragile inner man and the remarkably high calling upon my life as Christ’s servant. My fear and his calling seemed separated by an unimaginably huge chasm.

This hardly seemed an appropriate moment to discuss options, but I awkwardly sought counsel from an Indian Christian near me. “What should I do?” I stammered.

He calmly counseled me in great contrast to my obvious abject terror. In a very matter-of-fact manner, he indicated that *his* Bible had a few verses in it that said to keep preaching when people told us to stop. Then, in the same matter-of-fact tone, he inquired whether or not those verses were in *my* Bible as well.

Needless to say, his gentle rebuke to my fear hit me like a brick bat across the bridge of my nose, and I began to cry. I realized, in my fear, that I was now standing where, for thousands of years, my forefathers and foremothers had stood when the authorities ordered them not to preach God’s truth. This brief mental connection with Christian history heightened my sense of the gap between my horribly fearful and weak condition and God’s incredibly high calling upon my life.

Now it was my turn to stand! Me? No, it couldn’t be! It was almost overwhelming. I began a familiar and vigorous internal argument with myself, and all within seconds:

“Who are *you* to preach in a place like this? *You’re afraid* to preach when you are told to stop . . . but you just can’t give up. . . . Who

are you to be a representative of Jesus to these brothers and sisters in India?"

"I can't do this! I need to stop! But I can't! I simply can't!"

"You bet you can't! What will people think?"

"Who cares, I don't want to go to jail."

"But what about trusting God?"

The gap I was sensing seemed almost to drip from my pores like perspiration. Surely, it was sadly obvious to my Indian brothers and sisters that all I had within me was a frightened, self-absorbed, broken little heart.

Apply my experience to us all because I believe my time in India merely illustrates a foundational and critical question that must be asked by all Christians: how can the living God advance his kingdom through weak and shattered little people like me and like you? Putting it another way: what possible resources does God impart to his church in order that his way and his wonder may advance, despite all the human frailty and failure so obviously present in us, even after we're redeemed?

A vulnerable acknowledgment of one's own sense of the enormity of the gap between our human condition and God's calling raises just such questions. However, it seems, at least to me, that we Christians avoid these questions by committing two errors.

First, we dodge the gap between God's high call and our frailty through false humility. We hide behind what is understood or portrayed as humility when we describe our condition as "far too broken and so terribly weak" and "too foolish or simple" to even enter into any courageous ministry, mercy, sacrifice, or evangelism. Certainly *we* could not serve believers and unbelievers so radically as to change the world. We imply or plainly state our excuse: "I am just too spiritually immature."

Frankly, this has less to do with humility than it does with lack of faith. It may, actually, have its root in unbelief in who God is and what God provides. But this error is so common that it has become accepted and even seen as respectable!

A *second* error of those of us who are already redeemed is a naiveté about sin. The seriousness of one's tragically fallen condition

is simply underestimated. When we commit this error as followers of Christ, we actually rely on our own hustle and human effort to live as God's people for long enough and in large enough numbers that we can ignore or demean others' dependence on the power of the Holy Spirit as "unreformed" or "mystical." Such a Christian experience is lived by a kind of teeth-gritting effort for as long as we can keep it up, until eventually we collapse in on ourselves. Functioning for days, weeks, months, or years as if we could possibly accomplish the calling that God has given us without his glorious intrusive grace, we busy ourselves with spiritual activity until the powerless exhaustion from overwork crushes us, our mates, and our families or colleagues. Moral and personal chaos often ensues.

The question looms before us again: how does God advance his kingdom with people as broken as we are, who serve him day in and day out? How does he advance his glorious work through sinners like us, redeemed yet so obviously flawed?

The answer is found in Genesis 17:1–14. There the gap is clearly portrayed, and God's provision for advancing his kingdom is even more gloriously declared. Moses places these two issues in stark contrast.

The Gap Portrayed

To see the gap portrayed, note that Genesis 16 closes with the "father of Israel," "the father of the faithful," Abraham himself, committing an *illegitimate* act built upon *illegitimate* thinking because of the acceptance of *illegitimate* cultural norms that have given rise to an *illegitimate* relationship that produces an *illegitimate* son. And all of this is to actually attempt to "do" God's will in accord with God's covenant. One might expect Genesis 17 to begin with God saying, "Are you kidding? Who do you think you are? You're fired! You betrayed me."

Instead, the calling of God on Abraham is freshly declared in Genesis 17. It is stunning because it seems that Moses, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, intentionally presented God's call to contrast with chapter 16. As one chapter ends with such sad and sinful circumstances, the next begins with a glorious calling. The thirteen year gap between chapters 16 and 17 certainly did not cause

God to forget that Abraham had sought to accomplish the will of God by basically sleeping with the kitchen help, if I may be blunt. Still, God commands him and entrusts him with the responsibility of covenant headship for the people of God. How can this be? How can a holy God use such a twisted servant and call him to such a high and holy task? The answer is found in four things that God provides to advance his kingdom despite the disservice of Abraham.

1. God provides peerless power to advance his cause.
2. God provides peerless transformation to perfect his servants.
3. God gives the always-transforming servant a universal and eternal purpose.
4. God provides a gospel-centered sign to keep the cross and the King vivid in our hearts and minds.

Genesis 17 is arguably the hinge pin of all ministry, for it is quoted ten times in the book of Hebrews, eight times in the book of Galatians, eight times in the book of Romans, and it is a main focus in Peter's sermon at Pentecost. Stephen even brings it up just prior to being stoned to death. Since it is a theological and missiological hinge pin upon which much of redemptive history turns, it should not be surprising that its application is not only for that one moment of time when Abraham walked the earth. It timelessly applies to the advance of God's kingdom itself in and through the lives of all followers of the living God for all time.

Before we examine God's four provisions in Genesis 17, we should note that for Abraham it has been over twenty years since God promised that Abram and Sarai would have a child. The delay itself must have been difficult. Don't we find God's delays enough grounds for our sinful selective disobedience, accompanied by our assumed impunity from guilt? We say, "God, you just are never on time! So I'm going on a little 'vacation' from obedience!" And we do so only because our schedule is different from God's.

Also, Abraham is no longer a young man. He was over 86 years of age as chapter 16 came to a close. Again, don't we rationalize regular extended "vacations" from passionate obedience by assuming, in our spiritual weariness, that our past faithfulness has "earned" our right

to coast for a little while, drop our guard, and just barely comply with God's commands? None of this is said to excuse Abraham, but it may cast light on some of the choices that he made. You and I have more in common with him than either he or we would want to admit.

Ask yourself whether the pressures that are upon you have heightened your own awareness of the gap between your human condition and God's calling, and thereby increased your desire to cry out for God's provision. Or, on the contrary, do you increase your accusing of the Lord, implying that your circumstances are really God's own fault and failure? Perhaps you, like me, are never quite so ruthlessly direct with the King about your rationalized sin. Still, search yourself and ask, "What pressures are there to which I yield and then rationalize disobedience and distorted thinking?"

God's Kingdom Plan Revealed

Now let's examine God's provision for advancing his kingdom through people like us, despite our deep corruption.

God Provides Peerless Power to Advance His Cause

Moses introduces the covenant with God's words, "I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers" (Gen. 17:2). Abram then responds in verse 3 by falling face down. God then says to him, "As for me, this is my covenant with you . . ."

God follows that statement with a series of twelve affirmative and definitive statements: "I will, so . . . you will . . ." again and again! There could well be an exclamation point after each declaration of God's promised power.

The sheer repetition is like a rhetorical jackhammer blasting away upon the hardened, self-reliant heart previously shown by Abraham and evident in all humanity. Although God makes the positive statement, "I will, so . . . you will . . .," twelve times, God could just as well have said it negatively, "You can't, you won't, you shouldn't, and you wouldn't." This is a declaration of sovereignty and a clear affirmation of God's utter power. It also makes me think of a baseball outfielder waving off the teammate soon to collide with him as both

reach for the pop fly, repeating a cry in the outfield heard even in the stands; “I got it! I got it! Mine! Mine!” God is saying exactly that to Abraham: “I got it! I got it!” He waves Abraham and you off! Did you hear him? Did you? Or are you still trying to make the catch on your own? Do you feel the chest-heaving exhaustion beginning to cripple your self-centered effort?

Let’s apply this more expansively from beyond the text. A quick summary of Scripture reveals that God often discloses the immensity of his peerless power for the sinners whom he has redeemed at the very moment that their corresponding poverty of human ability is most evident. Still, sadly, we choose self reliance and hustle! Yet God seems to time the disclosure of his provided power just in the nick of time.

One example of this paradox may be found as Stephen is about to be stoned in Acts 7. As the soon-to-be martyr nears the moment of unimaginable pain at the hands of unjust treatment, God tears open heaven and gives him a vision of heaven’s courtroom with Stephen’s Lord rising to his defense, to sustain his faith as he is crushed in utter weakness beneath stones thrown viciously by a crowd gone wild with rage. God tilts Stephen’s chin up as if to make him look at the *real and final* courtroom, the *right and accurate* judgment, and the *righteous and truly powerful* Judge rising in his behalf, lest he languish in a foolishly narrow view of life in all its horrible fallenness. God calls Stephen, like Abraham, to behold his peerless power in the midst of human sin.

Similarly, John the Baptist and Peter, James, and John, Jesus’ closest disciples, are the only four people in the New Testament to sensibly experience the Trinity. John the Baptist encounters each person of the Trinity at the baptism of Jesus. He sees the Son standing before him and beholds the descending dove, the theophanic appearance of the Holy Spirit, as he hears the Father’s voice: “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” Then, on the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter, James, and John likewise experience the Trinity. The Old Testament manifestation of the Holy Spirit, the *shekinah* glory-cloud, the pillar of fire and smoke, encompasses Jesus, the Son, who stands before them. And the Father speaks once again, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.

Listen to him!” Note that each of these men—John the Baptist, Peter, James, and John—would face their utter weakness and poverty as they were all horribly persecuted for their faith and (with the exception of John the Apostle) eventually martyred.

Think of it! John the Baptist would have his head removed for the maniacal pleasure of Herod. Understandably, John the Baptist would send to Jesus from his prison cell the question, “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?” (Luke 7:20). Surely his weakness loomed before him as he sent messengers to put such an inquiry before the Son of God!

James would be the first apostle to lay down his life for Jesus (Acts 12:2). History and legend admittedly combine, but it seems verified that later Peter was horribly martyred under Nero’s reign. All three of the apostles closest to Jesus would face the end of their lives in a hurricane force gale of injustice and physical and relational pain. Surely, they looked dead in the eyes at the depths of their human frailty. But the Triune God also reveals himself to them in glory, so each one is given a peerless vision of God in all his Trinitarian power and wonder. I suggest we find here this principle: *God advances his kingdom with weak servants by graciously disclosing his peerless power to sustain, keep, and move them.*

To illustrate the principle, think of the protective equipment worn by gymnasts as they practice floor exercises. Athletes must throw the weight of their body in rapid succession, flipping into cartwheels and handsprings and vaults. Without a securely worn protective harness and pulley system held by trained spotters, by which the gymnast can be lifted into the safety of mid-air should he or she fail in the exercise, practicing such events could literally result in serious injury or death. I know because I remember my brief high school participation in gymnastics. After months of practice, I was told by my gymnastics coach, Coach Cunningham, that we all had “graduated from” the safety harness and now would have to begin to practice floor exercise without it. Of course that’s the goal for a gymnast. But not me! The next day when gymnastics practice took place, I was definitely absent! I never went back again! You see, I knew that without the harness I would hurt myself, so I never returned. As the saying goes, “My mama didn’t raise no dummy!” I

didn't want to die! I had to have protective power or my courage to take risks would be gone!

Genesis 17 is God's promise to Abraham that he would *never, ever* remove the harness. God says to his broken servants like Abraham and all of us, "I will . . . I will . . . I will!" How much more spiritual courage, sacrificial risk, committed obedience, profound and vulnerable repentance would mark us if we actually applied such a promise of provision of peerless, kingdom advancing power? I think we'd shock ourselves and the watching world if we were "practicing Calvinists"! We are all "closet Arminians"! People like me, sympathetic to the Reformed position, are so often articulate in *describing* our position; but we fail in our *application* of its implications. My friends in India, of whom I spoke earlier, taught me that God's sovereignty ought to make me look a lot more like Mother Teresa in lifestyle choices. If I believed, really believed, that God never removes his harness, I believe I would be much more "conformed to the likeness of" Jesus himself (Rom. 8:29).

God Provides Peerless Transformation to Perfect His Servants

God transforms his people first in their *person* and then in their *purpose*.

Genesis 17:1, God's covenant disclosure, begins with a command, preceded by a weighty self-identification by God: "I am God Almighty; walk before me² and be blameless."³

This is a command for peerless transformation. "Blameless" is the English translation in the NIV for *tamim* in Hebrew. Various translated elsewhere "whole, complete, finished, not missing any essentials," this is a startling command. How can God give such a command to a man who for many previous years has shown himself to be anything but "*tamim*"—anything but blameless, whole, and complete? In fact, Abraham has shown himself to be person-

2. *Walk in front of* (like its parallel, "stand in front of") is well chosen. The phrase usually expresses the service or devotion of a faithful servant to his king, be the latter human (1 Kings 1:2; 10:8) or divine (Gen. 5:22, 24; 6:9).

3. *Blameless*: "This Hebrew word, *tāmim*, is used frequently in the sections of the Old Testament dealing with ritual procedure. It is imperative that the animal brought for sacrifice be one that is unblemished." Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 461.

ally and repeatedly *missing* faith, integrity, courage, consistency, and obedience.

God shows his answer to this problem in several ways.

First, Abraham has been commanded by one who has just identified himself as “God Almighty.” Let’s paraphrase God’s opening words: “Because I am who I am, all powerful, I command of you to do what you cannot do and to be what you cannot be. For I can and I will give to you that which you do not have so you will be *tamim*. You will be *tamim* because I command it.”

This can be likened to Jesus commanding Lazarus to “come forth” from the tomb, though Lazarus had been dead for days. Abraham has spiritual death oozing from almost every choice he’s made. His middle name, spiritually speaking, is often “Rigormortis.” He is and ever will be “*anti-tamim*” . . . *unless Someone else* has the ability to transform his person, to make him what he cannot be in himself.

This is where the gospel floods him with grace. The apostle Paul addresses this very issue and uses Abraham as his primary illustration when he argues for *imputed righteousness* provided by Almighty God, who is absolutely just and the perfect justifier when he leaves “sins committed beforehand” by people like Abraham “unpunished” and finally punishes Jesus fully for them in the atoning death of Calvary:

But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. (Rom. 3:21–27)

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had

something to boast about—but not before God. What does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” (Rom. 4:1–3)

Paul says it explicitly, though not using *tamim*, when he writes that Abraham was “credited” with righteousness—that is, accounted as *tamim*—by God Almighty. Without the gospel, God’s command to Abraham is an utter impossibility for a wretch like him—or you, or me. In fact, *any* command without gospel-given grace can never, ever be kept by a sinner, even a redeemed one.

Think about the grand plan of God in Eden. Pre-fall humans were designed to obey in the context and condition of perfect *tamim* with God. We have lost that “completeness” due to sin. But in Christ and in Christ alone, Abraham and you are *given tamim*. Through grace imputed to you once-for-all by the Father and through grace infused by the Spirit, you can and finally do *love* truth and actually start to *want* to sacrifice, and even sense a beginning *growth* toward real honor. We develop yieldedness and surrender to God’s kingdom cause, and all because of that imputed righteousness and the infused grace that follows from it. Soon, we find ourselves not merely admiring William Wilberforce, or Amy Carmichael, or John Paton, or Mother Teresa. We yearn with tearful passion to be like them.

I remember Professor John Frame looking me in the eyes at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia and saying to this young idealistic student, “You want to study Francis Schaeffer. But I want to help make you into another one like him.” As God imputes *tamim* to Abraham and us, the Spirit infuses *tamim* into us; and then, as Mr. Frame hoped, we are transformed. Unfortunately, this hope of Mr. Frame’s is far from being realized in me, but that’s not the point. God can do so if he pleases, and will do so in the end! That *is* the point!

That brings us to the second dimension of *tamim*: God transforms our *purpose*.

Genesis 17:5 reads, “No longer will you be called Abram [great father], your name will be Abraham [father of many nations]. . . .”⁴

4. Ibid.: “It is the first time that an individual’s name is changed” (464). Hamilton also observes: “We have noted above the shift (v. 1–8) from second singular to second plural . . . most of this section (v. 9–14) is cast in the plural, and the reason for this should be plain. The

Then God speaks of all Abraham's "descendants" and all the "generations" and all those "born in your household or bought with your money." His purpose is parental and familial, not unlike the purpose given to Adam in the garden before the fall into sin.

It is also reminiscent of Genesis 15:5, which reads, "He [God] took him outside and said, 'Look at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them. . . . So shall your offspring be.'" Abraham would now be re-defined by the sort of impact he would have upon others. Abraham was being told that he would reassume the responsibility imparted to Adam to be a blessing to the world by filling it with "God lovers." Hence in Genesis 12:2 God says, "You will be a blessing."

In essence, Abraham is being told he is no longer a "guest" on God's planet but joins God's great mission to advance his kingdom, and hence becomes a "host." Abraham, like Jesus himself, is not here to be served but to serve and to give his life for many. God is utterly redefining the Middle Eastern bedouin named Abram to make him a servant for the accomplishment of God's kingdom purposes. His name will be "Abraham." Five times he is told to be and to see himself as the "*father* of many nations."

One might conclude that the name change of Abram to "father of *many* nations" is a purely metaphoric adjustment of title and has no reference to any God-intended methodological approach to ministry that would be clearly familial, loving, and warm. But that position disregards the weight of redemptive history, which, when read as context for this name change, seems clearly to teach a rich, warm, and robust familial approach to all ministry associated with Abraham's descendants. So let's first examine a redemptive historic sketch of the familial fabric of God's kingdom advancement. Then, we'll apply its implications.

Redemptive Historic Summary on the Familial Character of God's Kingdom Program

Even *before creation* the Triune God, who would create image bearers called humans, already had an "eternal familial quality" as

prescriptions covered in these verses are to become legally incumbent upon all generations. God is speaking to those who are not yet born" (468).

the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as he would later reveal himself in the Bible. Familial relating, communicating, and loving within the Trinity precede creation, and in fact cause creation. If, then, God ever takes his name “father” and gives it to someone else, how important might you reckon *that* to be?

At creation Genesis begins with a family, Adam and Eve, commanding them to *love*, in order to fill the earth with God lovers as the Triune God’s image bearers. They will be physically “one” as their God is mysteriously and perfectly one, and children born from their union will love God and fill the earth . . . if sin and death have not intervened.

As history progresses the repeated genealogies of the Torah show the importance of family structure, naming in detail a host of otherwise unknown individuals. Noah is given the same familial command previously given to Adam and Eve. Now Noah hears it post-flood. He is to repopulate the world with God lovers in a familial way.

Within our study of Genesis 17, Abraham’s name is indicative of a familial fabric of this new kingdom, for he is not named “*leader of many nations*” or “*pastor of many nations.*” He is not called “*prophet, priest, or king of many nations,*” as important as these titles are. Abraham’s title is not ecclesiastical, civil, governmental, or professional. It is clearly familial.

The covenants God makes with his people progress through family ties from Abraham, to Isaac, then on to Jacob and his sons, and to the tribes and clans that they father. Joseph rescues his brothers in familial faithfulness and affection, despite their bizarre familial trespass against him. Moses is commanded to arrange the tent city of nomadic Israel in the wilderness by tribes, which are merely big families. Joshua enters the land and divides it up familially according to tribes. The family theme continues in the Psalms and the Prophets:

Psalm 68:4–6 reads: “His name is the LORD. . . . A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows. . . . God sets the lonely in families. . . .” *Isaiah 66:13* records God’s poignant reassurance to errant Israel: “As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you. . . .”

Hosea the prophet points us to God's familial way of redeeming a people at great personal loss, even when the one whom Hosea loves is reprehensible, like the Lord's wandering wife, Israel.

In the New Testament Jesus is revealed to us as our "older brother" and the "first born among many brothers," who is not ashamed to call us "brothers" and who makes us "co-heirs with him" by "adoption" into a "new family." He will conclude his redemptive restorative work with a familial "wedding feast" to which we are invited and for which we are being prepared as a "bride." James records in his epistle that true religion is "to look after widows and orphans in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (James 1:27). True religion has a familial focus to restore broken families. Officers in the New Testament church are required not so much to pass certain seminary courses, but rather to love and care for their families (1 Timothy 3; Titus 1).

Jesus prays that the Trinitarian familial love among the persons of the Godhead, specifically between the Father and the Son, would be experientially normative among us, so we are to be as Jesus prayed: "one, Father, as you are in me and I am in you. . . . May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (John 17:21–23). Jesus wants the love the Father has for the Son to be in us (v. 26).

Paul says it perhaps most directly as he connects God's familial care to ours in Ephesians 5:1–2: "Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us. . . ."

Now, let's apply. The sheer weight of redemptive historic momentum shown in this brief summary casts light on Abraham's new name by giving context from a much larger picture. We simply must conclude that God is saying, "My kingdom will advance with familial treatment of people within and even outside the covenant community." Cold, sterile, professional, antiseptic, task focused, relationally distant, personally unconcerned ministry practice is inherently forbidden and contradicts the very personality of the Triune God!

This kingdom is to pulse with familial affection, sacrifice, and relational involvement that should find no human cultural peer at any point in history, or in any place on planet Earth. There is to be

only one community where creatures can love like the Creator: the kingdom of God.

Unreconciled, bitter, or faction-filled believers do nothing less than lie about the King and his kingdom before they've said a word! More pointedly, our relational dissonance or distance *models heresy*, though our words may be utterly orthodox.

Dr. Cornelius Van Til once stated in a lecture I attended at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, "All truth is the externalization of the personality of the Trinity." I was so struck by those words that I could not take notes for the remainder of the class. His brilliant presuppositional statement is reflected in the renaming of Abraham. God, *who is the Father*, is renaming *a father* to carry out his kingdom *family* agenda in a *familial* way because every family reflects the parent. This "family" has no less than God himself as our Father. Glory be to God on high! How dare we act in contradiction to his character and think it acceptable?

Time and time again this familial approach for world transformation is magnified in the Word of God. This is exemplified by the apostle Paul in Romans 9:3 as he calls the unbelieving race of Israel, to which he is seeking to proclaim the gospel, his "brothers." Paul says, "I wish that I myself were cut off from Christ for the sake of *my brothers*, those of my own race." The apostle does not use this word "brothers" loosely. He appears to be adopting the familial approach to world transformation delineated in the Abrahamic covenant and applying it even to some people who want to kill him. Simply put, Paul is implying with this language that, if there is not a deep and abiding love for those served in mission, then we are not doing ministry in accord with the prescription laid out before Abraham by the living God in Genesis 17.

The apostle Paul again exemplifies this kind of familial care for his flock when he describes himself in 1 Thessalonians 2:7–8: "We were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us." He is even more pointedly familial in verse 17, when he writes about the separation from Thessalonica as follows: "But, brothers, when we were *torn away* from you for a short

time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you.” The words “torn away” are a translation of one word, *aporphanizō*. At its heart is the Greek word *orphan*, which is the source of our English word for a child who has lost parents. It calls to mind the media pictures of parents being separated from a child by some unjust court order requiring that the child be wrenched from his loving parents’ hands while they reach yearningly for the child, screaming over the separation. This is the picture Paul paints of leaving the Thessalonian church. So God advances his kingdom with people who have been designed to address the world with a familial-like love that has no peer.

Puritan history exemplifies this familial approach to ministry. In the 1780 collection of the letters from John Newton originally entitled *Voice of the Heart: Cardiphonia*, there is a biographical sketch in which the Rev. R. Cecil frankly assesses Newton’s weaknesses as a preacher:

With respect to his ministry, he appeared, perhaps, to least advantage in the pulpit, as he did not generally aim at accuracy in the composition of his sermons, nor at any address in the delivery of them. His utterance was far from clear, and his attitude ungraceful.⁵

Newton’s biographer is quick to add, however:

He possessed, however, so much affection for his people, and zeal for their best interests, that the defect of his manner was of little consideration with his constant hearers. At the same time, his capacity, and habit of entering into their trials and experience, gave the highest interest to his ministry among them. . . . The *parent-like tenderness and affection* which accompanied his instruction made them prefer him to preachers who, on other accounts, were much more generally popular. . . . His ministerial visits were exemplary. I do not recollect one, though favored with many, in which his general infor-

5. R. Cecil, “Memoirs of the Rev. John Newton,” in *The Works of the Rev. John Newton to Which Are Prefixed Memoirs of His Life by the Rev. R. Cecil, A.M.* (Thomas Nelson & Peter Brown: Edinburgh, 1827), 68. Also cited in John Newton, *Voice of the Heart: Cardiphonia* (repr., Chicago: Moody, 1950), 18. Previous editions published under the title *Cardiphonia*, various publishers.

mation and lively genius did not communicate instruction, and his affectionate and condescending sympathy did not leave comfort.⁶

In other words, John Newton ministered in a familial way to his flock. John Newton himself commented on his manner of gently and lovingly ministering to people even from the pulpit, relative to his peers: “Perhaps it is better to feed our people like chickens, a little and often, than to cram them like turkeys, till they cannot hold one gobbet more.”⁷

How this approach might well temper our pulpits and blogs and lectures as we expound and apply the Word of God in the Father’s church! The familial purpose should be evident in all we do!

O Jesus, forgive our antiseptic professionalism and scholastic sterility!

God Gives the Always-Transforming Servant a Universal and Eternal Purpose

Abraham is not only redefined by his impact on others and commanded to do so in a familial way; he is to do so without accepting any cultural, racial, linguistic, or social barrier whatsoever. The impact that God’s kingdom advance is to have upon the world is universal. It is in the DNA of God’s kingdom people to be *omnicultural*.

In Genesis 17:4, we read that Abraham is to be “the father of *many nations*.” This is repeated in verse 6, where he is told, “I will make *nations of you*.” Hence, he is to be ministering in a multicultural manner, to say the very least. But in Genesis 12:3 God told Abraham, “*all peoples on earth will be blessed through you*.” We see Abraham’s calling as not only multicultural, but it is *omnicultural*. For Abraham to live in a parochial, self-absorbed, monocultural manner would betray the transforming work of God’s advancing kingdom. Every human and sin-made barrier must fall before God’s advancing kingdom. Babel’s dispersal will be undone by God’s grand reversal.

This means that the late missiology professor of Westminster Seminary, Dr. Harvey Conn, was right when he said, “The kingdom of God is not uniform, but unified.” Cults are uniform, but the

6. Cecil, “Memoirs,” 68 (emphasis added).

7. Newton, *Voice of the Heart*, 21.

kingdom is unified. This multinational view is so prominent, that when God speaks in Genesis 25:23 about the children inside of the beloved Rebekah's womb, he does not say there are two children within her. He says, "Two *nations* are in your womb."

This omnicultural ministry, empowered by God, is also *eternal*. Genesis 17:7 calls this promise of such empowering grace from God to love and serve every nation "an *everlasting* covenant." Verse 8 promises "everlasting" placement on the earth. Verse 13 identifies the sign of this promise as "everlasting." There is therefore, no "plan B," no exceptions, no options or alternatives . . . now or ever.

What a privilege! What an honor it is to be placed into the longest standing, most multilingual, multinational, multiracial, multicultural organization in the history of the cosmos, the kingdom of God! This kingdom will be among God's tools to heal the cosmos, and you and I are placed in it! This alone should thrill us and motivate us by glorious privilege to passionate obedience and service.

This provision of God means that the slightest hint of racism is hereby condemned as abject heresy among God's people. Monocultural or single race supremacy of any kind is an aberration. Cultural elitism is a contradiction of our kingdom calling, both then and now, because God's people are to participate in a kingdom that is universal, and this intent of God is eternal.

When God's people have been gripped by this thrust of God's advancing kingdom, they have often been lonely voices among the overt and covert cultural racists of their moment in history. In the 1800s the Scottish Presbyterian missionary, John G. Paton, exemplified this commitment to God's omnicultural kingdom, standing all but alone amidst the culturally self-impressed of his age. As he both went to and returned from the ministry to the New Hebrides and their cannibalistic cultures, he received mixed response and even rejection among his own race and denomination for his care for "brutes." When he traveled to Australia for prayer support and fund-raising, he found church members who doubted that aboriginal tribes' people even had souls. Thankfully, in a visit to England he would find a Baptist brother and sister named Reverend and Mrs.

Charles H. Spurgeon, who would support him when some closer to him in theological persuasion would not!⁸

Reverend Paton wrote:

A book once fell into my hands, entitled, “Sermons on Public Subjects,” by Charles Kingsley. I knew him to be a man greatly gifted and greatly beloved; and hence my positive distress on reading from the eighth sermon, page 234, “On the Fall,” the following awful words: “The Black People of Australia, exactly the same race as the African Negro, cannot take in the Gospel. . . . All attempts to bring them to a knowledge of the true God have as yet failed utterly. . . . Poor brutes in human shape . . . they must perish off the face of the earth like brute beasts.” I will not blame this great preacher for boldly uttering and publishing what multitudes of others show by their conduct that they believe, but dare not say so.⁹

Paton ministered in utter contrast to these prejudices in such passion and in such deep commitment to the universal nature of God’s kingdom advancement that when he left Australia he could write:

At my farewell meeting in Melbourne, Sir Henry Barkley presiding, I pleaded that the Colony should put forth greater efforts to give the Gospel to the Aborigines: I showed the idols which I had discovered amongst them; I read Nora’s letters; and I may, without presumptions, say, the “brute-in-human-shape” theory has been pretty effectually buried ever since.¹⁰

May Paton’s confidence be found true of us. Would that we were changed by the Abrahamic covenant and never saw another human as a “brute-in-human-shape”!

Social statisticians estimate that the North American Anglo citizens will be the racial minority within twenty to fifty years, conservatively speaking. God is bringing the nations to North America. The sovereign placement of God’s people in an omnicultural kingdom ought to thrill us with the prospect of our cities, our neighborhoods,

8. John G. Paton, *Missionary Patriarch: The True Story of John G. Paton, Evangelist for Jesus Christ to the South Sea Cannibals* (1891; repr. Vision Forum: San Antonio, 2002), 434–35.

9. *Ibid.*, 263–64.

10. *Ibid.*, 275.

and our churches going through cultural shifts. As Christians, we should be the first at the door to welcome our neighbors who look, dress, speak, and act so differently from us. We should be the first to flex, serve, respect, welcome, and “love our neighbors as ourselves,” like a family.

However, with all that God has provided, outlined thus far in Genesis 17, we often fail miserably. We live frightened, self-absorbed, culturally sequestered little (*very* little) lives. We do not live “large,” which seems to be the call of the Abrahamic covenant!

“God, I’m a failure! God, we are failures! Help me!”

He does! He does! He does help us!

***God Provides a Gospel-Centered Sign to Keep the Cross
and the King Vivid in Our Hearts and Minds***

As a groom places a “sign of covenant” and love on his bride’s finger, so God gives a gospel-driven, christocentric sign to remind his bride that he will pay the price necessary for all of her failings, her sins, her false starts and inexcusable stops. Hence he commands circumcision as the sign of the covenant. The text reads in Genesis 17:9, “As for you, you must keep my covenant. . . .”¹¹ Then verses 10 and 11, “This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you.”

How stunning this is when you see it in context! After twelve “I will . . . you will” statements, God’s *primary requirement* of Abraham is to bear the sign of *God’s faithfulness* to the covenant, not Abraham’s faithfulness. His role is to point himself and his family and everyone in the kingdom to the covenant faithfulness of God. His role is to bear the sign that points away from *his* ability and toward *God’s* ability to deal somehow with our sin. Abraham knew of this dealing with sin in such a limited way, through the foreshadowing that he glimpsed in the sign of circumcision. You and I, however,

11. Hamilton, *Genesis*, 468, comments on verse 9: “*For your part*. The emphatic pronoun *’attā* puts the spotlight on Abraham. After a series of “I will’s” by God, Abraham becomes the subject of the verb, instead of an object.”

know of this so much better, for we know the truths of salvation to which the sign points.

But for now, note that this sign places Abraham in a position much like the transportation department worker who stands on a road under repair, holding a sign that points *away* from the workers as they wave drivers off, a sign that points *to* where drivers should direct their attention. Abraham similarly is to direct attention *away* from humans *to* God's faithfulness. What's the direction of your life's signage? Do you attract people's attention to you or to Jesus? Do you take center stage in your ministry, or do you gladly step aside as God's power is seen elsewhere: in other people, in other elders, in other staff? Your ministry and life point somewhere! Dare to ask yourself, "To whom does my life point?"

The sign itself is shocking!¹² I think we must admit it. Though culturally common then, still circumcision is stunning. I suspect that I might have responded to God by saying, "What! Did you say that the sign of the covenant is circumcision? Excuse me, but that seems a bit strange. Perhaps I can understand that you want to remind me that there will be no forgiveness for my sins without the shedding of blood, but please prick my *finger* or my *ear lobe* or perhaps my *heel*. Why such a sign? Why *there*? This is a bit odd!"

No, on the contrary: rather than odd, it is supremely brilliant and pointedly vivid!

To explain this, we must refer to Colossians 2:11 and the following verses that identify the *cross of Jesus Christ* as "a circumcision [not] done by the hands of men." So, connect the dots! We infer that God is saying in Genesis 17 by this sign that no God-ordered ministry will be done, or can be done, without remembering the cross. He seems to be telling us:

1. We must remember the cross so vividly . . . it is even scarred into the flesh. The law was merely nailed to doorposts or woven into hair and head garments.¹³ But the gospel is "cut" deeply into our person.

12. *Ibid.*, 470–71.

13. *Ibid.*, 473–74.

2. We must remember the cross in a place (the location of the sign) in which we will not often think of spirituality and theology and truth and God.
3. During our moments of sexual intimacy with our spouse, we should even be mindful of the cross.
4. We must remember the cross at the moment a child is conceived.
5. We must remember the cross every time we change a diaper.
6. We must be “cross-eyed” as we look at all children and every marriage and experience of human love and physical intimacy and passionate sexuality and family.
7. Basically, we should only be able to look at *all of life* “cross-eyed.”

I have personally evaluated my grasp of God’s intent with this sign by asking all three of my children, who are now grown, to leave the room on one evening during family devotions when they were quite young. I invited them back into the room one at a time so none of them could hear their siblings as I asked them a single question; “What is the most important truth that I have taught you as your father?” My eldest son said to me, “Always do the right thing!” My younger son said, “Always keep the rules and do your best.” But my youngest child, my daughter, then in preschool, simply said, “Jesus loves me.” I looked at my wife and said in sorrow, “Great! I’ve raised two Pharisees and one Christian.” Although in many ways that is an oversimplification, there is great truth in it. It is an oversimplification because all three of my children have become believers in Jesus Christ. Thanks be to the Sovereign King of grace and glory!

But the truth of this statement is measured by this: The emphasis in raising my first two children was far more upon our rule-keeping than upon the Savior reigning. It was far more upon obedience than it was upon delight in a sovereign, electing salvation. It was far more upon externals than it was upon internals. It was far more upon acting so that I would respond to them favorably than on their believing so that faith would immensely deepen them in obedience. It took me three children before I became more faithful to God’s covenant

and its sign in the way that I saw family and marriage and parenting. How about you, Dad or Mom? Are you “cross-eyed”?

Failures like us are called and commissioned because the cross is sufficient. Remember! Remember! That’s the reason for this sign. God will advance his kingdom as the gospel is made clear for the forgiveness of sins to the sinner and the magnification of Christ’s work is made vivid to the broken. We are to constantly think of the perfection of saints by imputed righteousness, or we’ll give up. Even in physical places where most folks don’t consider Christ at all. We must remember the gospel! Then the self-reliant human heart will beat out a rhythm that stops being utterly contradictory to sovereign, electing grace. That’s what circumcision was to teach. If we as failed servants are covered by grace, we should be the biggest, fastest, deepest repenters the world has ever seen.

Conclusion

There is peerless privilege to be savored by us who have been so graciously rescued, when these ways of God’s advancing his kingdom are graciously given us. It is much like purchasing tickets for your very favorite musical performance with a favorite artist. Perhaps it is a classic, Celtic, folk, jazz, or bluegrass concert. No matter. You have invested a significant amount of money, and you’re still only in the “nosebleed seats” in the third balcony. Imagine, for the sake of illustration, in the midst of the concert, the performer you so enjoy and have finally come to see in person addresses the audience just before the intermission with the following words: “Is the following person here?” and then the artist says *your name*. Just imagine the shock and even terror that might course through your heart and mind, having heard your name coming from his or her lips in that massive auditorium. This would probably be paralyzing. But then imagine that the performer whom you so deeply love and profoundly respect says the following: “I know you’re here. I know you bought a ticket. I made sure you got that ticket.” A spotlight begins to sweep through the entire audience until it finally locates you sitting in the balcony. Your sense of embarrassment is now almost intolerable, and then the performer who has captured your heart and imagination for so many years affectionately says these

words to you: "There you are. I am so glad I found you. I would like to invite you to come down onto the stage to play and sing this next song with me!" Can you even imagine the swirling sense of terror, privilege, and joy that would course through you?

May I tell you something even more marvelous that has happened? The living God has turned to you, Christian, weak and broken sinner that you are, and called upon you to sing the music of the gospel before the entire world. His electing grace has sovereignly found you and made you his own; and he has now commanded you to sing a "life music" that is familial and universal, unstopped by racial or social barriers, a melody that is driven by a gospel attention that is life-constraining. He wants you to play his song before the world. Do you sense the privilege? You see, you and I will never play the music of his kingdom any better than a middle school band member plays Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*. Have you ever listened to middle-schoolers play Beethoven? Someone has said wisely, "It's music only a father could love."

The miracle is, the Father *does* love the music that you sing, and he will actually change the world when people hear you singing the song. He will make sure they hear his message in your song. Welcome to the "band," fellow follower of the Most High God! Take your place in his orchestra with a fresh sense of his full provision, and play with pleasure!