

“CHILDREN OF THE COVENANT”

For the next three weeks, we will be taking a break from our sermon series on the Gospel of Mark in order to have a short series on the topic of “Child Discipleship.” I thought this would be especially appropriate at this time, because we will be implementing our new Sunday School plan in just a few weeks. And I want to say from the outset that this is not a subject that only concerns those of us who still have children at home. The spiritual nurture of the church’s children is a matter of the utmost importance for the future vitality of the church, something with which every Christian should be concerned. While it is true that the primary responsibility for a child’s nurture rests upon the shoulders of his or her parents, there is also a sense in which every member of the church needs to take part in this all-important task. At the very least, every one of us needs to make it a point to be in regular prayer for our church’s children and their parents, and we all need to strive to set a godly example for our youth by our own commitment and service to Christ.

Because we all have a role to play in the discipleship of the church’s children, it is important that we have a sound grasp of what the Bible says about children who are born into the church. And that is the first thing: the Bible teaches that children born to at least one Christian parent are in fact born into the church, born into the covenant community. They are members by birth. And for this reason, the promises and responsibilities of the

covenant are addressed to them from the time of their birth. This does not mean that every child born into a Christian home is automatically regenerate. But it does mean that the question of whether they are bound by the terms of the covenant - the covenant that God set up with his church in Jesus Christ, sometimes referred to as the covenant of grace - that question is not theirs to decide. God has already made the decision for them by placing them in a Christian family.

This idea is sometimes referred to as the doctrine of covenant succession, a doctrine defined and defended in an important article by Pastor Robert Rayburn, published about a decade ago in our denominational seminary's theological journal. ["The Presbyterian Doctrines of Covenant Children, Covenant Nurture, and Covenant Succession", *Presbyterian*, 22.2 (1996); available online at <http://www.faithtacoma.org/doctrine/covenant.aspx>] In that article, Rayburn defines 'covenant succession' as "the purpose of God that his saving grace should run in the lines of generations." [167] The same idea is expressed in the brief doctrinal statement published by our denomination, where one of its affirmations reads: "We believe that God is gracious and faithful to His people not simply as individuals but as families in successive generations according to His covenant promises." In other words, we believe that it is God's purpose that he should be God to us and to our children after us. Our children are participants in the covenant by virtue of their birth.

What is the biblical basis for this belief? While a number of texts could be mentioned, there is probably no better place to begin than the passage before us this morning:

Genesis 17:7. In this passage, God ratifies, or confirms, the covenant that he had already set up with Abraham (see Gen. 12:1-3; 15:1-21). And as he does so, he says that this covenant is not only with Abraham, but with Abraham's offspring as well. He will be God to Abraham and to Abraham's offspring after him. Abraham's children would be participants in the covenant by virtue of their birth. This is why God instructed Abraham to place the sign of the covenant, circumcision, upon his children. God would not have done this unless Abraham's children were partakers in what was signified by circumcision.

It will not do to argue, as many Baptists do, that God's covenant with Abraham mainly had to do with temporal promises, such as land and descendants. To be sure, those things were promised to Abraham. But there is no getting around the fact that the heart of the covenant with Abraham is spiritual in nature. God promises to be Abraham's God and to be the God of his offspring after him. It doesn't get any more spiritual than that.

And, as if that were not enough, we have Paul's statement in Romans 4:11 that Abraham "received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith."

Paul says that circumcision was a sign of the gospel, a sign of faith. Yet God commanded Abraham to place that sign upon eight-day-old infants, who were incapable of making a

profession of faith. Why? Because he promised to be their God, and this made them participants in the covenant from birth. Calvin laid emphasis upon this in his response to those who argued that the church should not baptize infants because they are incapable of making a profession of faith. He wrote,

“These darts are aimed more at God than at us. For it is very clear from many testimonies of Scripture that circumcision was also a sign of repentance. Then Paul calls it the seal of the righteousness of faith. For although infants, at the very moment they were circumcised, did not comprehend with their understanding what that sign meant, they were truly circumcised to the mortification of their corrupt and defiled nature, a mortification that they would afterward practice in mature years. To sum up, this objection can be solved without difficulty: infants are baptized into future repentance and faith, and even though these have not yet been formed in them, the seed of both lies hidden within them by the secret working of the Spirit.” [*Institutes*, 4.16.20]

If Calvin’s words make you feel a little uncomfortable, then you are not alone. The idea that a person can have a “seed of faith” placed within them in infancy is foreign to most contemporary evangelicals - even though there is at least one explicit New Testament example of it in John the Baptist, not to mention the Psalms that speak of trusting in the

Lord from birth. One of the main reasons why Calvin's statement sounds strange to us is the extent to which we have been influenced by revivalism. Revivalism is an approach to the Christian life that places great emphasis upon the need for every Christian to undergo a conscious conversion experience. It pressures every Christian to be able to identify a moment in their lives when they made a decision to place their trust in Jesus Christ. It is an idea that is so pervasive that most evangelicals would find it very troubling to have it called into question.

Now it is certainly true that some people undergo this sort of experience. We see it in the conversions of the Apostle Paul, Augustine, John Wesley, and many others. But to say that this is the normative Christian experience is simply not true. There have been, and there continue to be, many faithful followers of Jesus Christ who cannot recall a time when they did not believe the gospel. There is absolutely nothing wrong with that. In fact, it is perfectly consistent with what God reveals in his Word about how he builds his covenant community. Over and over again, the Bible says that it is God's purpose to use believing families to produce believing children.

We see this in Genesis 18:19, where God says that he chose Abraham "that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him."

We see it in Psalm 112:2, where it says that the offspring of the man who fears the LORD
“will be mighty in the land; the generation of the upright will be blessed.”

We see it in Malachi 2:14-15, where God says that he brings believers together in
marriage because he is seeking “godly offspring.”

And we see it in Acts 2:38-39, where Peter preaches to the crowd at Pentecost saying,
“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness
of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you
and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls
to himself.”

Concerning that last passage, Joel Beeke and Ray Lanning write:

“Significantly, these words of Peter declare that certain things had not
changed and would not change in the new era. The pattern of God’s
dealing with believers and their children, as old as creation itself, would
continue as a constitutional principle of the visible church.” [“Unto You,
and to Your Children”, in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, pp.
49-50]

This is why we baptize our children. We do not do it because the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition failed to go far enough in correcting the errors of Roman Catholicism. We do it because God commanded Abraham to place the sign of the covenant upon his children, and because the New Testament never repeals that requirement.

And this means that our paradigm for child-rearing is not that of evangelizing covenant outsiders, but of nurturing covenant insiders. To be sure, our children are born in sin every bit as much as the children of unbelievers. They are in need of the gracious work of the Holy Spirit to regenerate their hearts and grant them saving faith. Nevertheless, they are members, from birth, of the people to whom God has addressed his promise of salvation. Their salvation is not guaranteed, but we are to treat them as those who are inside the covenant. As Charles Hodge writes of covenant children,

“[W]e do not assert their regeneration, or that they are true members of Christ’s body; we only assert that they belong to the class of persons whom we are bound to regard and treat as members of Christ’s Church.

This is the only sense in which even adults are members of the Church, so far as men are concerned.” [cited in Rayburn, 190]

It is true that we cannot know whether an infant child born to Christian parents is regenerate. But the same is true of everyone in the body of Christ. You can have assurance of your own salvation, but you cannot have the same kind of assurance about someone else's salvation. What we do know is this: God providentially places the children of Christians into the community to which he addressed his covenant promises. And this should cause us to raise our children as those who belong to Christ from birth. Yes, we should be constantly explaining the gospel to them and applying it to their lives. And we should be continually praying for their souls. But we must not tell them that believing in Christ and following Christ is something that they will have to decide about when they get old enough. The decision has already been made for them. The fact that they have been born into the church means that they are already under the covenant and they are bound to live by its terms. If they keep the covenant by having a living and fruitful faith in Christ, they will receive the blessings of the covenant. But if they break the covenant by turning away from Christ and never turning back, they will come under the curses of the covenant. Listen to how this is expressed in the Westminster Assembly's Directory of Worship:

“[C]hildren, by baptism, are solemnly received into the bosom of the visible church, distinguished from the world, and them that are without, and united with believers; and that all who are baptized in the name of Christ, do renounce, and by their baptism are bound to fight against the

devil, the world, and the flesh: That they are Christians, and federally holy before baptism.” [cited in Rayburn, 179]

The children born to Christians have no choice in the matter. They are under the obligation to trust in Christ and follow after him. They are bound to fight against the world, the flesh and the devil.

Admittedly, this goes against our culture’s fierce individualism. In fact, Richard Dawkins, the prominent atheist, argues that it is “a form of child abuse to label children as possessors of beliefs that they are too young to have thought about.” [*The God Delusion*, 354] Those words probably ring true to the ears of many people in our world. But isn’t it a sign of how twisted our thinking has become that we would consider a blessing of such unfathomable proportions to be a human rights violation?

Children: I want you to understand something. The fact that you have been born into a Christian home, born into the church, is the greatest privilege you will ever have in this world. You are an heir of all of the wonderful promises that God has given his people in his Word. Those promises are all yours, if only you will lay hold of them by faith. You did not do anything to earn these things. But God has said that he will be your God, and he said it even before you were born. Do not throw away the riches that God has lavished upon you. Take hold of what God has promised you in your baptism by taking

hold of Jesus Christ by faith and never letting him go. Feed your faith by reading and memorizing the Bible, by learning how to pray, by memorizing your catechism, by coming to Sunday School and worship eager to learn, and by asking your mom and dad lots and lots of questions about the gospel.

The promise of God is a promise to believers and our children. As B.B. Warfield put it,

“[T]he family...is the New Testament basis of the church of God...[God] does, indeed, require individual faith for salvation; but He organized His people in families first; and then into churches, recognizing in their very warp and woof the family constitution. His promises are all the more precious that they are to us and our children. And though this may not fit in with the growing individualism of the day, it is God’s ordinance.” [cited in Rayburn, 184]

And it is a wonderful ordinance, and a great promise. And it should motivate all of us to set an example of lively Christianity for the church’s children. For one lesson that we learn from church history is that weak faith in one generation typically results in an even weaker faith in the generation that follows; and dying faith in one generation often becomes dead faith in the next. May such things never be said of us, or of our children.