

**The Sign of the Covenant**  
By the Rev. Eric H. Carswell  
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This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your  
descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised. *Genesis*  
17:10

This is one of the stories in the Lord's Word that could easily cause skeptical people to shake their head about its nature as Divine revelation. Why would God choose this particular symbol as a key sign of His sacred covenant with Abram and his descendants? Why would God choose something to be applied to just the males?

If you want to understand what the Lord has revealed in His Word, it is important to understand that He always is speaking both to a particular people at a particular time and also speaking for all people in all time. One of the remarkable assertions of New Church doctrine is that the fate of the human race depends on there always being a Church on earth that connects us all to the angels of heaven. In this context, "Church" does not mean a building or a human organization. It refers to a group of people who are trying to learn about God and His will and follow it. The number of people who form this Church and provide this connection with heaven need not be large. If that connection were ever lost, all human beings would lose the guidance and spiritual life that comes through the angels.

The New Church asserts that the Lord has seen to it that a Church always exists to provide this connection. The early stories of Genesis, Adam and Eve, Noah and the Flood, the tower of Babel, all describe through symbolic language qualities and events in the earliest of those churches. Sadly, these stories describe a descent from a Church established in an initial "golden age" to ones that were more and more corrupt. Eventually, we have been told, the human race got to a point that no genuine Church of the Lord could be established and yet it was not yet time for the Lord Himself to be born into the world and to establish a distinctly new and truly spiritual church. So it was necessary for the Lord to set up a Church of people who acted in a way that the simplest of angels would see as being a Church. The ancient Israelites were given forms of worship, such as animal sacrifices, that made sense to them, but could also, when translated symbolically, give an image of faith and charity. But because of the limitations of the group of people the Lord was talking to, often what He said, understood on its most literal level, was not what the Lord might otherwise have chosen have say. Consider the following ideas from the teachings for the New Church:

[T]he Word would have been different if it had been written among a different people, or if that people had not been such as it was. For the literal meaning the Word treats of that people, because the Word was written among them, as is plain from both the historic and the prophetic parts of the Word, and that people was . . . at heart idolatrous; and yet in order that the internal and the external sense might agree together, that people had to be praised, and to be called the people of God, a holy nation, a peculiar possession; consequently the simple, who were to be instructed by the external or literal meaning of the Word, had to believe that that nation was such as it is called; as also that nation itself believed, and as also believe very many of the Christian world at this day. Moreover, also many things are present in the external sense of the Word, and make it, that were permitted them on account of the hardness of their hearts. *Arcana Caelestia* 10453:3

A following passage adds:

[The following are] the ways in which the outward or literal sense was changed on account of that nation. . . On account of that nation altars, burnt offerings, sacrifices, grain and drink offerings were commanded, and therefore are referred to in both the historical and the prophetic parts of the Word as the holiest things of worship. But they were in fact no more than concessions made to that nation. *Arcana Caelestia* 10603:3

In this context we can perhaps recognize that the sign of the covenant the Lord gave Abram was adapted to his state of mind, but in a wonderful way could also symbolize something truly spiritual and universal. It is this quality that we would most want to focus on.

This sermon continues a series on the saga of Abram's life as recorded in Genesis. Earlier sermons spoke of how each event from the Lord's first appearance to Abram far from the land of Canaan on through the birth of his first son, Ishmael, describe, on a deeper level, the spiritual journey each of us must follow if we are to grow to be the human beings the Lord wants us to be. The earlier stories describe all the ways that a person's heart and mind are prepared to the point that adult concepts of truth and good can exist within that person's mind. The birth of Ishmael represents the faculty of the adult mind that is capable of understanding these concepts.

But the Lord isn't so interested in what we know, but rather what we care about and do. The Lord has created us such that we can mature into an adult state in which we are capable of understanding some of what He wants for us. This understanding is given to us in a way that it feels like the thoughts and concepts are our own. Through them we can freely choose to follow the Lord or not.

In order to freely follow the Lord each of us needs to battle against some things that stand in the way. So we are told:

Circumcision . . . meant nothing else than the removal and rejection of those elements which stand in the way of and defile heavenly love, namely evil desires, especially those of self-love, and falsities resulting from those desires. (*Arcana Caelestia* 2039:1)

With any external action that we can do, the Lord does not focus on the act alone, but rather on what is in our hearts and minds. This is clearly and powerfully spoken of in the following sentence.

That circumcision is no more than the sign of a covenant or of conjunction becomes quite clear from the fact that circumcising the foreskin counts for absolutely nothing if unaccompanied by circumcision of the heart; and that purification from those filthy loves is what circumcision of the heart means. (*Arcana Caelestia* 2039:2)

The Lord allowed this sign of the covenant because of what it can correspond to or symbolize. The angels of heaven think of this sign in terms of its relationship to the marriage of good loves and true ideas in living a good and useful life that the Lord wants for us all. (cf. *Arcana Caelestia* 2039:1) It commanded of every male not because females don't have to face these spiritual battles, but rather from the symbolism of male in the Word as truth. This is explained in this way:

The reason why the word "male", meaning the truth of faith, is used is that nobody can be purified from those filthy loves except people who are governed by truth. From truth they

recognize what is pure or impure, and what is holy or unholy. Until they possess such knowledge there are no channels into which and through which heavenly love flowing in constantly from the Lord is able to operate, for it cannot be received except within truths. It is by means of concepts of truth therefore that people are reformed and regenerated, but this does not take place before they have been endowed with them. (*Arcana Caelestia* 2046)

We cannot make spiritual progress unless we are willing to acknowledge that there are patterns in our thinking and motivation that are dangerous to us, to those around us, and to the useful things we hope to accomplish in our lives. These patterns are not something that a child is capable of seeing for him or herself. It takes an adult mind to be able to recognize them. In some states of mind they are elusive or disguised as described in the following passage:

People who are immersed in self-love and love of the world are quite incapable of believing that they are under the influence of such filthy and unclean loves as in fact they are. Indeed a certain pleasure and delight exists which coaxes, encourages, and allures, and causes them to love that life, to prefer it to every other kind of life, and so to imagine that there is nothing bad about it at all. For whatever encourages anyone's love and resulting life is considered to be good. For this reason also the rational agrees to and produces confirmatory false ideas which lead to blindness so great that people see nothing at all of what heavenly love is. And if they did see it they would in their hearts say that it was something wretched, or not really anything at all, or something in the nature of a delusion which takes possession of the mind as it does in sickness. (*Arcana Caelestia* 2045:1)

Fortunately, we are not constantly immersed in this dark state of mind. The Lord can give us times of reflection and perspective. He can help us recognize the blindness of some of our patterns of thought, word, and action. He can inspire us to consciously monitor our future behavior to eliminate or limit those patterns. Many times each day, the Lord calls us to use what we've learned to change our habits. He wants each of us to become a different person from what we've been in the past. It is our job to cooperate with Him in this effort. We can daily pray, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, And renew a steadfast spirit within me." (*Psalms* 51:10) And many times each day we can work to recognize and remove anything that stands in the way.

A wonderful part of the story of Abram's life is that as soon as the covenant of circumcision was commanded two things also happened. The Lord changed both Abram's and Sarai's names adding an "h" from His own Divine name, "Yehowah." This change is a symbol of a deeper presence of the Lord with a person who has reached this stage of spiritual development. The second thing that happened was that the Lord also promised Abraham a son by his beloved wife Sarah. This son, Isaac, represents the new spiritual life that we can receive as our own. It is a far wiser pattern of thinking and caring than we could possibly have at the beginning of our adult life. It brings much joy, peace, and usefulness. It is this new life that the Lord is leading all of us to receive, to the extent that we are willing to be led. May we recognize our role in this journey. May we turn to the Lord in His Word to learn what we are to do and not do; what we are to think and not think; what we are to love and not love. May we consciously use that knowledge, with a strong and continuing prayer for the Lord's help, to consider who we have been and what we would want to do differently in the future. AMEN.

Lessons: Genesis 17:1-14, John 13:34-35, *Arcana Caelestia* 2041

### **Genesis 17:1-14**

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I *am* Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless. And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly." Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying: "As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God." And God said to Abraham: "As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This *is* My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised; and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male child in your generations, he who is born in your house or bought with money from any foreigner who is not your descendant. He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant."

### **John 13:34-35**

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

### ***Arcana Caelestia* 2041**

*"You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin"* means the removal of self-love and love of the world. This is clear from the representation and the meaning of 'circumcision' as purification from filthy loves.

There are two loves so-called, and their desires, which obstruct the influx of heavenly love from the Lord. For when these reign in the interior self and in the external self and take possession there they either reject or they stifle, and also degrade and defile, heavenly love flowing in, for they are absolutely contrary to heavenly love. To the extent they are removed however, heavenly love flowing in from the Lord starts to make its appearance, and in fact starts to dawn in our interior self; and to that extent we start to notice first that we are under the influence of evil and falsity, then that we are under the influence of what is impure and filthy, and lastly that this has been our sense of our own self.

It is with those who are being regenerated that those loves are removed. That removal may also be recognized from what goes on in those who are not regenerate when the desires belonging to those loves become quiescent, as happens sometimes when they are engaging in meditation on holy things or when they are languishing - as is the case with them in times of misfortune, sickness, and disease, and above all when they are about to die. At these times, since bodily and worldly interests have grown languid and are so to speak dead, such persons become aware of something of heavenly light and of the comfort brought by this. But with these it is not a removal of those desires, only a languishing, for the moment that these people return to their previous state they sink back into those desires.

It should be realized that with each person heavenly love from the Lord is flowing in constantly, and that nothing else stands in the way, obstructs, or prevents the reception of it than the desires belonging to those loves, and the falsities resulting from them.