

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Special Messages		Pastor/Teacher
Text:	1 Corinthians 7:14		Gary L. W. Johnson
Date:	December 15, 2019 (a.m.)		

THE REFORMED DOCTRINE OF CHILDREN IN THE COVENANT

“The question of the Subject of Baptism,” wrote Warfield, “is one of that class of problems the solution of which hangs upon a previous question. According as is our doctrine of the Church, so will be our doctrine of the Subjects of Baptism. If we believe, with the Church of Rome, that the Church is in such a sense the institute of salvation that none are united to Christ save through the instrumentality of her ordinances, then we shall inevitably determine the proper subjects of her ordinances in one way. If, on the other hand, we believe, with the Protestant bodies, that only those already united to Christ have right within His house and to its privileges, we shall inevitably determine them in another way. All Protestants should easily agree that only Christ’s children have a right to the ordinance of baptism. The cleavage in their ranks enters in only when we inquire how the external Church is to hold itself relatively to the recognition of the children of Christ. If we say that its attitude should be as exclusive as possible, and that it must receive as the children of Christ only those whom it is forced to recognize as such, then we shall inevitably narrow the circle of the subjects of baptism to the lowest limits. If, on the other hand, we say that its attitude should be as inclusive as possible, and that it should receive as the children of Christ all whom, in the judgment of charity, it may fairly recognize as such, then we shall naturally widen the circle of the subjects of baptism to far more ample limits. The former represents, broadly speaking, the Puritan idea of the Church, the latter the general Protestant doctrine. It is on the basis of the Puritan conception of the Church that the Baptists are led to exclude infants from baptism.”¹ The argument for infant baptism, like the doctrine of the Trinity, is *inferential, cumulative, and conclusive*. It rests upon a covenantal understanding of the unity of the people of God. “One can say without exaggeration that this view of the unity of the Old and New Covenants formed the essential and profoundest basis for the defense of infant baptism. There was no *a priori* dogmatic reason for the decision, and neither was there an explicit scriptural command. The intention, nevertheless, was to think and conclude on the basis of Scripture as a whole.”²

I. **THE OLD TESTAMENT WITNESS.** “The warrant for infant baptism,” writes Warfield, “is not to be sought in the New Testament but in the Old Testament.”³ In this connection, it is not without interest that the Anabaptists, the sixteenth century precursors of the Baptists, had a marked tendency to disparage the Old Testament and to destroy the proper unity of Scripture.”⁴

A. **Children are Particularly Specified in the Covenant.** In Genesis 17, God established His covenant with Abraham and gave him circumcision as the sign of the covenant – and this sign was administered to every male child (17:10, cf. also Genesis 21:4). Paul, in Romans 4:11, tells us that circumcision was a *sign* and a *seal* of the righteousness of faith. Circumcision, therefore, served as the sign of the covenant. We know that the sign of circumcision did not bring Abraham into the Covenant; it confirmed that he was *in* it. It was “a seal of the *righteousness* of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised” (Romans 4:11). We know that Abraham’s circumcised infant child did not receive faith through the sign of circumcision. He was not regenerated by that rite. Indeed, *nothing* happened to him spiritually. The significance of circumcision for the child was this: he received circumcision because it was God’s command, and this was a sign that even as God had received Abraham into the Church according to the Covenant, so He recognized

Abraham's family as part of Abraham himself. His children were *federally holy* and separate from the rest of the world. It signified this external privilege as well as the deeper spiritual privileges of God's grace. It put the child in the *way of blessing*.⁵

NOTE: Where males were circumcised, females were considered to be under the covenantal status of their fathers (in the same sense of headship, 1 Corinthians 11:3), but females of heathen nations were called "uncircumcised" (Judges 14:3).

B. *God and the Old Testament Family.* Note the following examples:

1. Noah received grace from God, **and** his family is saved (Genesis 6).
2. God deals graciously with Lot **and** his children (Genesis 19:12).
3. God made His covenant with Israel – men, women, **and** children (Deuteronomy 29:10-13).
4. When the people of God are gathered in the Old Testament, the children are there (Joel 2:16, 17).
5. God promises to those who fear Him **and** to their children's children (Psalm 103:17).

II. ***THE NEW TESTAMENT PRACTICE.***

A. *God and the New Testament Family.* Note the following examples that contain the Old Testament teaching of God and families:⁶

1. The daughter of a Jewish official is healed because of the father's faith (Matthew 9:18-19, 23-26).
2. The father of an epileptic requested healing by Jesus for his son, and the boy is healed (Matthew 17:14-18).
3. A widow's son is raised from the dead. Why did Jesus do this (she did not ask)? Jesus had compassion on her (Luke 7:11-17).
4. Jesus healed an official's son **because** the boy's father asked (John 4:46-54).

Notice that in each case, the child was restored because of the parent.

B. *The Concept of "House" in the New Testament.* In the New Testament, we have recorded nine different accounts of baptism.

1. Three thousand on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41).
2. The Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:27-38).
3. Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9:1-18).
4. The Samaritan converts (Acts 19:5).
5. The disciples of John the Baptist (Acts 19:5).
6. Lydia and her family (Acts 16:15).
7. The Philippian jailer and his family (Acts 16:32, 33).
8. Crispus with all his family (1 Corinthians 1:16).
9. Cornelius and his family (Acts 11:14).

NOTE: In no less than five of these we are told that *families* were baptized. Baptists say that this does not necessarily mean that there were infants. But notice that Peter declared that the promise is to you and your *children* (Acts 2:39), and we know that in the first century Jews themselves practiced baptism as a rite for the initiation of proselytes, and this definitely included children along with the parents.⁷ Furthermore, the word translated "family" or "house" is **oikos** and its Old Testament usage *always* includes little children (cf. Genesis 34:30; Numbers 16:27, 32; Deuteronomy 25:9; Ruth 4:12; Psalm 113:9; 1 Samuel 2:33).

- C. *The Case of the Philippian Jailer.* Note the language of v. 31 – Paul tells the jailer that his family will *also* be saved. How is it possible for Paul to assure the jailer of this? The only answer is that the Apostle knew the Old Testament and that God does purpose to save His people in the line of continued generations.⁸ So in the case of the jailer, *he* believed, *he* rejoiced, but he *and all his house were baptized*.
- D. *The Status of Children With Christian Parent(s).* In 1 Corinthians 7:14, Paul declares that due to *one* believing parent, the children are “holy,” not by nature, since *all* are children of wrath even as others (Ephesians 2:3), but *federally*, in the sense of *covenantal* holiness. The other word rendered *unclean*, **akathartha**, means unconsecrated, the state of those *outside* of the covenant community (cf. Leviticus 20:26; Ezra 9:2; Deuteronomy 7:6, 14:2, 21).
- E. *Jesus and Little Children.* The attitude and statements of Jesus to and about children constitute an important element. In Matthew 18:3, Jesus draws from childhood the object lesson for entering the Kingdom. In all three synoptic Gospels, we have the account of Jesus receiving into His arms and blessing little children (in Luke 18:15-17, the word is **brephos**, meaning babies). The very fact that the mothers came to Jesus and sought His blessing indicates that they saw the hope of their salvation, and the salvation of their children, in Christ. It should also be pointed out that Jesus, writes, Bromiley, “does not seem to share the rationalistic view that the Holy Spirit cannot do his work of illumination and regeneration except in those who have at least the beginnings of an adult understanding.”⁹

NOTE: Children *are* said to be the objects of the Spirit’s work in Scripture. Abijah as a child feared the Lord (1 Kings 14:13), as did Obadiah (1 Kings 18:12), Samuel who was called as a small child (1 Samuel 1:22), Jeremiah, who was sanctified from his mother’s womb (Jeremiah 1:5), as was Paul (Galatians 1:15), and John the Baptist, who was filled with the Holy Spirit in the womb (Luke 1:15).

CONCLUSION: The Apostle Paul, along with the rest of the writers of the New Testament, represents the Church of the Living God as one. It was founded on His covenant promise to Abraham – and from Abraham to our day, the promise is to us *and* to our children. The visible Church consists of believers and their children. The argument, says Warfield, “is simply this: God established His Church in the days of Abraham and put children into it. They must remain there until He puts them out. He has nowhere put them out. They are still then members of His Church and as such, entitled to its ordinances. Among these ordinances is baptism, which standing in similar place in the New Dispensation to circumcision in the Old, is like it to be given to children.”¹⁰

Let me conclude by quoting the wise words of the noted Presbyterian theologian Robert Lewis Dabney: “This Bible plan is in strict conformity with those doctrines of grace and principles of human nature which God employs for the sanctification of His people. Our theory assumes that God’s covenant is with His people and their seed (Acts 2:39). That their seed are heirs of the promises made to the fathers (Acts 3:25): that the cause which excludes any such from saving interest in redemption is voluntary and criminal, viz., unbelief and impenitence – a cause which they are all bound to correct at once, if they are arrived at the years of discretion: that the continuance of this cause, however just a reason for the eldership’s excluding them from certain privileges and functions, is no justification whatever for their neglecting them. And, above all, does our plan found itself on the great rule of experience, common sense, and Scripture, that if you would form a soul to the hearty embracing of right principles, you must make him observe the conduct which those principles dictate. Every faithful parent in the world acts on this rule in rearing his children. If the child is untruthful, unsympathizing, unforgiving, indolent, he compels him, while young, to observe a course of truth, charity, forgiveness, and industry. Why? Because the parent considers that the outward observance of these virtues will be either permanent or praiseworthy if, when the child becomes a man, he only observes them from fear of hypocrisy? Not at all; but because the parent knows that human nature is moulded by habits; that the practice of a principle

always strengthens it; that this use of his parental authority is the most natural and hopeful means to teach the child heartily to prefer and adopt the right principle when he becomes his own man; that it would be the merest folly to pretend didactically to teach the child the right and leave all-powerful **habit** to teach him the wrong, and to let the child spend his youth in riveting the bonds of bad habit, which, if he is ever to adopt and love the right principle, he must break. Will not our heavenly Father act on the same rule of good sense toward His children? Is not the professed principle of the Immersionist just the folly we have described? Happily, Scripture agrees with all experience and practical wisdom in saying that if you wish a child to adopt and love the principles of a Church member when he is grown, you must make him behave as a Church member while he is growing.”¹¹

ENDNOTES

¹ *The Collected Works of Benjamin B. Warfield IX* (rpt. Baker, 1981), p. 389.

² G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: The Sacraments* (Eerdmans, 1961), p.175.

³ B. B. Warfield, op. cit., p. 399.

⁴ This is the observation of Geoffrey W. Bromiley, a noted Church historian, cf. *Children of Promise* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), p. 13.

⁵ C. G. Kirkby, *Signs and Seals of the Covenants* (Evangelical Press, 1983), p. 75.

⁶ These are drawn from John P. Sartelle's excellent little book, *What Christian Parents Should Know About Infant Baptism* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1985), p. 56.

⁷ Cf. Oscar Cullmann, *Baptism in the New Testament* (SCM Press, 1956), p. 56.

⁸ Cf. the extended discussion on this subject in Herman Hanko's *We and Our Children: The Reformed Doctrine of Infant Baptism* (Reformed Free Pub., 1981), p. 64-65.

⁹ Bromiley, op. cit., p. 5.

¹⁰ Warfield, op. cit., p. 408.

¹¹ R. L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (rpt. Zondervan, 1972), p. 798.