

Revealed to Babes:

Children in the Worship of God

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PREFACE

The purpose of this book is to set forth what has been the consistent Reformed position on the subject of children and infants in the church's worship services. More and more, otherwise Reformed churches have begun using nurseries as a sort of baby-sitting service while the parents attend upon the worship of God.

We must distinguish from the very beginning between nurseries and "crying rooms." By the term "nursery" I mean a location removed from the sanctuary of the church, and thus from the rest of God's people and from the hearing of God's Word. It might be attended by at least one adult supervisor who may or may not be a member of the church operating the nursery.

By the term "crying room," however, I mean a room for those children who are temporarily disrupting the worship service. It should be neither a dormitory nor a playroom. The "attendants" are the parents of the children making use of the room. Ideally, it is located inside, or adjacent to, the sanctuary and separated by a glass partition or window. The preaching of the Word of God is "piped in" via public address system. This book should not be construed as having any bearing on a crying room except insofar as parents use the crying room as a nursery. A crying room would, in fact, be totally consistent with everything that follows.

In Chapter One we will look at Scripture to determine the role of infants and children in the covenant of grace and

thus their relationship to the church. We will see that God has from the very beginning of creation manifested His abiding concern for covenant children. We will also see that this is a concern that has continued throughout both the older and newer testaments. Next we will direct our attention to the subject of both general and specific commandments we have received from Scripture regarding our covenant infants and children and how we are to treat them. The third chapter will attempt to discern Christ's own attitude toward covenant children and their membership in the visible church. The concluding chapter will set forth what the author believes to be the consistent Biblical practice regarding infants and children in worship services.

By the conclusion of this book, the reader will hopefully be convinced that there are really only two consistent attitudes that we can have toward our children. One is a covenantal Christian approach which not only acknowledges paedobaptism, but also insists upon all the other outward rights and privileges which belong to the children of believers. The other approach is a humanistic-rationalistic attitude that ties rights and privileges to an ability or rationality on the part of the children themselves.

Most Reformed churches today hold neither of these positions in a consistent manner. What exists instead is a syncretism of a consistent Biblical theology of children with a humanistic practice. It is the earnest prayer of this writer that the study which follows will be helpful to many Reformed churches throughout the world in bringing their practice more into subjection to the teaching of Scripture.

One of the more interesting aspects of the research that has gone into this book is the discovery of the virtual absence of nurseries throughout nearly 2,000 years of church history. Yet, those who would defend nurseries no longer feel that they must justify their position on the basis of either *sola Scriptura* or the history of the church. Rather, those few individuals and churches who today oppose nurseries are placed in the position of having to refute a comparatively recent innovation. This book goes forth with precisely that end in view.

Raising covenant children is arguably the most important thing that Christians do in the Kingdom. God has chosen in His sovereign wisdom and mercy to make the church herself the “seedbed of election.” This book makes no apology for that fact. It assumes throughout that Scripture gives the only necessary framework for raising a child from infancy to become “thoroughly furnished unto every good work” (Second Timothy 3:17).

CHAPTER ONE: Children of the Covenant.

Creation, Fall, and Redemption in Christ

God commanded from the very beginning for unfallen man to fill the earth with children. Scripture proclaims on the first page, “And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth” (Genesis 1:28). Although God could have created man as He did the angels, in His sovereign wisdom He commanded man to “reproduce after his kind” (Genesis 1:27; Matthew 19:4-6; Mark 12:25). Furthermore, even after the fall of man children continue to be a gift from God. Our children are only ours by way of stewardship, and actually and finally belong only to God Himself.

Man was originally created in the image of God and given the role of dominion over all creation under God. God placed Adam in the garden of Eden and charged him with tilling the garden and guarding it (Genesis 2:15). Additionally, God gave Adam every ordinance and revelation that he needed for his task. God gave the creation ordinances of labor, Sabbath, and family plus a revelation of His holy will. Part of the revelation which God gave Adam was that Adam could not eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil upon pain of death.¹

In direct disobedience to the revealed will of God how-

ever, Adam sinned against God by eating the forbidden fruit. This rebellion resulted in the fall of not only Adam, but also all his naturally born posterity. So then, all mankind from conception onward is liable to the sin of our federal head Adam. However, God, out of His mere good pleasure and grace toward a part of fallen mankind, elected some to life through a Redeemer. The only hope for man as either infant or adult lies in the work of our LORD Jesus Christ, the only Redeemer of mankind.

This basic theme of “Creation, Fall, and Redemption in Christ” is the Bible’s motif. It is God’s purpose in history to call out a people for Himself by means of the covenant which He has made through Jesus Christ.²When Calvinists and Augustinians maintain that all mankind fell with Adam and are now totally depraved, they mean that even the seed of mankind from the very moment of conception are under the wrath and curse of God.

The Arminian and Pelagian view of man is quite different in that original sin “exerts no immediate effect on the will, but affects this only mediately through the intellect. Sin always originates in the free choice of man, and is the result of weakness and ignorance. Consequently infants cannot be regarded as guilty, for they have inherited only a physical corruption.”³This false view of original sin came

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1. Westminster Shorter Catechism (WSC) number 12.
 2. Westminster Shorter Catechism (WSC) number 12.
 3. Louis Berkhof: *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), p. 128.

directly from Greek philosophy and as a result of accepting it, the eastern church has never formulated a scriptural doctrine of original sin. The western church, however, has consistently held with Scripture that all mankind fell with Adam.⁴

The implications for our children of the doctrine of original sin have been best expressed by Calvinists. The nineteenth century Presbyterian, R. A. Webb, maintained that this is one of the “fundamental tenets of Calvinism.” Webb explained that because salvation is strictly by God’s grace, God is free to apply salvation to infants as well as to adults. Though all mankind — including infants — sinned in Adam and fell with him in the first transgression, God set a decree of grace against the decree of nature. “God must predestinate, or we are every one lost, whether we be an infant of eight days, or an old man of eighty years.” But finally there is nothing in the state of infancy to exclude an infant from being a beneficiary of the atonement. The atonement is “just as imputable to a baby as to an adult.”⁵

The Seed of the Covenant of Grace

This same covenantal or “familial” salvation continued in the line of Noah, who “found grace in the eyes of the LORD.” Not Noah alone, but Noah together with his wife and children, entered into the ark for safety from the judg-

4. *WCF* VI:iii.

5. R. A. Webb: *The Theology of Infant Salvation* (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle, 1981), pp. 271-77.

ment of God (Genesis 6:18). After Noah and his family emerged from the ark, Noah pronounced a blessing on Shem, but a curse on the son of Ham. This was not as a direct result of Ham's sin, but rather an indirect result due to the manner in which Ham would surely raise his children (Genesis 9:22-25).

The life of Abraham provides us with our next view of God working familiarly in the line of the covenant of grace. Although God had just finished telling Abraham that He was Abraham's shield and exceeding great reward, Abraham continued to be concerned that he had no seed. Abraham expressed his concern over this fact in Genesis 15:3 — "Behold, to me thou hast given no seed..." God assured Abraham that his seed would certainly be numberless and when Abraham believed that promise, "[God] counted it to him for righteousness" (Genesis 15:6).

It is very important that Abraham believed God; but also important is the fact that *what* he believed was God's promise to bless his offspring in a special way. Subsequent to that God promised, "And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee" (Genesis 17:7).

It is at least *possible* to understand those words to mean, "I will establish my covenant with thy seed in each generation after that seed has grown to maturity." So in Genesis 17:12 God clarified that it was a gracious covenant and did not depend upon the maturity of Abraham's seed — "And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you,

every man child in your generations... .” Now God did not make circumcision an *option* for Abraham, for He warned, “And the uncircumcised man child whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant” (Genesis 17:14).

Notice that in this verse, God says that the uncircumcised infant son has himself broken God’s covenant. In fact, the early church father Tertullian opposed infant baptism on precisely the grounds that he believed that the token of the covenant placed the children of believers under too great a burden in the keeping of the covenant.⁶Tertullian was correct at least insofar as he recognized that circumcision was not merely a national badge, but sealed a child in the covenant and therefore gave him certain covenantal responsibilities. More recently, Geerhardus Vos⁷made the same point in maintaining that circumcision symbolized the *ethical* more than the *national* character of Old Testament religion.

Holy Before Baptism

Here is the point where we come to a parting of the ways between Reformed and Baptist Christians. Baptist Christians (including their predecessors the Montanists, Donatists, Anabaptists, etc.) have historically maintained that circumcision was a national sign given to Israel, but is not carried over into this present age in the sacrament of

6. Berkhof: *op. cit.*, p. 248.

7. Geerhardus Vos: *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948 & 1985), p. 88.

baptism. Reformed Christians, on the other hand, have consistently maintained with the Apostles that the sacrament of baptism has completely replaced the sacrament of circumcision precisely because both represent, signify and seal the same things. As O. Palmer Robertson has pointed out in his book *The Christ of The Covenants*, “[circumcision]...emphasizes the principle of solidarity between parents and children in the covenantal relationship.”⁸

Of course, it might be argued that the very fact of a covenant child’s birth emphasizes the same solidarity, but additionally, “circumcision symbolized inclusion in the covenant community.”⁹The family is more than simply a group of people related by their own blood; covenant family members are related to one another in Christ as well, for “God’s creational orderings for... the family have continuing significance in the purposes of redemption. The propagation of the race through the institution of marriage [and hence family] indicates a primary means by which God’s purposes in redemption find realization.”¹⁰

Even John Calvin takes the same position when he says in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, “For from early times the LORD did not deign to have them [covenant infants] circumcised without making them participants in all those things which were then signified by circumci-

8. O. Palmer Robertson: *The Christ of the Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), p. 149.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 150.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

sion.”¹¹And just what was signified by circumcision? The very same things that are signified by baptism; viz., justification, regeneration and sanctification.¹²Whether we are therefore speaking of circumcision or baptism, we are acknowledging that the recipients are members of the visible church of God. As Calvin says, “... let us offer our infants to Him [in baptism], for He gives them a place among those of His family and household, that is, the members of the church.”¹³

It is at this precise point that the Baptist often objects to infant baptism, claiming that the babes of even Christians are incapable of faith. Whether infants are or are not capable of repentance and faith may be debated (and will be debated in this book), but what may not be debated is that covenant infants are salvable by God. As R. A. Webb maintains, though infants are not necessarily rational, yet they are salvable sinners “(a) because they are electable by the Father, (b) because they are atoneable by Christ, and (c) because they are vocable by the Spirit” and so should be given all the rights and outward privileges of their callings.¹⁴

In the baptism of covenant children, we do not merely admit them to superficial standing with others in the church; we also maintain that those infants themselves have become

11. John Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), IV:16:5.

12. Vos: *op. cit.*, p. 90.

13. Calvin: *op. cit.*, IV:16:32.

14. Webb: *op. cit.*, p. 283.

members of the visible church.¹⁵As a member of the visible church, the baptized child “has a right to the fulfillment of the promises; he has a right to fellowship with Christ; he has a right to citizenship in the church with the people of God; he has a right to pardon; he has a right to be instructed in the works and commandments of God; he has a right to the obedience of his parents to the commands which God gives and shall give for his education, and also to their prayers; he has a right to the faithful and preserving ministry of the church which is his mother.”¹⁶As Samuel Miller says in his book *Infant Baptism*, “In like manner, every baptized child is a Member — a plenary Member — of the church... .”¹⁷

Baptists often bring their infants to the front of the church building for a ceremony they call “dedication.” In the Reformed churches, however, it is the parents who are dedicated and the infants who are baptized. When the Reformed churches baptize infants, they solemnize the admission of those infants into the fellowship of the visible church. However, we should not understand this to mean that the infants of believers are made holy (or set apart to God) *by* their baptism. Exactly the opposite is the case! Because they are *already* holy, we baptize them as commanded by God. Charles Hodge, commenting upon First Corinthians 7:14 said, “So Christian children are not made

15. *WCF XXV:ii.*

16. Pierre CH. Marcel: *Baptism* (Cherry Hill, NJ:Mack, 1973), p. 226.

17. Samuel Miller: *Infant Baptism and Christian Education* (Dallas: PHP, 1984), p. 120.

holy by baptism, but they are baptized because they are holy.”¹⁸This position regarding covenant infants is not peculiar to Hodge, however. Dwight H. Small, paraphrasing B. B. Warfield, says, “They [covenant infants] are in that general class of persons enjoying the privileges of the visible church, its worship and fellowship, its instruction and the means of grace.”¹⁹

Why then do Presbyterians baptize their infants? Because their infants have already been declared holy by God through His covenant. Such has been the historic position of those in the Reformed faith. As Berkhof says in *The History of Christian Doctrine*, “The Reformed...had to prove in opposition, especially to the Anabaptists, but also to the Roman Catholics and the Lutherans, that children can be regarded as believers before baptism, and as such ought to be baptized.”²⁰

The grandchildren of Abraham — Jacob and Esau — were twins born of the same mother and father and at the same time (i.e. moments apart). Before either of them had done either good or evil, God elected Jacob to salvation and Esau to reprobation (Romans 9:13). But both were within the pale of the church and so both of them received the sacrament of circumcision. Although Esau would later despise

18. Charles Hodge: *Commentary on I Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 118.

19. Dwight H. Small: *The Biblical Basis for Infant Baptism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968), p. 64.

20. Berkhof: *op. cit.*, p. 250.

his birthright, that by no means indicates that the birthright did not exist. Jacob and Esau's circumcision, and hence their membership in the visible church, did not depend upon their election nor upon their profession of faith. At least it did not as infants. Later events in the life of Esau would prove that though he was *in* the covenant he was not *of* the covenant. Nevertheless, "God did command that both Jacob and Esau be circumcised, and thus be visibly identified as members of the church."²¹

Calvin also was of the opinion that infants of believers are both holy before their baptism and that, in fact, many of them are actually regenerated and saved prior to their baptism. Calvin emphasized in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* that baptism is tied to regeneration. The rite is not so bound to it, however, that regeneration cannot take place during, after, or even before baptism. "Now it is perfectly clear that those infants who are to be saved (as some are surely saved from that early age) are previously regenerated by the LORD."²² And as Calvin so tenderly phrased it later in the same chapter, "How sweet is it to godly minds to be assured, not only by word, but by sight, that they obtain so much favor with the Heavenly Father that their offspring are within His care?"²³

21. G. I. Williamson: *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1964), p. 189.

22. Calvin: *op. cit.*, IV:16:17.

23. *Ibid.*, IV:16:32.

The Doctrine of Infants in the New Testament

We would expect that with the universalizing of the gospel in the New Testament that our covenant infants and children would continue to have at least the same rights and privileges that they did under the old economy. We will look in detail later at the attitude that Jesus Christ manifested toward covenant children, but for this chapter we will content ourselves to look at what the replacement of circumcision with baptism might mean to our covenant infants.

There are numerous examples of household baptisms in the New Testament; so many that it is ludicrous for Baptists to make the opposite claim.²⁴ But were those members of households baptized merely for their ability to profess Christ, or were they baptized because of their relationship to the covenant through the head of the household? Rather the latter; and the key text on this point is First Corinthians 7:14, “For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy.”

Paul was not saying in this text that an unbeliever is made a believer or even considered a believer by having a believing spouse. He was saying that the unbelieving spouse is *sanctified* by the believing spouse. Throughout Scripture the term “sanctified” is used for something which is set aside specifically for God’s use. In this case, the unbeliev-

24. See, for example, Acts 2:38-39; 16:14-15; 16:31-33; 1 Cor. 1:16; etc.

ing spouse (or parent) was set aside for the purpose of raising up godly seed. Otherwise the children would be unclean. Paul did not say, “otherwise your children would be unbelievers,” nor did he say, “otherwise your children would be reprobate.” Rather, he said, “otherwise your children would be unsanctified.” They would be profane, or would not be set aside for God’s purposes. But then Paul continued on to say that it is obvious that the children of even *one* believing parent are federally holy because of the covenant that God has made with the believing parent. Therefore, as Charles Hodge rightly concluded, “This passage recognizes as universally conceded the great Scriptural principle, that the children of believers are holy. They are included in the church, and have a right to be so regarded. ... The child of a Christian parent has a right to baptism and to all the [outward — R.B.] privileges of the church. ... The children of Christians, Paul assumes as a thing no one would dispute, are to be treated as Christians.”²⁵

Summary of Chapter One

God always intended for man to reproduce offspring that would be dedicated to Him. The fall of man made that task impossible for man to perform, but did not alleviate man of the responsibility to do it. However, in His grace God decreed to save a portion of humanity from the fall through the Redeemer, Jesus Christ. In saving men from the fall and its consequences, God does so covenantally through fami-

25. Hodge: *op. cit.*, p. 117.

lies. This truth is shown forth in the sacraments of circumcision in the Old Testament and baptism in the New Testament. In baptizing our children we are saying much about the grace of God operating covenantally upon and within our children. We are saying that we believe God is a covenantally faithful God Who is the God not only of individuals, but of their families as well. We are saying, as O. Palmer Robertson has phrased it, that “God in His work of redemption intends to restore the solidarity of the creation order of the family.”²⁶ Additionally we are saying that such a restoration involves a great deal of responsibility on the part of both the covenant parent and the covenant child. The Scriptures have much to say with respect to covenant children. Our children are federally holy before the LORD (First Corinthians 7:14). As a result of the relationship they enjoy with God and His church, they have certain rights and privileges which do not belong to the children of unbelievers. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* defines the visible church as consisting of “all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with their children ...”²⁷ Presbyterians agree that covenant children bear a special relationship to the church and to God that is not enjoyed by the children of unbelievers. It remains for us to examine what the nature of that relationship is.

26. Robertson: *op. cit.*, p. 152.

27. *WCF XXV:ii.*

CHAPTER TWO: Examples, Commandments, Precepts

The Position Established

Having seen what God's attitude is toward covenant children, we turn next to see if He has given us any examples, commandments, or precepts regarding our relationship with covenant children. As Presbyterians, we believe that our children are holy even before their baptism, and that in their baptism they have been set apart from unbelievers.²⁸ We must be biblical in our answer to the question of how we should relate to our children and how our children, in turn, should relate to the rest of the visible church. The answer to this question will bear directly on how consistent and lawful it is for a Presbyterian church to maintain a nursery.

In the previous chapter we saw the importance of baptizing covenant children. However, we also saw that this importance derives from God's command to treat our children as His children. Because our infants are holy even before their baptism, we acknowledge by the sacrament of baptism their relationship to God in His covenant. As John Calvin said, "We consider that immediately from birth God takes and acknowledges them as His children, [so] we feel a strong stimulus to instruct them in an earnest fear of God and observance of the law."²⁹ We saw that, among other passages, First Corinthians 7:14 teaches that our covenant

28. *WCF* XXVIII:vi.

infants have been sanctified or set apart by God as holy to Him. Therefore, Calvin asserted, “If any account of this is made, it will be evident that baptism is properly administered to infants as something owed to them.”³⁰If baptism is indeed something “owed” to covenant infants, then the question the church should ask is “*what else might be owed to these covenant children?*”

God repeatedly reminds His people to instruct their children in His law by reminding them of His covenant. One of the ways in which we remind our children of God’s covenant is by helping them to “improve” their baptism, as the *Westminster Larger Catechism* states it.³¹When our infant children are baptized they are solemnly admitted into the visible church.³²It is important to repeat the principle established in chapter one, that as church members they have a right to all the outward privileges of the church. Not only Marcel, but also Dwight H. Small has said, “The [baptized] child has a right to fellowship with Christ in fulfillment of the promises made to him. He has a right to citizenship in the visible church with the people of God, especially those who are his own parents. He has a right to be instructed in the Word of God. He has a right to be led into faith in the

29. Calvin., *op. cit.*, IV:16:32.

30. *Ibid.*, IV:16:5.

31. WLC number 167.

32. WLC number 165. Technically, covenant children are members of the church from birth, but their admission is solemnized and sealed by their baptism.

Saviour. He has a right to the obedience of his parents to their covenant obligations. He has a right to the faithful ministry of the church. We cannot infringe upon these rights without offending God Himself, for these are rights granted by Him. Baptism signifies and certifies these rights.”³³

Moses on Raising Covenant Children

Deuteronomy 4:9 tells us to teach God’s law to our sons and our son’s sons. While this particular passage does not specifically mention infants or toddlers, it is nevertheless quite clear that the issue is not one of age. Moses told the Israelites that they had cleaved unto the LORD God. All the previous generation died in the wilderness wanderings of the last forty years. The people, with a few notable exceptions, had refused to enter the land of promise and so had died outside the land. The people to whom Moses spoke in Deuteronomy 4:9 were the offspring of those people. He was admonishing them in the entire passage (4:1-15) not to follow the example of their parents, but instead to keep God’s law and to teach their children to do the same:

Now therefore hearken, O Israel, unto the statutes and unto the judgments, which I teach you, for to do *them*, that ye may live, and go in and possess the land which the LORD God of your fathers giveth you. Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish *ought* from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you. Your eyes have seen what the LORD did because of Baalpeor: for all the men that followed Baalpeor, the LORD thy God hath destroyed them from among you. But ye that did

33. Small: *op. cit.*, p. 111.

cleave unto the LORD your God *are* alive every one of you this day. Behold, I have taught you statutes and judgments, even as the LORD my God commanded me, that ye should do so in the land whither ye go to possess it. Keep therefore and do *them*; for this *is* your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations, which shall hear all these statutes, and say, Surely this great nation *is* a wise and understanding people. For what nation *is there* so great, who *hath* God *so* nigh unto them, as the LORD our God *is* in all *things that* we call upon him *for*? And what nation *is there* so great, that hath statutes and judgments *so* righteous as all this law, which I set before you this day? Only take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget the things which thine eyes have seen, and lest they depart from thy heart all the days of thy life: but teach them thy sons, and thy sons' sons; *Specially* the day that thou stoodest before the LORD thy God in Horeb, when the LORD said unto me, Gather me the people together, and I will make them hear my words, that they may learn to fear me all the days that they shall live upon the earth, and *that* they may teach their children. And ye came near and stood under the mountain; and the mountain burned with fire unto the midst of heaven, with darkness, clouds, and thick darkness. And the LORD spake unto you out of the midst of the fire: ye heard the voice of the words, but saw no similitude; only ye *heard* a voice. And he declared unto you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, *even* ten commandments; and he wrote them upon two tables of stone. And the LORD commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and judgments, that ye might do them in the land whither ye go over to possess it. Take ye therefore good heed unto yourselves; for ye saw no manner of similitude on the day *that* the LORD spake unto you in Horeb out of the midst of the fire.

Deuteronomy chapter six is more explicit. Not only are *parents* responsible to teach God's law; *children* are also responsible to know and keep it (verse 2). The fact that the children must know and keep the law of God further makes it necessary for the parents to teach it diligently to their children all the time. In verse 7, parents are instructed, "And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt

talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.” God here maintained that the daily, and even constant, reminder of His law would have a positive effect on the children of believers. Whether or not we can say that such a constant reminder will have a certain effect, we can say that this passage leaves no doubt that parents have a constant responsibility to teach God’s law to their children. Parents must take the responsibility *seriously* and they must perform their duty *diligently*.

Next we see that parents should perform the duty of teaching God’s law both at home and outside the home. The law of God is not something we teach part of the time or in certain circumstances. Finally, we see that there are at least two times during the day when it is *especially* important to teach God’s law to our children: just before bedtime and just after rising. We would have to attempt to escape our parental role in order to deny that God declares our infants “teachable.”

God also recognized that in spite of His explicit commands, some parents would be slack concerning this covenantal responsibility. Therefore He commanded through Moses that **all** the people, should gather together every seven years so that the children may hear the law and learn to fear the LORD.

And Moses commanded them, saying, At the end of every seven years, in the solemnity of the year of release, in the feast of tabernacles, when all Israel is come to appear before the LORD thy God in the place which He shall choose, thou shalt read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Gather the people together, men, and women, and children, and thy stranger that is within

thy gates, that they may hear, and that they may learn, and fear the LORD your God, and observe to do all the words of this law: And that their children, which have not known any thing, may hear, and learn to fear the LORD your God, as long as ye live in the land whither ye go over Jordan to possess it.

This passage does not teach that the people of God should begin bringing their children to church with them after the children become seven years old. That interpretation does great violence to this command. Nor does it teach that children need to hear and learn God Word only every seven years. Rather, at a specific festival during the Sabbath year, God commanded parents to bring their children to church *regardless* of the age of the children.

Proverbs on Raising Covenant Children

The Book of Proverbs was written to “give subtlety to the simple, to the young man knowledge and discretion” (Proverbs 1:4). As a result, we can expect the book to give us a great deal of insight into how God expects us to raise covenant children. It does precisely that, and in one portion wisdom personified even speaks to us and tells us, “I love them that love me; and those that seek me early shall find me” (Proverbs 8:17). This does not mean that we will find wisdom if we seek it early in the morning, but that we will find it if we seek it early in life.

The book goes on to tell us much that we need to know for raising godly children. In fact, if we do not raise godly children, God characterizes us as troubling our own house and, “He that troubleth his own house shall inherit the wind” (Proverbs 11:29). The parent who disciplines his

child, on the other hand, is characterized as loving him. “He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes” [early in life] (Proverbs 13:24). The chastening should take place early in life because that is when there is still hope for the child. “Chasten thy son while there is hope, and let not thy soul spare for his crying” (Proverbs 19:18). Notice that throughout Proverbs, God expects us to treat little covenant children as those who *can and will* learn to walk in His way.

A verse that is often quoted but little understood is Proverbs 22:6, “Train up [catechize — RB] a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.” This verse does not say that if we occasionally take our children to Sabbath school then someday they will return to the church. Solomon is teaching that if we diligently teach our children the way of God then when they reach adolescence (when their beard grows) they will not depart from that way and hence *never have to return to it*. How often we have heard parents lamenting the fact that their teenage children have left the church. How often we hear parents of adolescents asking what can be done either to keep their children in the church or attract them back To the church. The scriptural formula for keeping teenagers in the church is to catechize them as infants!

Instruction, though necessary, is not sufficient. Parents must not be afraid to spank their children. Solomon continues in the same chapter to say, “Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him” (Proverbs 22:15). When Paul was a child, he said, he thought and spoke as a child. But he eventually *put*

away childish things. A child does not put away childish things on his own, but as his parents diligently teach him God's law. Our responsibility to our children is, "Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell" (Proverbs 23:13-14).

As a parent myself I know something of the short-term pain that it causes a parent to spank a child when he deserves it. But I also know something of the joy that a parent receives when he sees his children walking in the wise ways of God. "The father of the righteous shall greatly rejoice: and he that begetteth a wise child shall have joy of him" (Proverbs 23:24). It is not only the desire of God; it is also the desire of righteous parents to see their children walk in God's way. A righteous child is by far the greatest reward that God gives parents in this life. But it is not an automatic result of being born into the covenant. God has given specific instruction on child-raising and we must never presume upon God that He will bless our families apart from obedience to His Word. "The rod and reproof give wisdom: but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame. ... Correct thy son, and he shall give thee rest; yea, he shall give delight unto thy soul" (Proverbs 29:13,15).

Covenant Children Commanded to be in Church

It might justly be argued at this point that all we have shown is that it is the job of the parent, but not necessarily the job of the church, to teach covenant children to fear the LORD. In order for us to maintain that covenant children

are to be present with their parents in the LORD's Day services, we should have at least an example and preferably a command or precept from Scripture. Does the Bible give a command, or even an example, of God calling little children into worship services?

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America apparently believes that covenant children are not only members of the visible church, but by virtue of that membership are to be present in church services on a regular basis. Not only has the Presbyterian Church in America accepted the *Westminster Confession of Faith* as its own confession, it has additionally accepted its own *Book of Church Order*. The *Westminster Confession* is quite clear that the baptized children of church members are themselves also church members.³⁴

The *Book of Church Order* makes the very same point in several places.³⁵In 1-3, the members of the visible church are defined as “all those persons in every nation, together with their children, who make profession of their faith in the LORD Jesus Christ and promise submission to His laws.” In

34. WCF XXV:ii.

35. Reference to the *Book of Church Order* of the Presbyterian Church in America is due only to the Author's familiarity with its content. Other reformed bodies have similar documents and should be consulted in this regard. For example, the *Form of Government* of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church states at II:2, “The universal church visible consists of all those persons, in every nation, *together with their children*, who make profession of saving faith in the LORD Jesus Christ and promise submission to his commandments.” [emphasis added]

Chapter 2, the same document goes on to say, “The visible church before the law, under the law, and now under the Gospel, is one and the same and consists of all those who make profession of their faith in the LORD Jesus Christ, together with their children.”

We should not understand this doctrine as only applying to the universal visible church, however. It applies to particular churches of Christ as well. In Chapter 4 of its *Book of Church Order* the Presbyterian Church in America goes on to say, “A particular church consists of a number of professing Christians, with their children, associated together for divine worship and godly living, agreeable to the Scriptures, and submitting to the lawful government of Christ’s kingdom.” Furthermore, in its chapter on church members (Chapter 6), the Presbyterian Church in America says of covenant children that, “The children of believers are, through the covenant and by right of birth, noncommuning members of the church.”

There can be no doubt as to the official position of the Presbyterian Church in America with regard to covenant children. It is the same position that Reformed Christians have taken since the time of John Calvin. That position, simply stated, is that covenant children bear a special relationship to the church and to God that is not enjoyed by the children of unbelievers. And because they bear that special relationship, we solemnly admit them into the church.

In *Book of Church Order* 56-4 on “The Administration of Baptism,” the minister is to instruct those present on the sacrament’s meaning. Among other things, he is to say that

“the children of believers have an interest in the covenant, and right to the seal of it, *and to the outward privileges of the church...*” [emphasis added]. While our children do not have a right to the sacrament of the LORD’s Supper until making a profession of faith and being admitted to the table by the session (*BCO 6-2*), they do have a right to the *outward* privileges of the church. This includes, obviously, the right to hear the Word of God preached in regular worship services.

Is this something peculiar to the Presbyterian Church in America? No, it is rather something peculiar to the people of God! In Deuteronomy 29:10-13 Moses said:

Ye stand this day all of you before the LORD your God; your captains of your tribes, your elders, and your officers, with all the men of Israel, your little ones, your wives, and thy stranger that is within thy camp, from the hewer of thy wood unto the drawer of thy water: that thou shouldest enter into covenant with the LORD thy God, and into His oath, which the LORD thy God maketh with thee this day: that He may establish thee today for a people unto Himself, and that He may be unto thee a God, as He hath sworn unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Note that even the little ones (<ypf — toddlers) were to stand together before God. Moses began this passage by speaking to Israel in the second person plural; but when he spoke of entering into covenant with God he changed to second person singular. This may not be as evident in some modern translations, but is quite obvious in the Hebrew original and in the Authorized Version. The people of God who enter into covenant with God are considered here in a sort of “collective singular.”

All the people of God, including the covenant “little

ones,” are considered to be the singular (or collective) people of God. Matthew Henry, in commenting on this text, ties in the covenant children when he says, “Not the men only, but their wives and children, must come into this covenant; though they were not numbered and mustered, yet they must be joined to the LORD. Observe, even little ones are capable of being taken into covenant with God, and are to be admitted with their parents. Little children, so little as to be carried in arms, must be brought to Christ, and shall be blessed by Him.”³⁶

This is not the only example we have in Scripture of the toddlers being in church along with the adults. As we saw earlier, Moses commanded that all Israel with their children gather together at least once every seven years to hear the law of God read so that they could know and keep God’s commandments. In Joshua 8:35 we see an example of the people of Israel obeying Moses’ command: “There was not a word of all that Moses commanded, which Joshua read not before all the congregation of Israel, with the women and the little ones, and the strangers that were conversant among them.” The Bible tells us once again that the commandments of God are not intended merely for adults, but also for the little ones of God. God commanded the covenant children to be present and we find in Joshua that is precisely how the people of God understood it.

This was apparently no short fifteen or twenty minute

36. Matthew Henry: *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, n.d.), ad. loc.

service, for “there was not a word of all that Moses commanded, which Joshua read not.” This does not necessarily mean that the entirety of the Pentateuch was read in that one service, although we could certainly understand it that way. What is evident, however, is that the service was not shortened to accommodate the short “attention span” of the children. Indeed, the very fact that it was the law of God which they were expected to hear and obey indicates that the adults present took great care to make certain that the children paid full attention to what was read. Once again, Matthew Henry’s comments are to the point: “Note, Masters of families should bring their wives and children with them to the solemn assemblies for religious worship.”³⁷

Later in the history of God’s people, at a prayer meeting for deliverance from the Moabite-Ammonite conspiracy in the time of King Jehoshaphat, let us take note of who was present: “And all Judah stood before the LORD, with their little ones, their wives, and their children” (Second Chronicles 20:13). Scripture here distinguishes between children and little ones. We make that same distinction today when we refer to children and toddlers. The Hebrew language makes several distinctions between the various stages of growth of a child.³⁸The word used here for “little ones” — *yypf* — is derived from the gait of a toddler.³⁹

In Ezra 8:21, Ezra proclaimed a fast for the people of

37. *Ibid.*

38. Alfred Edersheim: *Sketches of Jewish Social Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 103-104.

God. He said, “Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of Him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance.” It is not altogether clear from this that the “little ones” actually took part in the fast itself. It is certainly possible to discern from the entire context, however, that children were present. Ezra had gathered all the people of Israel by the river where they had set up a tent city (8:15). They stayed there for three days and it was in view of “the people” that Ezra there proclaimed the fast (verse 15, cf. verses 21, 23).

After the restoration of Jerusalem, upon the dedication and purification of the people and the wall and the gates, all the people offered thanksgiving to God. “Also that day they offered great sacrifices and rejoiced: for God had made them rejoice with great joy: the wives also and the children [dl y — infant]” (Nehemiah 12:43). The wives *and* infants were rejoicing in the LORD. The Hebrew word dl y is used for a newborn in numerous places throughout Scripture and is considered by Alfred Edersheim to have exactly that significance.⁴⁰ See also Genesis 21:7f; Exodus 1:17; 2:3; etc.

Finally, Joel 2:15-16 commands, “Blow the trumpet in Zion, sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly: Gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders,

39. William Gesenius: *Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. S.P. Tregelles (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979 & 1986), pp. 323-24.

40. Alfred Edersheim: *op. cit.*, pp. 103-104.

gather the children, and those that suck the breasts: let the bridegroom go forth out of his chamber, and the bride out of her closet.” Even unweaned infants were being called to be present at the solemn assembly! We should remember that in the New Testament dispensation there are no more holy days or solemn assemblies except for the Sabbath (the LORD’s Day).⁴¹ What the Bible says of holy convocations in the Old Testament can therefore be applied to the Christian Sabbath today or to specific days of fasting or thanksgiving.⁴²

The word which the Authorized Version translated “children” is the plural of the Hebrew *l l ou*, which is used in other Scriptures for a child only a span long (Lamentations 2:20) and for a child who never as yet had seen the light of day (Job 3:16). The term “those that suck the breasts” is an excellent translation of the Hebrew and obviously indicates children under three years of age.⁴³

Were these infants in Joel 2 taking part in the fast itself? Calvin thinks not and Matthew Henry thinks that they evidently were. Whichever is the case, they were commanded by God to be present. It may be that they were receiving some benefit themselves. It may additionally be, as Calvin suggested in his comment on this passage, that the reason

41. *WCF XXII:vii. cf. XIX:iii.*

42. *WCF XXI:v. cf. Book of Church Order of the PCA (BCO) 62:1-7.*

43. Alfred Edersheim: *Sketches of Jewish Social Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 103-104.

we have our children present in our worship services is to remind us of our need to repent and believe for the benefit of future generations of believers.⁴⁴ Matthew Henry's comments are also very instructive. "These [infants] were brought even when they were at the breast and were kept fasting, that by their cries for the breast the hearts of the parents might be moved to repent of sin, which God might justly so visit upon their children that the tongue of the sucking child might cleave to the roof of his mouth (Lamentations 4:4)."⁴⁵

Summary of Chapter Two

The overall view of Scripture toward covenant children is one of inclusion rather than exclusion. Parents and the church are together to instruct the infants of the church in the ways of the LORD. Many places in Scripture by example or command tell us to have our children with us in worship services and none at all give us the right to exclude our covenant infants from the corporate worship of God.

In the Presbyterian Church in America's *Directory for the Worship of God* (BCO Chapters 47 to 63), we find that "the Covenant children should be present so far as possible as well as adults."⁴⁶ The reason for the covenant children

44. John Calvin: *Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), *ad loc.*

45. Matthew Henry: *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, n.d.), *ad loc.*

46. BCO 47-7.

being in the service is very ably explained in Chapter 49-4: “Since the family, as ordained by God, is the basic institution in society, and God in the covenant graciously deals with us, not just as individuals but also as families, it is important and desirable that families worship together.”

The *prima facie* evidence from Scripture and Confession is that our covenant children are members of the visible church and therefore should be present with their parents in the worship services of the church. It is hard to say to what extent these little ones actually worship God. The Psalmist claimed that all of creation praises God and that God particularly ordains praise from the mouths of “babes and sucklings” (Psalm 8:2). The advocate of nurseries would be hard pressed to make as scriptural a case for his position as can be made against it. It is difficult to say how much these little ones understand of what they hear in the worship service, but at the very least it is certain that God has commanded they be present in the worship services of the church.

We must be very careful not to offend (i.e. cause to stumble) covenant children. We will see the importance of that in the following chapters. It simply is not the case that the church has operated or condoned nurseries for the past 2000 years. Quite the opposite is true. The Reformed church has struggled during that time against the Anabaptists on one side and the Baptismal Regenerationists on the other to guard a scriptural doctrine of children. Nurseries arise from a Baptist presumption regarding the covenant. The historic position of the Reformed churches has been that *families should worship together*.

CHAPTER THREE: Christ and Children

John Baptizer

The first recorded encounter of our LORD with a covenant child is found in Luke 1:39-44. “And Mary arose in those days, and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Juda; And entered into the house of Zacharias, and saluted Elizabeth. And it came to pass, that, when Elizabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost: And she spake out with a loud voice, and said, Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And whence is this to me, that the mother of my LORD should come to me? For, lo, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy.” The aspect of this passage that we most want to notice is the response of John Baptizer.

The Holy Ghost had recently conceived Jesus in the womb of His mother Mary when this account took place. John Baptizer was only six months from his conception. Yet even three months *prior* to his birth John is called a “babe” (brefo^o). The angel Gabriel had foretold that this covenant infant John would be filled with the Holy Ghost *even from his mother’s womb* (Luke 1:15).

Some might maintain that an unborn babe is not capable of conceptual thought. However, we have the testimony of Scripture that John Baptizer was indeed capable of being

filled with the Holy Ghost. Furthermore, upon being filled with the Holy Ghost, John leaped for joy in the womb. So we see in this passage that infants are capable both passively of being filled with the Holy Ghost and actively of responding with joy to the presence of Christ.

Baptists, particularly those with an Arminian theology, are fond of making reference to an “age of accountability.” What they mean by this is the age of a child after which God holds him accountable for personal sins. However, this age manifests itself, they would say, by the child’s own rationality. In other words, Baptist theology ties accountability to rationality. Reformed theology, however, maintains that babies are accountable to God from the moment of their conception (Psalm 51:5).

This is not a cruel doctrine of infant damnation, however, for God regenerates even elect infants when and where and how He pleases.⁴⁷Regeneration does not require a rational assent, much less a rational profession. Just as John Baptizer was filled with the Holy Ghost from his mother’s womb without compromising his humanity, so also all the infants of God’s choosing may be so filled. And just as John Baptizer could respond to Christ with joy, so also may the covenant infants of such believers who respond to Christ as “my LORD” as did Elizabeth.

In the case of John Baptizer we see precisely what we would expect to see if covenant theology is true. Elizabeth confessed that Jesus is LORD (Luke 1:43). John was not

47. *WCF* X:iii.

born randomly in a heathen home, but graciously in a covenant home. But God did not wait until John was seven or twelve or twenty years old before He began His work. Rather, God sanctified John from his mother's womb and filled him with the Holy Ghost.

It is not the position of this book that all covenant infants *without exception* are filled with the Holy Ghost from the womb. Some, such as Esau, clearly are not. However, without the clear testimony of Scripture to the contrary, covenant infants should be regarded as "holy" members of the covenant (First Corinthians 7:14). Elizabeth rightly interpreted the movements of John as "leaping for joy" — and she made this interpretation *after* she herself was filled with the Holy Ghost.

Mary likewise interpreted these events. Mary magnified the LORD with her soul and declared, "His mercy is on them that fear Him from generation to generation." Mary was not developing some new theology of infants as the pregnant cousins spoke with one another. Rather, she referred to the Abrahamic covenant which God made nearly 2,000 years earlier: "As He spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever." In other words, Mary based her theology of infants on the covenantal grace of God.

So what have we learned from the experience of John Baptizer? First, and most important for the purpose of this study, we learned that the grace of God has virtually no lower age limit. Even a babe in the womb of its mother can experience the grace of God in such a way as to be filled with the Holy Ghost passively and to leap for joy actively.

Second, we learned that regeneration is not tied to conceptual understanding in such a way as to preclude the covenant infants of the church from this blessing. In fact, our confession goes so far as to teach that the elect infants who die in infancy and thus never reach a stage of conceptual understanding are nevertheless regenerated when and where and how God Himself pleases.

Third, we saw that Mary understood this blessing in terms of the covenant of grace. She did not say that all infants regardless of their heritage saw the mercy of God. Rather, her statement was that God's mercy is ordinarily on the basis of the covenant that God made to "Abraham and to his seed for ever."

Finally, the implications of this for our own covenant children should be obvious. Rather than waiting until our children reach some extra-biblical age of "accountability," we should start teaching our children about the LORD — even from the womb. Only in this way can we consistently pray and believe that God will turn the hearts of the children to their fathers (Malachi 4:6).

Revealed to Babies

After Herod placed John Baptizer in prison, Jesus testified concerning John and his ministry. In Matthew 11:11, Jesus said that of those born of women there was not a greater than John. Then in verse 16 Jesus began to upbraid the cities in which He and John had preached. Those cities did not repent, so it will be more tolerable for Sodom in the day of judgment than for those cities, in spite of the fact that

they were located in the land of promise.

This serves to magnify the sovereign grace of God, for “At that time Jesus answered and said, I thank thee, O Father, LORD of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes” (Matthew 11:25). Christ was not saying that every baby in the world was saved, nor was He saying that it was impossible for the wise and prudent to be saved. But it is impossible to escape the fact that God *revealed Himself* to those babies, and *not* to those whom Christ called the “wise and prudent” of the day.

Redemption is not by its nature mystical or irrational. That is why God’s revelation of Himself is in human language and therefore understandable. Even unfallen Adam required special revelation from God in terms of what he was and was not to do. The understanding, unaided by revelation, is incapable of directing man. While the light of nature is sufficient to leave man “without excuse,” it is insufficient for man properly to discern God’s will.⁴⁸ Since the fall, man is not merely incapable of knowing God, he actually has a desire to suppress whatever knowledge of God is available to him (Romans 1:18). So redemption is neither mystical nor irrational; it *is* supernatural.

“The natural man,” claimed Paul, “receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (First Corinthians 2:14). Paul here is making the

48. WCF I:i.

unmistakable assertion that it is impossible for even the most rational of men to receive the things of God apart from God's Spirit. Left only to his natural understanding, man is incapable of discovering spiritual truth. The matter is one not only of objective in-scripturated revelation, but also of spiritual discernment.

In Matthew 11:25 Christ said that God the Father had "hidden these things" from the wise and prudent. We saw in First Corinthians 2:14 that this hiding was not a matter of keeping the things secret, but rather the withholding of the Spirit to the so-called "wise and prudent." Jesus made this the central issue of a discussion with one of the learned men of Israel. In John 3:3ff Jesus told Nicodemus, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Christ went on to explain, "That which is born of the Spirit is spirit...the wind bloweth where it listeth...so is everyone that is born of the Spirit." When Nicodemus answered that he still did not understand, Jesus asked him, "Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?" Once again, God hid "these things" from the wise and prudent. When Nicodemus appeared again in John 19:39, it was as a believer. He was not a believer because his understanding had increased, nor had he finally reached an "age of accountability." Nicodemus was not made smarter; he was regenerated by the Spirit of God.

Jesus not only thanked God the Father that He had hidden spiritual truth from the wise and prudent. He went on to say that the Father had revealed these spiritual truths to babes. Just as there are several different words in the Hebrew language for children at various stages of growth,

the Greek language in which the New Testament is written acknowledges stages in a child's development.⁴⁹ We do not know with certainty what Aramaic word Jesus used, but the Holy Spirit led both Matthew and Luke (in the parallel account in Luke 10:21) to use the Greek word *νηπιον*". Significantly, this is the word for a baby that has not yet acquired the power of speech.⁵⁰

The infants of Matthew 11:25 and Luke 10:21 not only had not yet made a profession of faith; at that stage of their development they were **incapable** of making such a profession. Even in that stage of speechlessness, however, God revealed Himself to those babes. The sovereignty of the Son of God is shown in the very fact that He often withholds revelation from those who, humanly speaking, we would expect to be the recipients. Yet in that same sovereignty He also sometimes (and perhaps often) discloses knowledge of the Father to the very ones that we would think incapable of receiving such revelation. As Dr. F. Nigel Lee of Queensland Theological Seminary has stated, "Here, the thought seems to be that the Son not only has revealed the Father to these speechless infants before they can talk, but also that He wants to reveal (or alternatively will continue to reveal) the Father to those elect covenant children even after they learn to talk."⁵¹

49. Alfred Edersheim: *Sketches of Jewish Social Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 103-104.

50. F. Nigel Lee: *Revealed to Babies* (Rowlett, TX: Commonwealth, 1986), p. 6.

51. *Ibid.*

The Apostle Paul amplified this very idea in First Corinthians 1:19ff. If salvation were possible as a result of human wisdom, then the wise could glory in their own learning or intelligence. If salvation were possible as a result of might, then the mighty could glory in their own strength or power. But Paul claimed that both of those approaches were dead wrong due to the fact that they both detract from God's glory and give glory instead to man. "For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent...hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?" Later in the same chapter Paul maintained, "But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things that are mighty... that no flesh should glory in His presence" (verses 27, 29). There are none in the world with less worldly wisdom than a baby, or that are weaker than an infant. Yet Christ has chosen to reveal Himself to babes rather than to the wise and prudent.

There is no question that, in the case of adults who would enter the church and be baptized, there should be a profession of faith in Jesus Christ (and a credible profession at that). However, Presbyterians do not require a profession of faith from the infants of church members before they are baptized. That is because we believe that they are holy before baptism. In this passage we have seen that God does in fact reveal Himself to covenant infants (when He is so pleased) even while they are yet speechless babes.⁵²

We must not lose sight of the importance, however, of these babes having been born into covenant families. As

members of covenant families we would normally expect them to have exposure even from the womb to the Word of God as it is preached in the church assemblies. We simply cannot say at what point or stage the covenant child first begins to believe in Jesus. We know that from the time that they are mere babes in arms — speechless ones — that they can recognize their parents; and we believe they can love their parents as well. Surely if such a young babe can recognize and even love an earthly parent then we can expect that God has made provision for these children — born and unborn — to recognize and love Him in and through His Word.

But Whoso Shall Offend

The next significant encounter of our LORD with covenant children is in Matthew 18:1-5 and its parallels in Mark 9 and Luke 9.⁵³

At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? And Jesus called a little child unto him and set him in the midst of them, and said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall .ot enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me. But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he

52. Charles Hodge: *Commentary on I Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 118.

53. Mark 9:33-37 and Luke 9:46-48.

were drowned in the depth of the sea.

Christ's disciples were arguing among themselves concerning "the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." It is not difficult to imagine that each of them must have considered himself the greatest. Perhaps Peter, James and John all considered themselves to be closest to Christ. Perhaps one considered himself most eloquent of the twelve and another the most intelligent. To resolve the question they went to Christ with the sure conviction that He would be able to tell them which of them had the quality or qualities which would make him greatest.

Then Jesus changed the issue of the debate. The issue was no longer who was greatest in the kingdom, but whether these men would even *enter* the kingdom of heaven (v. 3). Jesus took a little child (paidion — diminutive of pai", i.e. a babe or infant, and used of Christ when He was under two years of age [Matthew 2:8]) and set him down in the midst of the disciples. In order for Christ to set him down He must first have been holding him (see Mark 9:36). The evidence points to a very young child and probably one under two years of age.

After calling the child and setting the child in their midst Jesus told His disciples that they must become like this child in one very important respect: *they must be humbled!* The entire world, according to Christ, is divided into two camps: those who are *not* converted as this little child was *already* converted and those who *are* converted in the same way that this little child was *already* converted. Christ insisted that the disciples must be converted and evidence

that conversion by a childlike humility. Those who are thus converted become the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Christ told the disciples a truth that must have seemed to them a contradiction of everything they had ever believed. In order to become the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, a man must become as humble and passive as a child who has *nothing at all* to commend him. In fact, unless he is converted and becomes like that little infant, he cannot even enter the kingdom of heaven.

Christ did not stop there. He went on to say, “And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me.” Christ was no longer speaking of who will be greatest in the kingdom of heaven, or even of who will ultimately enter the kingdom. He was now speaking of the *attitude* the disciples should have toward covenant children. That attitude was to be one of *reception*. They were to receive the child in Christ’s name. It is common for Presbyterians to use this passage to defend the practice of paedobaptism. That is proper enough, as this passage does reflect on paedobaptism. But the implications go far beyond baptism alone. The disciples were to receive the covenant child as though they were receiving Christ Himself, for so they were.

The alternative to receiving the little child is offending him. And, as Christ went on to say, “But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.” This seems so plain that it is difficult to know how to make it any plainer than it already is. If someone offends a covenant child by not receiving him (that child was a member of a “covenant

city” and had very likely already been circumcised), then *drowning* is a better fate than what God has in store for the offender.

The parallel passage in Mark 9:33ff is a bit more graphic and explicit about the fate that is in store for those who offend little ones (uikroi) who are members of the covenant. Christ continues in that passage to say that if our hand offends, we should cut it off; if our foot offends, we should cut it off; and if our eye offends, we should pluck it out. The reason is that it is better to go through life with only one hand or foot or eye than to be cast into hell. In like manner, if we are found guilty of offending one of these little ones, it would be better to be cast into the sea for certain drowning, than to be cast into the lake of fire for certain damnation.

These are Christ’s own words. They may or may not be hyperbole. Whether they are hyperbole or not, Christ certainly made a point of how important it is not to offend covenant children. We may choose to think of this as relatively unimportant when so many other things in the church are also in need of reformation. As we can see from Christ’s words, however, *this is a moral issue*. It is not a question to be decided on the basis of opinion or even majority vote. Christ said that whoso offends one of these little ones — these covenant infants — is in danger of hellfire. It is difficult to imagine an issue that is more important.

Luke recorded these two statements as occurring at different times while Mark recorded them as occurring at the same time. We can therefore say with relative certainty that Christ made the statement more than one time. Luke 9:46-

48 relates the same incident as the one that took place in Matthew 18 and Mark 9. But then on a different occasion, when the subject was offenses in general, Christ made a similar statement about offending covenant children. In Luke 17:2, after pronouncing a general woe upon those through whom offenses come, He stated regarding those who offend children, “It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones.”

Jesus on neither occasion tells us what it is to offend a little covenant child. Obviously, had He said that little covenant infants are not to be excluded from the worship services of the church, this paper would be redundant.⁵⁴ However, it is impossible to imagine that such action would not offend a child who has an interest in the outward privileges of the church. Imagine telling an adult believer that he must be seated separately from the rest of the people of God and then decide if he would be offended. I do not mean simply that he might be displeased (though he probably would be). He would be offended in the biblical sense of having a stumbling block placed in his way. And so it is, claimed Christ, with infants as well. Or as Calvin expressed it in his commentary on Matthew 18:6, “Whoever then desires to escape that fearful punishment which Christ

54. As one concerned Christian parent remarked, “How *sad* it is to see children removed, particularly in spite of the fact that they *are* well behaved, *are* quiet, and *don’t* want to leave — but the parents just don’t want them there.” It is really hypocritical when parents claim to be doing something for their children while actually working *against* their children’s best interest.

denounces, let him stretch out his hand to the little ones who are despised by the world, and let him kindly assist them in keeping the path of duty.”⁵⁵

Forbid Them Not

We next examine that portion of Scripture which most bears on our study — the account in which Jesus received opposition *from His own disciples* to allowing covenant children to be present with Him and receive His blessing. It will be important for us to notice, first of all, *who* were the children the disciples were forbidding from coming to Christ. Second, we should notice both *from whom* and *why* the forbidding was taking place. And finally we should see Christ’s own response to the event. Or, another way of looking at it is that first we have the event itself, second the discouragement of the disciples, and third the encouragement of Christ.

This incident occurs in all three synoptic gospels. The account of Matthew is, “Then were presented to him children, that he might lay hands on them and pray; and the disciples rebuked them. But Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven. And he laid his hands on them, and departed thence” (Matthew 19:13-15). Mark adds that Christ was much displeased with the disciples (Mark 10:14). Both Mark and Luke add in their accounts that Jesus

55. John Calvin: *Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), *ad loc.*

said that everyone must receive the kingdom of God as those infants were then receiving it (Mark 10:15; Luke 18:17).

Both Matthew and Mark say that these parents were bringing *paidia* (diminutive “children,” as young as eight days) to Christ. As Alfred Edersheim points out, “Here there could be no question of intellectual qualifications.”⁵⁶ Luke says that they were additionally bringing *brefoi* (which can be any stage of development from embryo to infant) to Christ.⁵⁷In fact, we noted earlier that John Baptist received Christ while he was still a *brefo* or fetus in his mother’s womb. As Dwight H. Small claims, “There is no doubt whatsoever as to the class of children brought to Jesus by their parents. They were infants.”⁵⁸

However, these were not just **any** youngsters. This incident took place in the province of Judaea (Matthew 19:1; etc.). This means that the children were *already* members of the covenant community. Additionally, the parents themselves exhibited a familial faith in bringing the children to Christ in the first place. As Hebrews 7:7 informs us, the inferior are blessed by the better. The very act of these parents in bringing their children to Christ for a blessing indicates that they believed Christ to be at the very least a

56. Alfred Edersheim: *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), II:337.

57. See Arndt & Gingrich trans. of W. Bauer: *Greek-English Lexicon* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1952), pp. 146-47 & 609.

58. Small: *op. cit.*, p. 97.

superior, and more likely a prophet or even Messiah Himself. As Dr. Nigel Lee points out regarding these parents, “Even though these little children were apparently already in touch with Jesus by virtue of their prior membership in the covenant, their parents desired to bring them into even closer touch with the Savior.”⁵⁹

Matthew Henry’s comment on Mark’s account is quite instructive in determining the motives of the parents in bringing the children.⁶⁰

It doth not appear that they needed any bodily cure, nor were they capable of being taught: but it seems, 1. They that had the care of them were mostly concerned about their souls, their better part, which ought to be the principal care of all parents for their children. ... 2. They believed that Christ’s blessing would do their souls good; and therefore to Him they brought them... knowing that He could reach their hearts, when nothing their parents could say to them, or do for them, would reach them.

Henry was not claiming that the parents used this as a substitute for proper parental teaching, but that these parents realized that all the teaching that they could do would be fruitless without the blessing of Christ upon their children. As Dr. Lee rightly observes, “This shows they knew the covenant blessings for their children were not automatic, but required their own ‘bringing’ of their children to the Savior for Him to ‘pray’ for their children.”⁶¹

59. Lee: *op. cit.*, p. 14.

60. Matthew Henry: *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, n.d.), *ad loc.*

61. Lee: *op. cit.*, p. 15.

It seems fairly obvious from the context that the parents had correct motives in bringing their children to Christ for His blessing. But can we say from this that they actually were doing the right thing? Wrong actions, even from a right motive, are still wrong. There were two views presented by all three evangelists: the incorrect view of the disciples who would prevent the parents and the children, and the correct view of Christ who was displeased at the incorrect view and rectified it.

Calvin believed that the motive of the disciples in preventing the children from coming to Christ was that they wanted to preserve His honor. “For what has the highest Prophet and the Son of God to do with infants?” Calvin continued, “But hence we learn, that they who judge of Christ according to the feeling of their flesh are unfair judges. ... And therefore let us learn not to think of Him otherwise than what He Himself teaches, and not to assign to Him a character different from what He has received from the Father.”⁶²It is not necessary to impugn the motives of the disciples to see that what they were doing was wrong.

The disciples were with Christ in Galilee when He told them not to offend the little covenant children. Yet we find the disciples (just one chapter later in Matthew and Mark) doing precisely what Christ had forbidden. Notice in Mark that they did not simply suggest that the parents bring the children back another time. They *rebuked* those who

62. John Calvin: *Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), *ad loc.*

brought the children. This must surely be characterized as a discouragement to parents to bring covenant infants to Christ.

Christ, however, intervened on behalf of the covenant children and rebuked those most deserving of rebuke — the offending disciples. These covenant parents *should* have been commended rather than rebuked by the disciples. As Matthew Henry commented on Luke 18:15-17, “None are too little, too young, to bring to Christ, Who knows how to show kindness to them that are not [yet] capable of doing service to Him.” Moreover, Henry goes on to say in the same place, “It is no strange thing for those who make their application to Jesus Christ, for themselves or for their children, to meet with discouragement, even from those who should countenance and encourage them.”⁶³

Mark tells us that Christ was angry over the disciples’ rebuke of the parents. The Greek verb that Mark used here was *’aganaktew* — Christ was *indignant* over the rebuke that the parents received.⁶⁴ Christ’s anger was not only aroused because of the manner in which the disciples rebuked the parents, nor even so much over the fact that they did it. To manifest the fact that His indignation was over the *cause* of the rebuke, Christ proceeded to do exactly what the parents desired of Him.

John Murray even goes so far as to maintain that the mar-

63. Henry: *op. cit.*

64. Arndt & Gingrich: *op. cit.*, p. 4.

ital institution itself is involved in this passage.⁶⁵

The marital institution is sanctified by the forces of redemptive grace to such an extent that it is made one of the main channels for the accomplishment of God's saving purpose in the world. It is in the bosom of the Christian family that the nurture which the LORD Himself provides is administered. Of this our LORD in the days of His flesh gave a concrete example when He took the little children into His arms and blessed them and said, 'of such is the kingdom of God.' He has given us in this a token of what He does continuously through the instrumentality of the Christian family by the efficacious operations of His grace in the hearts and lives of little infants who are the partakers of His covenant grace.

Infants — even covenant infants — share in the first Adam's sin. To escape from the sin and misery of the estate into which even they fell, they must also share in the last Adam's grace. Christ said that those who come to Him He would in no wise cast out (John 6:37). In Matthew 19 and Luke 18 He demonstrated that even those covenant children and infants who are *brought* to Him He will in no wise cast out. Covenant parents are, as Henry says, "trustees of their children's wills."⁶⁶ Or as Calvin comments, "Infants are renewed by the Spirit of God, according to the capacity of their age, till that power which was concealed within them grows by degrees, and becomes manifest at the proper time."⁶⁷

65. John Murray: *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), p. 79.

66. Henry: *op. cit.*

67. John Calvin: *Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), *ad loc.*

Expanding on Calvin's illustration somewhat, we fully believe when we plant a seed in the garden that it will eventually become a fully grown plant. We have the duty to water and cultivate that seed from the very moment of planting. Eventually we may have an oak from an acorn; but even while it is *still an acorn* we must value it and nourish it so that it will become that oak. Furthermore, there is nothing in the oak that was not *already* in the acorn. So with our covenant children, we do not continually dig the garden soil away to make sure that the seed of faith is taking root. Rather, we nurture them in every appropriate way and we eventually hear their profession of the faith that was always there.

Christ considered it a very serious offense to prevent a covenant child from approaching Him. To forbid a child of any age to come to Christ through His ordinances, e.g. baptism, preaching, public worship, etc., is to exclude those whom He has already received. It is to cast them out of the inheritance which Christ purchased for them. The most mature believer does not so much apprehend Christ as he is apprehended *by* Christ (Philippians 3:12). It is not as important to the child of God what he knows of God as the fact that God knows him (Galatians 4:9). A covenant child is as capable of *being apprehended and being known* as is an adult. In fact, Matthew 18 sets forth child-like humility as evidence that one has been apprehended by Christ.

Then Christ, after blessing the covenant infants which had been brought to Him, "departed thence." Matthew Henry observed, "as if He reckoned He had done enough there, when He had thus asserted the rights of the lambs of

His flock, and made this provision for a succession of subjects in His kingdom.”⁶⁸In taking these children up in His own arms, Christ testified that they were indeed of His own flock (Isaiah 40:11). But in order to make this reference explicit He went on to say, “for of such is the kingdom of heaven.” *These covenant infants are, in fact, members of the visible church.* As members they enjoy (or are entitled to enjoy) all the outward privileges of the church.⁶⁹

As Marcel rightly observed on this passage, “So far from excluding [such] children from the church, in whose bosom they have always been cherished, Christ calls them the lambs of His flock, takes them in His arms and blesses them, and declares that the kingdom of heaven is for those who are like them and that their angels always behold the face of the Father in heaven.”⁷⁰

Marcel further explained the implications of this for the church.⁷¹

If the church pays attention to the demands of the administration of the covenant and considers those who have been born in it as being primarily entrusted to her care, if she knows how to

68. Matthew Henry: *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, n.d.), *ad loc.*

69. Readers unfamiliar with the claim by paedocommunionists that infants should be allowed to the LORD’s Supper should consult this author’s *What Mean Ye By This Service?* for a refutation. Infants should not be allowed to the communion table until they are capable of examining themselves.

70. Marcel: *op. cit.*, p. 122.

71. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

avail herself of the theology of the covenant and of the psychological and pedagogical weapons which it affords, if she believes in God's promises and in His faithfulness, then she ought to reconsider her hasty judgments, too often formed without charity and with an altogether Pharisaic brutality — and which undoubtedly control her methods of work — against Protestants who are called 'detached' or who have become 'indifferent.' She must learn once more to regard them lovingly as members of the covenant and of the people of God. She has an urgent and special ministry in respect of them, founded on the commands and promises of God. We shall return to this point in connection with baptism. All ecclesiastical strategy — in every sphere! — flows from the covenant of grace, and is something very different from that spoken of in most church synods.

Babes and Sucklings

The final confrontation of Jesus Christ with those who would offend covenant children took place at the beginning of the week of His death. The confrontation was once again with those who would exclude them from church worship services. After overturning the tables of the moneychangers and thus indicating that there were some present in God's temple who ought not to be (Matthew 21:12-13), Jesus indicated His great zeal for the church by referring to it as "My house" (verse 13). The blind and lame came to Him in the temple and rather than showing His displeasure as He had with the moneychangers, He healed them there (verse 14). Then the chief priests saw what He was doing and heard the covenant children who were present at the temple praising Him, and they were indignant [*'aganaktew*] (verse 15).

The chief priests realized that they had to "do something" about Christ, so they tried to get Him to contradict everything that He had been teaching with respect to cove-

nant children. The children had been crying, “Hosanna to the Son of David.” The chief priests and scribes wanted it stopped. But Christ’s response was not merely that He Himself had taught that these covenant little ones should be present, but also that the Old Testament taught the same thing. He “saith unto them, Yea; have ye never read, Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise?” (verse 16).

Now it is significant that it is from the mouths of babes and sucklings that God perfects praise (or ordains strength, as it is translated in Psalm 8:2), for these words are for infants who are so young that they do not yet possess the capability of speech. The word for “babe” that is found in Psalm 8:2 is ללוּ, and the New Testament word found here in Matthew 21 is νηπιο" (the same ones to which God the Father revealed “these things” in Matthew 11:25). The respective Hebrew and Greek words translated “suckling” are קָנוֹי and γαζαζόνθ. As the name implies, these are infants who are still at their mothers’ breasts. It was the custom for Hebrew mothers to nurse their infants to an older age than mothers in the United States, but these children were still very likely under the age of three. A קָנוֹי is younger than an ללוּ because while the ללוּ is still a suckling, he also gets some soft food such as bread (Lamentations 4:4).⁷² But even Hebrew mothers normally had weaned their infants by the time they were three years old. We can surmise from these facts, therefore, that both the

72. Alfred Edersheim: *Sketches of Jewish Social Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 103-104.

babe and the suckling of which Christ spoke were under three years of age.

Notice that Christ maintained that even those of such a tender age *are capable in a way that pleases Him* of rendering God praise *in the place of assembly*. As Calvin observed on this text,⁷³

God needs no other orators to proclaim His power than mere infants, who are still hanging on their mothers' breasts. In themselves, no doubt, they are silent; but the wonderful providence of God, which shines in them, serves the purpose of splendid and powerful eloquence. ... But since the praises of God are heard from the tongue of infants, Christ infers from this, that it is not strange if He cause them to be uttered by children who have already acquired the use of speech.

In fact, Christ earlier said that God would give tongues and lips to the very stones rather than allow His kingdom to be without testimony (Luke 19:40).

Not only were the children present in the temple, they apparently had been there many times in the past to know to sing hosannas to Christ as He healed in the house of God. In fact, in crying "hosanna" they were imitating what they had seen their parents do in the worship services of the temple so many times. As Henry observed,⁷⁴

Little children say and do as they hear others say, and see others do Children will learn of those that are with them, either to curse and swear, or to pray and praise. The Jews did betimes

73. John Calvin: *Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), *ad loc.*

74. Matthew Henry: *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, n.d.), *ad loc.*

[early] teach their children to carry branches at the feast of tabernacles, and to cry Hosanna; but God taught them here to apply it to Christ . . . Our LORD Jesus not only allowed it, but was very well pleased with it, and quoted a Scripture which was fulfilled in it.

Henry also made the point that in infants God is particularly glorified because His strength is made perfect in their weakness.⁷⁵

It has a peculiar tendency to the honor and glory of God for little children to join in His praises; the praise would be accounted defective and imperfect, if they had not their share in it; which is an encouragement for children . . . and to parents . . . When great things are brought about by weak and unlikely instruments, God is thereby much honored, for His strength is made perfect in weakness, and the infirmities of the babes and sucklings serve for a foil to the divine power.

Summary of Chapter Three

Throughout His earthly ministry, from the womb to the very last week of His life, Jesus had an attitude of love and inclusion toward covenant children. He consistently opposed those who would exclude covenant children and infants from His presence or from the kingdom of God and its ordinances. Sometimes the opposition came, as we might expect, from the chief priests and scribes. On other occasions, however, the opposition came from Christ's own disciples.

We saw that John Baptizer was filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb. Furthermore, the tiny

75. *Ibid.*

embryonic John was fully capable even at that tender age of being apprehended by the LORD. And more than that, upon being apprehended and known by God, John was fully capable of leaping for joy at the approach of his Savior.

We additionally noted that the things of the LORD are spiritual in nature, and not necessarily apprehended by the reason. As a result, God often hides the things of His kingdom from the wise and prudent and reveals them instead to speechless babes. Because even the wisest of men cannot understand the things of God without the aid of His Spirit, and because even a speechless babe can receive the things of the Spirit without conceptual understanding, salvation is “not by power nor by might but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts” (Zechariah 4:6).

Next we learned that it is far better for a man to have a millstone hung about his neck and be cast into the depth of the sea than to offend a covenant child. Offending a covenant child is set in opposition to receiving him. The original context had been who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, but Christ went on in the discussion to state that whoever receives a covenant child in the name of Christ is receiving Christ. We observed at that point that this is, in fact, a moral issue with hellfire the result of disobedience.

Then we looked at Matthew chapter nineteen and saw Christ use a negative imperative when He told His disciples to quit forbidding parents to bring their covenant children to Him for blessing. According to Arndt and Gingrich’s *Greek-English Lexicon*, this construction is used whenever a negation is a general rule and not simply a one-time prohibi-

tion.⁷⁶Dana and Mantey⁷⁷agree in this assessment, but refer to it as “the imperative of prohibition.” We observed additionally that Christ was displeased with the disciples to the point of indignation. Not only should the parents not have been rebuked, they should have been commended for bringing their infants to Christ.

Finally we noted that Christ was pleased to receive the praise of the children who were crying hosannas in the temple. We additionally learned from His explanation to the chief priests and scribes that even tiny babes and sucklings should be allowed to praise God in the temple, for this was the setting in which Christ spoke. Never once in His thirty-three or more years on earth did Christ ever turn His back on a covenant infant. Instead, there were numerous occasions in which He both ministered to them and told His followers to be more like them.

As with most other things in the kingdom, there is both a giving and a receiving on the part of covenant children. They are our examples of humility, i.e. realizing that there is nothing at all we can do to merit God’s favor. We are their examples in what it means to grow up and remain submissive to the will of the LORD. They are our examples in that we must desire the Word of God in the same way that they desire mother’s milk. Additionally, while they are our examples in malice (not holding grudges), we are their

76. Arndt & Gingrich: *op. cit.*, p. 518.

77. H. E. Dana & J. R. Mantey: *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Toron.: Macmillan, 1957), p. 175, 300-303.

examples in understanding. In a word, the infants and children of the church *need* the adults of the church, but the adults *also need* the infants and children. As G. I. Williamson stated in his study of *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, “Even those members of the Christian church which are lacking in ability, knowledge, or usefulness serve a purpose involving all believers.”⁷⁸

78. Williamson: *op. cit.*, p. 197.

CHAPTER FOUR:

Conclusion

A Summary of the Thesis

The offspring of believers play a very important part in God's covenant. Even prior to Adam's fall, God commanded that man was to reproduce and thus replenish the earth with a godly seed. When redemption of the human race became an historical necessity due to the fall, God revealed that He would save His people in the context of "believers and their seed." This covenantal grace was demonstrated in the sacrament of circumcision in the Old Testament and is continued in the sacrament of baptism in the New Testament.

Furthermore, we learned in Chapter Two of this book that God has given specific commands to His people to bring their children into the worship services. The purpose for the commands is twofold: God has chosen to receive praise even from the mouths of babes and sucklings, and the seed of the covenant are required to learn God's Word from both family and church.

God, through Moses, required that the children of believers be present in the worship services. God made His covenant not only with believers, but also with their seed. This is the very basis upon which Presbyterians baptize their children. The book of Proverbs, as we saw, also insists that children should be taught the Word of God from the earliest age (e.g. Proverbs 8:17; 13:24; etc.). While these data indicate

the importance of raising children to know God's Word, this book further adduced passages of Scripture that demonstrate that God on several occasions throughout the history of His people called upon the children to be present in services such as fasts and thanksgivings.

With the lone exception of the LORD's Supper (or the Passover in the Old Testament), we learned that the children of believers are entitled to all the outward privileges of the church.⁷⁹The implications of Scripture and the history of the church both indicate that covenant children should be included in the worship services. Parents and church should together train the children of the church in "the way that they should go." There is not a single Scripture passage indicating that children should routinely be excluded from the regular worship services of the church.

In fact, the PCA *Directory for the Worship of God* (BCO Chapters 47 to 63) clearly indicates that the PCA stands in conformity with the historical position of the body of Christ.⁸⁰With respect to worship services, BCO 47-7 states "the Covenant children should be present so far as possible

79. For the reasons for excluding them from the LORD's Supper, see the pamphlet *What Mean Ye By This Service?* (Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1989).

80. Once again, it should be noted that what is said here of the PCA is true of other Reformed bodies as well. The Orthodox Presbyterian Church's *Directory for Worship* II:8 states in part, "Public worship differs from private worship in that in public worship God is served by His saints unitedly as His covenant people, the body of Christ. For this reason the *covenant children should be present as far as possible as well as adults*" [emphasis added].

as well as adults.” *BCO* 49-4 gives the reason for this when it states, “Since the family, as ordained by God, is the basic institution in society, and God in the covenant graciously deals with us, not just as individuals but also as families, it is important and desirable that families worship together.”

In Chapter Three of this book we examined Jesus’ attitude and concern for covenant children. We noted five specific instances in which Christ dealt directly with the issues concerning us. In each instance Christ took the part of covenant children against those who would exclude them from His presence or service. When Christ taught His disciples regarding who would be greatest in the kingdom of God, He used a little child as an example. Furthermore, He made clear to the disciples that the inclusion of covenant children is a moral issue.

John Baptizer was filled with the Holy Ghost while still in his mother’s womb. This filling was passive in the sense that God Himself filled John, but John’s response to the filling was an active one in that he “leaped for joy in his mother’s womb.” John Baptizer was still in his mother’s womb, yet God worked mightily in his heart. It is unreasonable in the light of this to speak of an “age of accountability” or “age of discernment” before which we exclude children from rejoicing in the light of their salvation.

In fact, Christ maintained during His earthly ministry that it is sometimes (and perhaps often) the Father’s good pleasure to reveal Himself to babies. Whatever rational or conceptual faculties children may have, God can and does reveal Himself to children when He so pleases (*WCF* X:iii,

q.v.). Christ did not teach that God's revelations of Himself were by their nature irrational or mystical. But He did teach that the understanding was incapable alone of apprehending God. It is in *that* sense that the things of God have been hidden from the wise and prudent. It is necessary to receive the Spirit of God (as the embryonic John Baptizer did) in order to understand the things of God. As Paul the Apostle told the Corinthians, "Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God" (First Corinthians 2:12). Paul also prayed for the Ephesians, "that the God of our LORD Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him: The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints" (Ephesians 1:17-18). Paul prayed that God would reveal Himself to the Ephesians in the same manner that Christ claimed the Father reveals Himself to babies.

As with most points of doctrine or theology, there are moral implications and applications to what we believe. Christ warned His disciples that it would be better for a man to have a millstone drag him to the bottom of the sea than to offend a covenant child. Christ defined offending a child as the opposite of receiving him. Anything that offends should be cut off. If our hand offends, it should be severed; if our foot offends, it too should be severed; if our eye offends, it should be plucked out. The reason Christ gave was quite straightforward: it is better to go through life maimed than to be cast into hell. Christ continued to make the same appli-

cation to the act of offending a covenant child. It is better to be drowned than cast into hell for certain damnation. Christ made His point quite graphically — offend a covenant child by not receiving him and burn!

This issue is therefore a moral one. Many such issues confront the church in the twentieth century. The worship services of the church have been corrupted by numerous additions and accretions. Even Protestant churches have succumbed to the siren-call of entertainment and idolatry. However, that fact does not in any way diminish the importance of this issue. Rather, it serves to accentuate it. Many of God’s ministers who are otherwise Reformed and would not entertain the suggestion of introducing novelties or extraordinary measures into God’s services have ignored the moral implications of having ongoing nurseries in which the children of the covenant are *routinely* excluded from the worship services of the church and thereby offended.

This question is not one to be decided by majority vote or the perceived “needs” of mothers and fathers in the church. Rather it is to be decided by *sola Scriptura* (i.e., Scripture alone). If the Scriptures sanction nurseries, then by all means they should be maintained. If the opposite is the case, then we must avoid them as idolatry and will-worship.

On one occasion, Luke 18:15-17, parents brought infants to Christ for Him to bless. Christ’s disciples rebuked the parents, but Christ’s response was quite different. He called the children to Him and told the disciples always to allow children to come to Him and never to forbid them from coming.

We learned from Chapter One that even covenant infants share in the first Adam's sin. In order for these babies to escape the wrath and curse of God they must also share in the last Adam's grace. Christ promised that He would not turn any away who came to Him for salvation (John 6:37). By prohibiting His disciples from forbidding covenant children to come to Him, Christ made a similar promise to our children whom we, as "trustees of their wills," bring to Christ .

But how is it that we come to Christ? It is by the ordinary means of grace which are most abundantly made available in the church's worship services. It is by the reading and preaching of the Word of God, prayer and sacraments that we come to Christ. We must not be guilty of forbidding these same means to our children as others might to theirs.

Christ's first interaction with a covenant child took place before either He or the covenant child were born. His last confrontation regarding covenant children took place on the eve of His death. Significantly, the final confrontation took place right in the temple, which Christ called "My house" (Matthew 21:13). Christ's zeal for the purity of worship was demonstrated by His casting the money-changers from the temple. Yet not only did He not cast out children, He went so far as to maintain that Psalm 8:2 was fulfilled in the cries of the children, "Hosanna to the Son of David."

Covenant children, according to Christ Himself, have a place in the worship services of the church singing to the glory of God and praising Him. If previous passages set the "tone" for our study, then this passage makes our conclusion

definitive. Covenant children have a *right* to be present and active in the worship services of the church. Not only do the children have a right to be present, but God manifests His glory in the praises of these dear lambs.

The church may not, without becoming subject to the wrath and judgment of God, routinely exclude covenant infants from worship services. Such exclusion is precisely the effect that an ongoing nursery has. As was stated in the Preface to this book, this concern should not be construed as an argument against “crying rooms.” It may be that an adult, at times, will have to be excused from worship services when a cough or the like distracts other worshipers. The same is true of infants. If or when children disrupt a worship service with uncontrollable crying, wiggling or giggling, the parents should remove them to an area adjacent to, or in the sanctuary. This area should not be a “junior church” with its own “service.” Rather, the actual church service should be “piped in” via public address system. Neither should the crying room become a dormitory, a playroom or a parental social gathering.

As Dr. F. Nigel Lee has said, “It is clear that the best place for a Presbyterian infant is inside the sanctuary at the time of his baptism and for ever thereafter — and not in a church nursery outside of the sanctuary and removed from his parents under the care of a hired nurse.”⁸¹ Dr. Lee advocates the same scheme outlined above (he refers to it as a

81. Dr. F. Nigel Lee: *Biblical Principles for Church Architecture* (unpublished manuscript, n.d.), p. 21.

“babies’ room” rather than a “crying room”). He goes on to explain the importance of such a room: “Only when a Presbyterian baptized in infancy has faithfully lived in the house of the LORD from cradle to grave, has the covenant of grace really been correctly understood throughout (First Corinthians 7:3-5,12-14; Ephesians 6:1-4; Psalm 92:13-14).

“The provision of cribs inside a soundproof babies’ room with transparent walls inside of the sanctuary solves the problem! Parents can sit there with infant covenant children, and as *participating worshipers* they can all see the service and hear its sound piped into that babies’ room (located either at floor level or on a balcony...within and at the back of the sanctuary). This safeguards the congregation from being disturbed by the voices of Christ’s little ones, enables fathers and mothers to tend to their own infants while watching and listening to the service, *preserves the covenantal family intact*, and keeps these families visibly inside the sanctuary as a whole during congregational worship!”⁸²[italics added, underscore in original].

Objections and Answers

In the first three chapters of this book, we examined the scriptural data concerning covenant children. It might seem to many that once the Scriptures have spoken to a subject nothing further need be said. However, it is often the case that one hears “yes, but...” type objections. We will now take up three “yes, but...” type objections one at a time. We

82. *Ibid.*

will see from a careful examination of the nature of each objection that it already has been adequately answered from Scripture. Once again, we must presuppose that Scripture is sufficient and final with respect to how God is to be worshiped.

The first of these objections is what may be called the “expediency” argument. Nearly all American churches now have nurseries, and parents have come to expect that there will be a nursery at any church they visit. We want to have a church that will be attractive to new families, especially those with young children. It therefore appears necessary to have a church nursery in order to attract more families. This line of argumentation practically denies the efficacy of God’s Spirit. Means and measures are seen as being more effective than the Spirit of God in calling men and women into His church. But let us try to answer this objection.

Our answer to this objection is twofold. First, we deny the force of the argument. If the regulative principle is true, then God is to be worshiped only as He has ordained in His Word. He has ordained that covenant children are to be present in congregational worship. Therefore, the unlawfulness of nurseries is based upon God’s Word and not upon an appeal to what works best or what seems to us to be most attractive. In fact, in making attractiveness the criterion of how we worship God, we have entered into the area of will-worship. Will-worship is condemned by God’s Word in such passages as Deuteronomy 12:32 and Colossians 2:20-23. One might as well argue that more people would be attracted to the church if it had a basketball team or swimming pool!

While not allowing expediency as an argument with any force, it is possible that having nurseries in the church is in fact not expedient. People learn by example as well as by precept. This is as true for adults as it is for children. Having a nursery is an example on the part of the church that, if strictly followed, could lead to parents excluding their children from family devotions. The nursery, as an institution, teaches parents the false doctrine that it makes no moral difference if the Word of God is taught to their children. After all, if the church has a low opinion of teaching the Word to her children, parents will have the same low opinion. By attempting to attract people to the church by catering to a desire on the part of those people to be “conveniently” rid of their children, the church implies that it makes no moral difference if the children hear the Word of God read and preached.

Christ appealed to a fear of hellfire when He said that it would be better for a millstone to be hanged around the necks of such parents (and elders!) than to “offend one of these little ones which believe in Me.” The root problem with the expediency argument is that it ignores the moral imperative that Christ gave to receive these children. The church has no commission to build basketball courts or swimming pools to attract the families of the community to worship services. Neither should a church have nurseries as a means of attracting parents who are ignorant of covenantal principles. Rather, the church should put into practice those covenantal principles that it claims to believe.

Another objection which might be brought against a Presbyterian doctrine of nurseries is the “worshipful atmo-

sphere” argument. According to this argument, we must worship God in a reverent manner (so far so good). But children are, by their very presence, disturbing to such reverence and therefore ought to be excluded. Once again, our answer to the objection is twofold.

First, it is admitted that children are sometimes disruptive to a worship service by reason of their cries. But this is far different from asserting that children are disruptive by their very *presence*. It has already been stated that crying rooms (or, as Dr. Lee calls them, “babies’ rooms”) may occupy the rear portion of the sanctuary and that parents may lawfully retire there with their children when the children are disruptive in a worship service. Excluding a child for cause is different in both intent and effect from routinely excluding a child due to his age alone.

Orthodox Presbyterian minister and missionary Karl Hubenthal, in his excellent pamphlet *Children and Worship*, explains the difference between a nursery and a babies’ room in this regard.⁸³

Someone is bound to suggest that the parent’s taking a child out of the room for being naughty is essentially the same as having a nursery. It emphatically is not! The rule is that all the church should worship together as a body. The first remedy is an exception to the rule; the second is a substitute for the rule. The first is an emergency action for the sake of keeping the rule; the second is establishing an alternate pattern in lieu of it. The first is temporary and short lived; the second is a permanent fixture. The first is permissible; the second is unnecessary, detrimental, and

83. Karl A. Hubenthal: *Children and Worship* (Havertown, PA: New Covenant Publication Society, 1987), n.p.

prohibited. If there are problems with the parent's taking the screaming or misbehaving child out of the service for whatever remedy will correct the problem, then there are greater problems with having a nursery simultaneously with the worship. If the correct procedure is abused, then we deal with the abuse, but if the procedure itself is an abuse, then on what foundation do we stand if we wish to keep things under control?

A second answer to this objection is also possible and is also much more to the point. The position of both Christ and the Psalmist (in Matthew 21:16 and Psalm 8:2) was that children were capable of praising God. An atmosphere devoid of the praises of God's lambs cannot properly be called a "worshipful atmosphere" however much it may appeal to our own view of what a worshipful atmosphere might be. As Matthew Henry said concerning the passage in Matthew, "Our LORD Jesus not only allowed it, but was very well pleased with it, and quoted a Scripture which was fulfilled in it."⁸⁴

God has called us to worship Him in the congregation of His saints. The children of believers are included in the scope of that call. An atmosphere cannot be called more worshipful if some of the proper worshipers are never there. The "worshipful atmosphere" argument fails due to its misunderstanding of what a properly worshipful atmosphere involves. A proper definition of worship includes not only what is done, but who does it and the spirit in which it is done. Let us beware of the spirit that Marcel called "Pharisaic brutality."⁸⁵

84. Matthew Henry: *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, n.d.), *ad loc.*

Still another objection that is raised to having covenantal infants in the worship services is that it does not make any difference because they do not understand what is going on anyway. This can be fairly characterized as the argument based on “non-rationality.” This argument seeks to make the understanding of the infants central to the issue of whether they should be present and then goes on to make the unwarranted assumption that the children could not possibly understand anything of what is happening.

First, we must confess that true Christianity is not an irrational religion. That is, it does not seek truth in trances or mystical visions. In fact, the truths of Christianity are found only in the propositional truth of God’s Word. If that is the case, then it must be determined to what extent infants have understanding of God’s Word and to what extent they lack understanding. We are not warranted from God’s Word to assume that spiritual understanding is possible to natural reason.

Christ maintained that in the case of at least some adults and some infants, it was the infants who had true spiritual understanding and the adults who lacked it. In Matthew 11, Christ prayed, “I thank thee, O Father, LORD of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight” (verses 25-26). God reveals Himself to whom He will. Regardless of the

85. Pierre CH. Marcel: *Baptism* (Cherry Hill, NJ: Mack, 1973), p. 133.

seeming “wisdom” of some adults, God hides His truths from them. More importantly, regardless of the seeming lack of understanding possessed by infants, God sometimes reveals His truths to them, and probably more often than we would recognize or care to admit!

This should teach us not to look upon the outward appearance. As discussed earlier in this book, the understanding must be enlightened by the Spirit of God. Paul reminded the Corinthians, “it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this world? Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe” (First Corinthians 1:19-21).

An infant or even a babe in the womb may not have a complete understanding of Christ’s atonement. But neither does a full-grown adult have that kind of understanding. God alone is omniscient and He alone has a complete understanding of anything, including the truths of the Bible. But that is not to say that an infant has no understanding at all. John Baptizer was apparently able to understand Who it was that approached in the womb of Mary. God apparently revealed Himself to babes during Christ’s earthly ministry. Children are made in God’s image from the moment of conception onward and, as such, are capable of receiving the engrafted Word with meekness. To assert otherwise is to deny what the Scriptures have to say about us and our children as well as what the Scriptures say regarding the effi-

cacy of the Spirit's calling and the sovereignty of God.

While people do put forward the preceding arguments against nurseries, it is nevertheless the impression of this author that the real problem lies elsewhere. What is taking place in Presbyterian churches in the U.S.A. and around the world is a failure to properly understand and apply the Scriptures to our worship services. Nurseries are simply one manifestation of a failure on the part of Presbyterians to properly apply what we claim to believe.

American Presbyterians have been especially impressed by what seems to "work." As a result, they have begun in the last generation to import methods and measures that would have been unthinkable to our Presbyterian, Reformed and Puritan forbears. Church growth (i.e. ever-increasing membership rolls) has become an end in itself rather than the result of God's Word being preached faithfully and fervently.

As indicated, nurseries are simply one manifestation of this spirit of the age. They have been imported into the Presbyterian churches from Baptist churches which have no consistent theology of children. Baptists, at best, see their children in a neutral position somewhere between election and reprobation. They do not baptize their children because they do not regard their children as having a right to the outward privileges of the church. They are therefore somewhat more consistent with their theology than modern Presbyterians are with theirs. But it is time for Presbyterians to become consistent with the theology of the Bible and to put into practice the theology that they claim to believe.

Presbyterians must begin to assert their heritage: the heritage of the Bible and of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. We must insist that God is to be worshiped only in the manner He has ordained in His Word. We must insist that God has called us in families — that He **always has**. We must rid ourselves of the trappings and vestiges of this world’s wisdom and instead take up the whole armor of God. We must ourselves be transformed by the renewing of our minds into a proper understanding of God’s Word, and then we must act upon that understanding.

Toward a Scriptural View

In the previous chapter, we insisted that Presbyterians must begin to take a Scriptural view of children and of their place in the worship services of God. The purpose of this section is to provide a beginning for the pursuit of such a view. This section is not intended to be the “last word,” but rather an outline of the direction such a theology should take. A proper theology of children should be considered from the standpoints of the vocability of children, the centrality of the Word of God, the importance of the covenant community and finally the implications for congregational worship.

An earlier chapter called into question the claim made by some that children lack reason or understanding and should therefore be excluded from the worship services of the church. It is the contention of this author that children are, in fact, reasonable creatures. It was established from Scripture, however, that reason alone is incapable of understand-

ing the truths of God's Spirit. The Holy Spirit must work supernaturally on the heart of a sinner before he can accept the truths of Scripture as the truths of God. We must not "lean unto our own understanding," but instead seek the wisdom that comes from above. Children have all the capacity that is necessary for the Holy Spirit to call them. Jeremiah the prophet was called while in his mother's womb, as was John Baptizer (Jeremiah 1:5-6 & Luke 1:15,41). Furthermore, the Psalmist David acknowledges that he, too, was known by God while still in his mother's womb (Psalm 139:13-16 cf. Psalm 51:5). If fetuses in the womb can be called by God, then there is no reason to suppose that the mere fact of their birth makes them any less callable. Any biblical theology of children must begin, then, with the fact that even infants in the womb are capable of being called by God and that at least some infants are so called.

Second, we must acknowledge the centrality of the Word of God in salvation. Paul told the Romans, "so then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God" (Romans 10:17). The ordinary means that God has appointed for calling His people and thus justifying and sanctifying them is the preaching of His Word. Although chapter ten (article iii) of our *Westminster Confession of Faith* acknowledges that elect infants dying in infancy are saved when and where and how God pleases, the entire chapter also maintains that God ordinarily calls us by His Word.

We must therefore not only expect that God will call our covenant children, but that He will call them by His Word.

This is the centrality of God's Word, or what is sometimes called *sola Scriptura*. God has magnified His Word above His name (Psalm 138:2). He has given His Word to perform all that He intends for it. It is by His Word that He ordinarily reveals Himself to us. Christ in fact executes His office of prophet by revealing God's will to us by His Word and Spirit. Our desire for our children's salvation, then, must be tied to our hope that God will accomplish that salvation by His Word. His Word is most notably made available to His people in the congregational worship services of the church. We must then expect that God will ordinarily call our children, justifying and sanctifying them, as a result of their attendance upon His Word in the worship of the church.

As important as the doctrine of the vocability of children is; as central as the preaching of God's Word is; we must also remember the importance of the communion of saints in God's economy. The church baptizes her children publicly in the sight of all God's people in that place. It is also customary for the people of the church to vow to assist the parents in raising that covenant child in the nurture and admonition of the LORD. The child, in other words, has a "right" to the aid of the other members of the church in his spiritual guidance. But that right is meaningless unless the child is known to the members and the members known to the child. *WCF XXVI:ii* speaks of the communion of saints in this manner: "Saints, by profession, are bound to maintain an holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God, and in performing such other spiritual services as tend to their mutual edification... ."

The third area that Presbyterians must examine in order

to arrive at a Biblical theology of children, is the communion of saints. God does not call us as rugged individualists, but always sets the solitary in families (Psalm 68:6). The church is the community of saints and, as such, has a responsibility that is dictated and controlled by Scripture toward the children of that holy community. The confessional doctrine of the communion of saints leads us to the final area of examination that Presbyterians must take seriously in order to arrive at a biblical doctrine of children.

According to the PCA's *Book of Church Order* 47-2, "A service of public worship is not merely a gathering of God's children with each other, but before all else, a meeting of the triune God with His chosen people."⁸⁶The implications of congregational worship require that **all** God's chosen people be present to worship Him. Furthermore, the *Book of Church Order* goes on in the same chapter (47-7) to state that "Public worship differs from private worship in that in public worship God is served by His saints unitedly as His Covenant people, the body of Christ. For this reason the Covenant children should be present so far as possible as well as adults."⁸⁷The unity of the Body of Christ is shown forth most completely in the worship service. As Presbyterians, we believe that this unity *includes* our covenant infants. For this reason, the idea and principles of corporate worship imply that our infants should be present.

86. See also the *Directory For Worship* of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, II:2.

87. *ibid*, II:8.

In summary, a Presbyterian doctrine of children must begin with the vocabulary of children. We do not tie the calling of God's Spirit to bare rationality. Second, a correct theology of children acknowledges the centrality of the Word of God in the calling of the children. The importance of the community is seen in the communion of saints and the rights that covenant children have to the gifts and graces of the rest of God's people. Finally, the implications of congregational worship insist that children be present with their parents. Any future theology of children should proceed along this four-fold line.

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