

THE PRESBYTERIAN DOCTRINES OF COVENANT CHILDREN, COVENANT NURTURE AND COVENANT SUCCESSION

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One of the features of Presbyterian thought and life, which ought most dramatically to distinguish it from the prevailing evangelicalism, is its view of the church's children. That, in fact, even evangelical Presbyterianism is not clearly differentiated in this way is, in my judgment, one of the saddest and most dangerous consequences of the debasement of our theology in both pulpit and pew. I do not hesitate to say that in respect to the doctrine of covenant succession, that set of truths connected with the purpose of God that his saving grace run in the lines of generations, there has been such a debasement and that it has resulted in Presbyterian people being robbed of one of the most precious parts of their inheritance.

That this doctrine in its various parts is either imperfectly understood or misunderstood appears in many ways. I have noticed as a pastor, in countless interviews for church membership, the assumption on the part of many who have grown up in Presbyterian churches that it is nevertheless expected that they should know when and how they were converted. Very often, upon further reflection, these same people are quite willing to admit that what they had counted as their conversion may not, in fact, have been the beginning of their new life in Christ, and that they may well have been Christians long before. I have myself listened to more than a few Presbyterian sermons devoted to one aspect or another of this truth only to be dismayed by how far removed such instruction regularly is from the doctrine of our church and our theological tradition. It is now quite common, for example, to hear ministers rise to the defense of parents whose children have betrayed the gospel as if they have quite forgotten the emphatic connection the Bible makes between the faithfulness of parental nurture and the eventual spiritual convictions of children.¹ And no wonder! For all the books available defending paedobaptism, there is not presently in print, to my knowledge, a single work of substance and worth devoted to the doctrine of covenant succession, providing a Biblical exposition of the doctrine in its various parts, clearing objections, and applying the whole to the practicalities of child-rearing in the Christian home. Such a work is most definitely a

¹ John R. de Witt, in his excellent exposition of the parable of the prodigal son, while acknowledging the tremendous responsibility laid upon parents for the spiritual nurture of their children and the blameworthiness of parents who neglect that nurture, nevertheless argues: "But it is by no means possible to argue back from a life wrecked by sin to parental blame, and to say that because a son or daughter comes to lead a life of wickedness, therefore the parents must certainly have been at fault. Who of us is sufficient for these things? It is, after all, only the grace of God that brings any to Christ and spares any a life of folly and ruin. Some godly and faithful parents have had wretched children, for the wreckage of whose lives they were not responsible. That the instance of the prodigal son also makes clear." *Amazing Love*, Edinburgh, 1981, pp. 23-24. It is noteworthy that this conclusion is almost precisely that of my friend Bruce Ray who writes from a Reformed Baptist persuasion. *Withhold not Correction*, Phillipsburg, 1978, p. 67. This is still more interesting in view of de Witt's splendid and thorough refutation of the Reformed Baptist perspective. "Children and the Covenant of Grace," *Westminster Theological Journal*, vol. XXXVII (Winter, 1975) pp. 239-255. Surely it strains the Principles governing the interpretation of parables to draw such a conclusion from the backsliding of the prodigal son. Moreover, it would seem rather obvious that the eventual repentance of the son and reconciliation with his father rather argues for the opposite conclusion.

desideratum. It would be hard to imagine that the church would rightly understand this part of the Scripture's teaching, alien as it is to the individualism and voluntarism of American evangelical culture, when it is so little considered in the literature available to the typical pastor or church member. Though a graduate of a Presbyterian seminary, I do not recall any serious consideration of this aspect either of theology or pastoral ministry, even though it very obviously bears directly and profoundly on the health and the growth of any church.² My informal investigations suggest that my experience would be typical of today's Presbyterian seminary graduate. I recently attended a church growth seminar taught by a Presbyterian pastor. Listed as topics for possible consideration were more than a dozen subjects bearing on ways and means to enlarge the church. Conspicuous by its absence was any mention of anything having to do with the birth and subsequent nurture of the church's children, even though it is easy to prove that since the church's beginning in Eden and still today the primary instrument of her growth has been that of covenant succession. We must, alas, offer as final evidence of the loss of this doctrine in Presbyterian circles the substantial number of the church's children that are being lost to the world in our day.

In these, and other ways, it appears that the thought and practice of evangelical Presbyterian churches is in the present day often untrue to their theological tradition. It also appears that this betrayal has occurred by default, unwittingly. Our doctrine has not been well taught in seminaries, in pulpits, or in books, whether written for ministers or laymen. Consequently, many ministers and congregations have only a vague notion of the theological substructure of the practice of paedobaptism, of the underlying method by which God's grace is appointed to run in the lines of generations. Too often today we find Presbyterians quite capable of fighting the good fight on behalf of infant baptism who then think of their children and raise them according to what are indubitably baptistic principles.

This is a phenomenon that demands explanation. How is it that this aspect of Reformed thought should be so poorly understood in our day? Why should this doctrine and not others have been left behind as the Reformed Faith made its way into the modern era?

THE DOCTRINE OF COVENANT SUCCESSION IN REFORMED THEOLOGY

A major effort to offer just such an explanation was made by Lewis Bevens Schenck in a dissertation for Yale University, published in 1940 by the Yale University Press as *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant: An Historical Study of the Significance of Infant Baptism in the Presbyterian Church in America*. It is a most valuable book, covering important ground not covered elsewhere. It is only further evidence of the problem that Schenck's book has been for so long out of print and is so little known by Presbyterian pastors. In my judgment, it is far more valuable and bears more directly on the necessities of the ministry than most books being read by them today.

Schenck's book, as the title indicates, is an historical study. It begins with an account of the doctrine of the status of children in the covenant as that doctrine was given its definitive construction as an aspect of Calvin's revolutionary ecclesiology. Building on his conviction that the covenant which God established between himself and Abraham contained nothing less than the promise of eternal life and that it was a

² I am happy to report that the situation is now otherwise at my alma mater, Covenant Theological Seminary. Prof. David Jones' syllabus for the course in ecclesiology contains an historical-theological and exegetical consideration of the place of covenant children in the economy of grace.

spiritual reality and communion of life between God and man,³ Calvin proceeded to draw out the implications of the fact that Abraham's descendants were likewise participants in this covenant.

...it will be evident that baptism is properly administered to infants as something owed to them. For in early times the Lord did not deign to have them circumcised without making them participant in all those things which were then signified by circumcision.⁴

Therefore, the promise of covenant relationship meaning what it does, the salvation of such infants is included in the promise: "I will be a God to you and to your descendants after you" (Gen 17:7). Such children "do not become the sons of God through baptism; but because, they are heirs of adoption, in virtue of the promise, therefore, the Church admits them to baptism."⁵ The covenant belongs to the children, since the promise of God places them in the same position as Abraham. Nor is it any different for children of Christians in the new epoch. The covenant promise of God today is the same promise of God's fatherly love, the forgiveness of sins, and eternal life made before to Abraham and it similarly embraces children with their Christian parents. Christ's appearing and the revelation that came through him and his apostles should make us not less but more sure of the salvation of the children of the covenant.⁶

According to Calvin the infants of believing parents belong to the church before they are engrafted into its visible membership by baptism. The child of a Christian parent is presumptively a Christian and an heir of eternal life.

The offspring of believers are born holy, because their children, while yet in the womb, before they breathe the vital air, have been adopted into the covenant of eternal life. Nor are they brought into the church by baptism on any other ground than because they belonged to the body of the Church before they were born. He who admits aliens to baptism profanes it.... For how can it be lawful to confer the badge of Christ on aliens from Christ. Baptism must, therefore, be preceded by the gift of adoption, which is not the cause of half salvation merely, but gives salvation entire; and this salvation is afterwards ratified by Baptism⁷

Calvin was, of course, entirely aware, that all professions were not genuine and that many baptisms, therefore, were empty. Only where the conditions of the covenant were genuinely embraced should it be expected that the Lord would confer its blessings.

³ Institutes of the Christian Religion, IV, xvi, 3; Schenck, pp. 6-9.

⁴ Institutes, IV, xvi, 5.

⁵ Articuli A Facultate Sacrae Theologiae Parisiensi Determinati Super Materiis Fidei Nostrae Hodie Controversis Cum Antidoto (1544), Corpus Reformatum, vol. 35, 7, cited by Schenck, p. 9.

⁶ Schenck, pp. 9-10.

⁷ Interim Adultero-germanum: cui adiecta est vera Christianae Pacificationis et Ecclesiae Reformandae Ratio. Per Joann. Calvinum. Corpus Reformatum, vol. 35, 619, cited by Schenck, p. 13. Similarly Calvin says, "...the children of believers are baptized not in order that they who were previously strangers to the church may then for the first time become children of God, but rather that, because by the blessing of the promise they already belonged to the body of Christ, they are received into the church with this solemn sign." Institutes, IV, xv, 22.

Objections to Calvin's doctrine, especially as it pertained to infant baptism, were raised from many sides and his responses to those objections served to clarify his meaning. To those who objected that infant children were incapable of that spiritual regeneration which is the prerequisite of baptism and, therefore, "that children are to be considered solely as children of Adam until they reach an appropriate age for the second birth." Calvin replied that "God's truth opposes all these arguments."⁸ He appealed to the fact that Christ summoned the little children to himself and called them members of the kingdom, to the fact that there can be no hope of salvation except one be engrafted into Christ by regeneration and even his opponents did not deny that infants "who are conceived in sin and under the wrath of God" can be saved, to the fact that God's work in regenerating infants cannot be denied by us simply because it remains beyond our understanding, and to the fact that John the Baptist was sanctified in his mother's womb.

A related objection to Calvin's doctrine was that faith should precede baptism but that infants were incapable of faith and repentance. Calvin's reply again referred the objectors to the fact that such considerations did not appear to weigh with God himself.

"...these darts are aimed more at God than at us. For it is very clear from many testimonies of Scripture that circumcision was also a sign of repentance. Then Paul calls it the seal of the righteousness of faith....For although infants, at the very moment they were circumcised, did not comprehend with their understanding what that sign meant, they were truly circumcised to the mortification of their corrupt and defiled nature, a mortification that they would afterward practice in mature years. To sum up, this objection can be solved without difficulty: infants are baptized into future repentance and faith, and even though these have not yet been formed in them, the seed of both lies hidden within them by the secret working of the Spirit."⁹

As he also puts it: "...let them only tell me...what the danger is if infants be said to receive now some part of that grace which in a little while they shall enjoy to the full? ...why may the Lord not shine with a tiny spark at the present time on those whom he will illumine in the future with the full splendor of his light..."¹⁰

Schenck then proceeds to show that Calvin's doctrine was substantially the same as that of Zwingli and Bullinger, who likewise held that the children of believers were to be reckoned the children of God because they are embraced, as their parents, by the promise and covenant of God.¹¹ Further, this same doctrine is that embodied in a variety of Reformed confessions and catechisms and in the teaching of the representatives of the mature Reformed theology, including English Puritans and those of Presbyterian Scotland. Schenck's conclusion is that "at least until the time of the Westminster Standards, there was no difference in the views of the leading exponents of covenant theology and those of John Calvin on the subject of children of the covenant."¹²

⁸ Institutes, IV, xvi, 17

⁹ Institutes, IV, xvi, 20; Schenck, pp. 18-24.

¹⁰ Institutes, IV, xvi, 19.

¹¹ Schenck, pp. 28-34.

¹² Schenck, pp. 34-52. Although this statement is true only as a generality, it appears to be substantially correct. Differences did appear, for example, regarding the construction of the doctrine of the ground of infant baptism and regarding what Calvin called "the seed of faith" in infants but "for the most part our Reformed divines followed the presentation of Calvin, with many alterations in wording..." H.E. Gravemeijer, *Leesboek over de Gereformeerde Geloofsleer*, vol. 3, Utrecht, 1894, pp. 431-432. The

Schenck accounts for the modern eclipse of the Reformed doctrine of covenant succession by the dramatic impact of the Great Awakening and the resultant revivalism, with its exclusive emphasis on a conscious experience of conviction and conversion as the essential evidence of genuine salvation. The background of the revival, as is well known, was a nominalism in which infant baptism was practiced without discrimination and without regard to the necessity of covenantal faithfulness. The often powerful experiences of conversion common to the revival's leadership, most of whom were themselves children of the covenant, combined with similarly dramatic episodes of conviction of sin and anguish of soul followed in time by joyful assurance of peace with God on the part of many touched by the revival created an expectation that true evangelical experience would conform to these and eventually a demand that it must. That a child was from a believing family made no difference. Gilbert Tennent, for example, not only preached the necessity of such an experience of conviction and conversion as had become the revival paradigm, but insisted that genuine believers will inevitably know when they were not Christians.¹³

Perfectly understandable as revivalistic thinking was, both as a necessary corrective to the nominalism which preceded it and as the natural result of such powerful spiritual impressions as were common during the Great Awakening, as a view of salvation and spiritual experience it was an obvious over-reaction, one-sided and seriously defective. In particular, this thinking left little place for the divine provision of covenant succession and in that, as I have subsequently to show, subverted the Bible's clear and emphatic teaching. Charles Hodge, speaking of a revival of religion such as occurred during the Great Awakening, wrote:

It may be highly useful, or even necessary, just as violent remedies are often the only means of saving life. But such remedies are not the ordinary and proper means of sustaining and promoting health. ...No one can fail to remark that this too exclusive dependence on revivals tends to produce a false or unscriptural form of religion.... The ordinary means of grace become insipid or distasteful.Perhaps however the most deplorable result of the mistake we are now considering is, the neglect which it necessarily induces of the divinely appointed means of careful Christian nurture. ...Family training of children, and pastoral instruction of the young, are almost entirely lost sight of. We have long felt and often expressed the conviction that this is one of the most serious evils in the present state of our churches.¹⁴

With regard to the issue of covenant succession itself, L. H. Atwater, also of Princeton Seminary, added:

consensus was challenged later in another way by the assertion of certain Presbyterian authorities, such as Rutherford and Brown of Wamphray, that it was desirable that the church should include many who are presumably unregenerate in hopes of their salvation. The peculiar position of covenant children as generally understood in Reformed theology was thereby undermined. A somewhat similar view prevailed in New England in connection with what came to be called "the Halfway Covenant." These views were definite innovations, were roundly rejected by other authorities such as Thomas Boston and, later, Jonathan Edwards, and were never accepted or adopted by any Presbyterian Church. Cf. J. MacPherson, *The Doctrine of the Church in Scottish Theology*, Edinburgh, 1903, pp. 74-90; J. Walker, *The Theology and Theologians of Scotland*, Edinburgh, reprinted 1982, pp. 121-126.

¹³ Cited in Schenck, p. 71. See further L.H. Atwater, "The Children of the Church and Sealing Ordinances," *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review*, vol. XXIX, No. 1 (Jan. 1857) pp. 13-15.

¹⁴ "Bushnell on Christian Nurture," *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review*, vol. XIX, No. 4 (Oct. 1847) pp. 520-521.

Still, it is apparent that this great revival, while it resulted in a great and blessed increase of true piety...while it removed the fungous misgrowths which sloth and unbelief had educes from the church membership of baptized children; also, in many quarters, unsettled the faith of the Church in that pregnant truth, and its logical and practical relations. The fruit has appeared in the distinguishing features of our American Christianity for better and for worse; in a remarkable vigour of aggressive evangelism upon those that are without, and in too often putting without the fold the lambs of the flock, so far, alas! that immense numbers of them are lost, past recovery, upon the dark mountains of sin! The latter we ought to correct; the former we should hold fast, and let none take our crown. These things ought we to have done, and not to leave the other undone.¹⁵

The tendencies fostered in the Great Awakening were given further impetus in the revival of 1800 and others which followed in the first half of the 19th century.

These were then institutionalized in the revivalist paradigm of the experience of salvation, which quickly become dominant in American evangelicalism.

The penetration of revivalist thinking into the Presbyterian Church, Schenck argues, created a situation in which

Many influential leaders and a large popular constituency held the historical Reformed doctrine of the significance of infant baptism in a "non-natural sense." Many held that children of the covenant were only "quasi" members of the church. There was no trace or recognition of a vital church relation until, by conscious conversion, they came out of the world.¹⁶

Schenck cites J. W. Alexander, L. H. Atwater, Ashbel Green, Samuel Miller, and Charles Hodge, among others, whose voices were raised in protest against the growing tendency to consider baptized children as though they were out of the church and to neglect the church's historic doctrine of covenant succession.

Nevertheless, at the same time powerful voices were raised within the church in defense of the new thinking. Especially among southern men, notably J.H. Thornwell and R. L. Dabney, it was held decidedly that baptized covenant children were to be presumed unsaved until they gave evidence of the new birth. This altered conception of covenant children was given theological justification by constructions of the

¹⁵ Atwater, "Children of the Church," p. 16.

¹⁶ Schenck, p. 80. Schenck is citing Atwater, "Children of the Church," pp. 6-7, who continues: "We are sure it is no exaggeration, when we say, that in a considerable portion of our evangelical Churches there is no recognition, no consciousness of any relation being held by baptized children, prior to conscious and professed conversion, other than that of outsiders to the church, in common with the whole world lying in wickedness -- at least that portion of the world which, having the light of the gospel, heeds it not.Whenever they see their way clear to profess their faith, and come to the Lord's table, it is regarded as joining the Church, just as if they had never belonged to it. No difference is put between them and the unbaptized, in the apprehensions, the procedures, the whole practical life of the Church, except that the latter, in joining its fellowship, receive the initiatory rite, which they have never received before. One great evil of this inadequate system is, that while it makes infant baptism a seal of Christian teaching and training, to be given the child, it always, in some degree, and often wholly, prevents such instruction and nurture, or frustrates their efficacy. And this, in our opinion, is among the most formidable barriers to the growth and prevalence of pure religion in the rising generation."

doctrines of the covenant of grace and infant baptism which introduced a clear distinction between the status of covenant children and professing Christians.¹⁷

These differing conceptions of the meaning and significance of covenant succession collided in the discussions, begun in 1857, regarding a proposed revision of the Book of Discipline. Dr. Thornwell, chairman of the committee, whose membership also included Charles Hodge, prepared the draft of the revision which was controversial in only one point: the relation of baptized children to the church. Dr. Thornwell's revision provided that "only those...who have made a profession of faith in Christ are proper subjects of judicial prosecution." It was understood on all sides that opinions on this specific question regarding church discipline took on an unusual importance as reflecting more fundamental conceptions of the covenant and church. Those supportive of the proposed revision, with the difference in status which it introduced between covenant children and those who had professed their faith, held that this difference in status was of such consequence that the two classes of baptized persons could not be regarded or treated in the same way. Covenant children and adult professors were thus related to the church in an entirely different way and according to fundamentally different principles. Dr. Thornwell argued in regard to covenant children:

It is clear that while they are in the church by external union, in the spirit and temper of their minds they belong to the world. Like Esau, they neither understand nor prize their birthright. Of the world and in the Church - this expresses precisely their status, and determines the mode in which the church should deal with them.¹⁸

Grace was offered to them in their baptism and the task of the church was the conversion of her baptized children. The position of covenant children, in this view, was a position of privilege and special opportunity. It was definitely not the communion of the saints. In the most fundamental respects the church's children were of the world not the church. Thornwell went so far as to say that the church is to treat her children

Precisely as she treats all other impenitent and unbelieving men -- she is to exercise the power of the keys, and shut them out from the communion of the saints. She is to debar them from all the privileges of the inner sanctuary. She is to exclude them from their inheritance until they show themselves meet to possess it.¹⁹

He likened the church's situation to that of a commonwealth of free citizens in which is found a body of slaves who are marked for eventual liberty. "Is it not clear," he asks, "that their condition, as slaves, determines their treatment...until they are prepared to pass the test which changes their status?" He continues:

Is not this precisely the state of things with the Church and its baptized unbelievers? Are they not the slaves of sin and the Devil, existing in a free Commonwealth for the purpose of being educated to the liberty of the saints? Should they not, then, be carefully instructed on the one hand, and on the other be

¹⁷ Schenck, pp. 84-89.

¹⁸ "The Revised Book Vindicated," The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell, vol. 4, reprinted, Edinburgh, 1974, p. 340. According to Thornwell, "The two classes of which the Church consists are not equally related to the idea of the Church. The class of professors pertains to its essence; that of non-professors is an accidental result of the mode of organization." (p.339).

¹⁹ "The Revised Book," p. 341.

treated according to their true character as slaves, in every other respect, until they are prepared for their heritage of liberty?²⁰

Thornwell maintained that his views were those of the historic Reformed church.²¹ The unlikelihood of that claim may have had much to do with the success of Charles Hodge in forestalling the adoption of the proposed revision until the church was divided between north and south in 1861. As Schenck argues, Hodge was surely correct in insisting that the historic doctrine of the Presbyterian church was that the child of Christian parents, no less than the adult who made a personal and voluntary profession of faith, was a member of the church on the same basis of presumptive membership in the invisible church. Consequently, Hodge argued, "we see not how this principle can be denied, in its application to the Church, without giving up our whole doctrine, and abandoning the ground to the Independents and Anabaptists."²² Dr. Thornwell's position was not that of Presbyterianism historically but was materially that of revivalism.

Schenck's thesis, that the classical doctrine of covenant succession was in the 18th and 19th century overwhelmed by the extension of the revivalist paradigm of a crisis of conversion to the church's children was, of course, by no means original to him. His exposition, as already indicated, relied heavily on the analyses of Charles Hodge, L. H. Atwater, Samuel Miller, and others. But this same thesis was still more comprehensively and popularly advanced by the Congregationalist Horace Bushnell in his *Christian Nurture*, first published in 1847 as *Discourses on Christian Nurture* and subsequently considerably enlarged and often reprinted. As Williston Walker wrote in an introduction to the edition of 1916, Bushnell "strove to correct [the one-sidedness of the revival impulse] and to vindicate for Christian childhood its normal place in the Kingdom of God. In so doing he adopted positions consonant with the great historic experience of the church, however little in agreement with the local American outlook of his time." In fact, Bushnell's eloquent and weighty book, notwithstanding its serious deficiencies, is of abiding value and deserves a wide readership today, especially among ministers. It exists virtually alone

²⁰ "The Revised Book," p. 348. A helpful discussion of this and related questions as they were discussed in 19th century American Presbyterianism is furnished by D. Jones, *The Doctrine of the Church in American Presbyterian Theology in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, ThD thesis, Concordia Seminary, 1970, pp. 49-86.

²¹ Thornwell's attempt to demonstrate that claim by citations (pp. 350-363) is severely compromised by an anachronistic reading of the sources and, still more, by his assumption that his view of the status of covenant children was necessarily shared by those who may have, for other reasons, shared his conclusions regarding their susceptibility to church censures. Further, it is not difficult to find contrary evidence on the point at issue. C. Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, vol. 2, reprinted, Edinburgh, 1979, p. 290. A.W. Miller, a prominent southern Presbyterian, opposed Thornwell at this point precisely on the ground that his views were not those of the Reformed Church. Addressing the General Assembly of 1866, Miller argued: "This principle should ever be kept in mind, that baptism is not conferred on children in order that they may become sons and heirs of God, but because they are already considered by God as occupying that place and rank, the grace of adoption is sealed in their flesh by the rite of baptism." This, Miller argued, was Calvin's doctrine and that of the Reformed Church historically. Schenck, p. 96.

²² Cited in Schenck, p. 99. Further see Charles Hodge's critique of Thornwell's position in *The Church and its Polity*, London, 1879, pp. 215-217.

as a full-scale examination of the nurture of covenant children in its theological, psychological,²³ and sociological aspects.

Bushnell's theology was in several respects wholly unacceptable to the conservative Presbyterians, which makes only the more noteworthy the general pleasure with which they welcomed his book. Reviews by Charles Hodge, Lyman Atwater, and Henry B. Smith were generally appreciative.²⁴ They all agreed with Bushnell's general thesis that Christian nurture in a godly home, beginning in infancy, is the divine instrumentality of the salvation of the church's children and that this nurture was the primary method appointed for the propagating of the church. They were further agreed, however, that Bushnell's manner of stating his thesis left the impression that the saving operations of the Spirit of God were confined to natural laws of parental influence and did not do justice to the necessity of the immediate working of the Spirit to overcome the native sinfulness of every covenant child.²⁵

The thesis advanced by these several authors that the classical Reformed doctrine of covenant succession and Christian nurture was largely displaced in the American Presbyterian Church by the revivalist requirement of an experience of conscious conversion and by a corresponding alteration in the status of covenant children, is, in my judgment, substantially correct. The doctrine of Thornwell is definitely not the doctrine of Calvin nor is his view of the church's task in respect to children of the covenant that of the great reformer. The difference is profound. Yet Thornwell's views more nearly approximate the unstudied opinion of most evangelical Presbyterians today, not because they intend to follow Thornwell against Calvin, but because of the compatibility of his views with that of revivalist thought and practice which thoroughly penetrated conservative Presbyterian thought and life in the 19th and 20th centuries, displacing the historic Presbyterian viewpoint.

My own experiences growing up in conservative Presbyterian circles and my observation since confirm this. The doctrine of covenant succession with its various parts and implications has been largely in eclipse. In the individual circumstances where covenantal nurture in a Reformed sense has not been supplanted by evangelism as the paradigm of child-rearing, this is more often the result of instinct than conviction, rarely the result of comprehensive instruction. Inattention to the doctrine of covenant succession, an evangelism which makes no significant distinctions between the church's children and those outside of the community of faith, a widespread hesitation to charge Christian parents with responsibility for the unbelief of their children, a doctrine and practice of infant baptism which bears little living connection to the practical approach taken to covenant children subsequently, covenant children themselves who have little sense of the immensity of their blessing, and an almost universal practice of

²³ C. Hodge expressed a special appreciation for Bushnell's development of the power of parental influences upon a child -- by "the look, the voice, the handling" -- even before the development of the child's reasoning. *Essays and Reviews*, p. 312, cited in Schenck, p. 143. R.L. Dabney developed some of these same themes in a splendid sermon, preached in 1879, "Parental Responsibilities," reprinted in *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, vol. 1, London, 1967, pp. 676-693.

²⁴ Lyman Atwater, in his own article devoted to Bushnell, wrote: "In its way [Christian Nurture] was another instance of the attempted recovering, in a partial and distorted way, of a truth which was grievously fading out of sight in Dr. Bushnell's surroundings. This was cordially recognized in leading Presbyterian reviews of the book." *Presbyterian Review*, vol. 2, No. 5 (Jan. 1881) p. 128.

²⁵ C. Hodge, "Bushnell on Christian Nurture," pp. 502-539. It is to be noted that a view of infancy and childhood which does not take adequate account of original sin is hardly unique to Bushnell, being found already in the apostolic fathers and widely thereafter. Cf. S. Legasse, *Jesus et L'Enfant: "Enfants", "Petits" et "Simples" dans la Tradition Synoptique* (Etudes Bibliques), Paris, 1969, pp. 269-276.

permitting baptized young people living in rebellion against the gospel and law of their covenant God to walk out of the church unmolested, as if they had never genuinely belonged, never having "joined the church" -- all this is only a partial demonstration of the extent to which the contemporary Presbyterian church has lost touch with its own doctrine.

Nevertheless, in my judgment, the thesis of Hodge, Schenck, and others does require modification in this respect: they have somewhat overstated the extent to which the doctrine of covenant succession was given its rightful place and emphasis in the formative period of the Reformed theology. Schenck is, I believe, largely correct in his claim that covenant succession by nurture was the doctrine of the Reformed church from Calvin through the period of the great scholastic systems.²⁶

It is not difficult to trace the consensus on this point through the theological literature of the period. While not copious, the attention devoted to this matter in the creeds and catechisms is sufficient to indicate that the convictions to which Calvin had given expression in his Institutes were soon received as part of the Reformed theology, if not in every case with the same emphasis and consistency. In particular, confessional status was granted to the affirmations that covenant children are Christians, that they are baptized because the power and substance of the sacrament belongs to them, that they are heirs of the same blessing promised to their parents, that they are capable of regeneration and of the "seed of faith," and that, should they die in infancy, they are saved.²⁷

Neither the Westminster Confession nor the two catechisms provide as complete a statement of this doctrine as may be found in other Reformed symbols, but the Directory of Worship does provide a more definitive statement of the thinking of the Westminster Assembly concerning the status of covenant children.

In the service of baptism therein described the sacrament is defined as "a seal of the covenant of grace, of our ingrafting into Christ, and of our union with him, of remission of sins, regeneration, adoption, and life eternal." Concerning the ground of infant baptism it is said, among other things, that

"the promise is made to believers and their seed; and that the seed and posterity of the faithful, born within the church, have, by their birth, interest in the covenant, and right to the seal of it, and to the outward privileges of the church...That the Son of God admitted little children into his presence, embracing and blessing them, saying, "For of such is the kingdom of God": That children, by baptism, are solemnly received into the bosom of the visible church, distinguished from the world, and them that are without, and united with believers; and that all who are baptized in the name of Christ, do renounce, and

²⁶ Though A. Kuyper's formulation of the doctrine is problematic, it was not the mistake it is sometimes represented to be that he regarded covenant succession as an essential mark and ingredient of the Reformed theology. Cf. C. Graafland, *Van Calvijn tot Barth: Oorsprong en ontwikkeling van de leer der verkiezing in het Gereformeerd Protestantisme*, 's-Gravenhage, 1987, p. 294 and C. Veenhof, *Prediking en Uitverkiezing*, Kampen, 1959, pp. 283-286.

²⁷ Calvin's Geneva Catechism, Questions 336-339; The Heidelberg Catechism, Question 74; Craig's Catechism [Q. What if our children die without baptism? A. Then they are saved by the promise. Q. Why are they baptized, when they are young and do not understand? A. Because they are of the seed of the faithful. Q. What comfort do we have in their Baptism? A. This, that we rest persuaded that they are inheritors of the Kingdom of Heaven. Q. What should that work in us? A. Diligence in teaching them the way of salvation. Q. What admonition are they given through this Baptism? A. That they are to be thankful when they come to age. Q. What then is Baptism for our children? A. An entry into the Church of God, and to the Holy Supper]; The Belgic Confession, Article 34; The Scots Confession (1560), Article XVI.

by their baptism are bound to fight against the devil, the world, and the flesh: That they are Christians, and federally holy before baptism...That the inward grace and virtue of baptism is not tied to that very moment of time wherein it is administered; and that the fruit and power thereof reacheth to the whole course of our life... The minister is to admonish the parent "To consider the great mercy of God to him and his child; to bring up the child in the knowledge of the grounds of the Christian religion, and in the nurture and admonition of the Lord; and to let him know the danger of God's wrath to himself and child, if he be negligent: requiring his solemn promise for the performance of his duty."

After the sacrament, the minister's prayer begins with the acknowledgement of the Lord's mercy: "that he is good and gracious, not only in that he numbereth us among his saints, but is pleased also to bestow upon our children this singular token and badge of his love in Christ: That, in his truth and special providence, he daily bringeth some into the bosom of his church, to be partakers of his inestimable benefits..." It then continues with this petition:

"That [the Lord] would receive the infant now baptized, and solemnly entered into the household of faith, into his fatherly tuition and defense,

and remember him with the favour that he sheweth to his people...and if he live, and attain the years of discretion, that the Lord would so teach

him by his word and Spirit, and make his baptism effectual to him, and so uphold him by his divine power and grace, that by faith he may

prevail against the devil, the world, and the flesh, till in the end he obtain a full and final victory..."

This, I admit, is less than might have been said and less than Calvin did say. But it is his doctrine of covenant succession in its broad outline. Further, it is easy enough to locate in dogmatic works, especially in the loci devoted to calling or regeneration and baptism, more or less complete statements of the doctrine of covenant succession. An example would be this lovely passage from Witsius: *The Economy of the Divine Covenants*:

Here certainly appears the extraordinary love of our God, in that as soon as we are born, and just as we come from our mother, he hath commanded us to be solemnly brought from her bosom as it were into his own arms, that he should bestow upon us, in the very cradle, the tokens of our dignity and future kingdom; that he should put that song into our mouth, "Thou didst make me hope, when I was upon my mother's breast: I was cast upon thee from the womb: thou art my God from my mother's belly," Ps. xxii. 9, 10, that, in a word, he should join us to himself in the most solemn covenant from our most tender years: the remembrance of which, as it is glorious and full of consolation to us, so in like manner it tends to promote Christian virtues, and the strictest holiness, through the whole course of our lives. Nothing ought to be dearer to us than to keep sacred and inviolable that covenant of our youth, that first and most solemn engagement, that was made to God in our name.²⁸

But, the general consensus notwithstanding, the doctrine of covenant succession was never as comprehensively developed or as thoroughly integrated into the theological system as it could and should

²⁸ ET 1837, vol. 2, p. 440. Herman Witsius himself was the son of godly parents who had dedicated their firstborn to the Christian ministry before he was born. In the dedication of one of his first works, *Practijcke des Christendoms* (1665), he paid tribute to the spiritual nurture which he had received from his parents, making the words of Proverbs 4:3-5a his own. J. van Genderen, Herman Witsius, 's-Gravenhage, 1953, pp. 7-8.

have been nor was it as emphatically stated as it deserved to be. Its connections with other parts of the system were never completely delineated and certain difficulties were left inadequately furnished with satisfactory resolutions. It did not receive sufficient attention to ensure that the rough edges left in the original theological construction of the Reformation era would be made smooth. Indeed, while great effort was made to defend, elaborate, and polish certain doctrines, this was left largely in its original form. Indeed, there seems to have been in some cases a diminishment of Calvin's own emphatic presentation of the doctrine. That this is so may be demonstrated in several ways.

In a goodly number of manuals of Reformed theology and monographs on Reformed soteriology, the doctrine of covenant succession is given only cursory treatment. Either attention is devoted to only a few of its parts or, worse, the doctrine appears only as part of the argumentation for paedobaptism.²⁹ It cannot be said that the exposition of this doctrine in the Reformed literature leaves the clear impression that covenant succession through parental nurture is the principle way in which salvation comes to the elect of God. Parental nurture finds no regular place in the treatment of the means of grace, neither faith nor justification are regularly treated so as to accommodate those doctrines to the reality that the largest number of Christians in the world do not receive the gift of faith only subsequently to a life of conscious rebellion against God and by means of a crisis of conversion, and that in very many if not most cases justification precedes a conscious experience of conviction of sin and guilt.³⁰ The entire treatment of the *ordo salutis* in this literature is characteristically written as if, in fact, the typical experience of salvation were that of the person called out of the world only after he or she gained full possession of rational and spiritual powers.³¹

²⁹ In H. Heppe's summation of the Reformed theology, consideration of the doctrine of covenant succession, in one respect or another, appears but briefly and only, so far as I could determine, in connection with the discussion of the calling or regeneration of infants and that of infant baptism. *Reformed Dogmatics set out and illustrated from the Sources*, ET London, 1950, pp. 540-541; 621-624. Popular manuals such as those of Ames (*The Marrow of Theology*, Boston, ET 1968, pp. 179-180; 211) or Wollebius (*Christianae Theologiae Compendium* [1626] reprinted, Neukirchen, 1935, pp. 88, 93, 116.) give only meagre attention and that in the form of brief standardized affirmations in the customary loci.

³⁰ Kuyper calls this the "weak spot" in much Reformed discussion of justification. Always there is this exception, whether stated or unstated: "*loquor de adultis*." *Dictaten Dogmatiek*, vol. IV, Kampen, n.d., pp. 62-63.

³¹ Interestingly, the exception to this generality is that of the case of infants dying in infancy which, no doubt due to the punishing necessities of life in those days, did receive a more careful consideration. Reformed writers, many of whom had suffered such losses themselves, expressed themselves with great confidence and often with an exquisite pathos in regard to this one part of the doctrine of covenant succession. Upon the death of his daughter Katherine, at that time the youngest of his children, Thomas Boston wrote: "I never had such a clear and comfortable view of the Lord's having other use for children than our comfort; for which ends he removes them in infancy; so that they are not brought to the world in vain. I saw reason to bless the Lord, that I had been made father of six children, now in the grave, and that were with me but a very short time; but none of them lost; I will see them all at the resurrection. That clause in the covenant, 'And the God of thy seed' was sweet and full of sap." *The Complete Works of Thomas Boston*, vol. XII, reprinted, Wheaton, 1980, pp. 278-279. Rutherford, in a number of his immortal letters, bent his genius to bring the Reformed theology with its wonderful consolation home to grieving parents. *Letters of Samuel Rutherford*, reprinted, Edinburgh, 1984, Letters 28, 238, 287, 300, 310, 326. Conclusions bearing on this subject were integrated at several points in the theological system. However, the bearing of those same considerations on the case of infants who lived to and beyond the age of discretion did not seem to be as clearly grasped, at least with respect to the necessity of theological integration. Reformed treatments of the doctrine of the salvation of infants dying in infancy and its

It cannot be doubted that this is, in large part, the consequence of Scripture's own emphasis upon paradigmatic conversions, especially that of the apostle Paul, and the fact that the New Testament's historical narrative of the history of salvation covers only a brief period of evangelization of hitherto unreached people, a period, that is, before covenant nurture could begin to supply the fledgling church of the new epoch with large numbers of members.³² Nevertheless, taking the Scripture's evidence together, as I hope to demonstrate below, it cannot be to the credit of the Reformed theology that so often its treatment of the doctrine of covenant succession has the appearance of a concession rather than an affirmation of central importance.

Furthermore, the same understatement and lack of full integration can be observed in the popular literature. Again, it is not difficult to find sermonic and pastoral material in which the Reformed consensus is expressed. For example, in Richard Baxter's *A Christian Directory*, the most comprehensive work of Puritan pastoral theology, the doctrine of covenant succession by nurture is the basis of his consideration of the motives and means of the spiritual upbringing of children.³³ In the course of his treatment of these subjects, he affirms that the children of believers belong to the Lord, that they are engaged in their baptism to the life of faith, and that parental nurture is the ordinary appointed means of their salvation. His exposition of parental nurture, especially in its psychological aspects, anticipates the larger study of Bushnell.

But it must be said that the Puritan emphasis upon a sound conversion more often than not overwhelmed these sometimes virtually parenthetical concessions that the experience of covenant children did not

integration into the larger soteriology are furnished by R.A. Webb, *The Theology of Infant Salvation*, reprinted, Harrisonburg, 1981, and B.B. Warfield, "The Development of the Doctrine of Infant Salvation," *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, vol. IX, New York, 1932, pp. 411-444. These works are tarnished, however, both by the consideration of infants dying in infancy as a separate class whose status is governed by separate principles'a position for which only the most doubtful of Scriptural support has ever been advanced -- and by the still more doubtful conclusion that in this class of infants the difference between covenant infants and infants outside of the covenant is immaterial.

³² The number of references to children in the New Testament is not large. It is striking, however, that, taken together, what references there are serve simply to reiterate the commonplaces of the Old Testament's doctrine. There is definitely no new doctrine of children or of their status in the New Testament.

³³ Reprinted, Ligonier, PA, 1990, pp. 409-431; 449-454. Other examples include Thomas Manton's sermon on Ps 102:28, *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton*, vol. 15, reprinted, Worthington, PA, n.d., pp. 463-474 and William Guthrie's classic exposition of true faith in Christ, *The Christian's Great Interest*, reprinted, Edinburgh, 1969, pp. 38-39. Guthrie acknowledges that some Christians are called to faith in Christ from the womb and have no experience of being prepared for conversion by the work of the law, such as would ordinarily be the case for someone called out of a life of unbelief. An exposition with many similarities to Baxter's was published in 1679 in Amsterdam by J. Koelman, a major figure of the Nadere Reformatie, whose thought was deeply influenced by English Puritanism. *De Plichten der Ouders in Kinderen voor Godt op te voeden*, reprinted, Houten, 1982. Koelman readily acknowledges the possibility of regeneration in the womb, even urges parents to pray for it during pregnancy (p. 42). He is further better than most in laying emphasis upon the fundamental place which parents' faith in God's promise to be their children's God and Savior occupies in a true covenantal nurture (pp. 46-47).

always conform to the standard paradigm. When J.I. Packer,³⁴ in his sympathetic but not uncritical account of the Puritan emphasis on gospel experience writes: "All the Puritans agreed that the way by which God brings sinners to faith is through a "preparatory work", longer or shorter, of contrition and humbling for sin" he does not mean to exclude the experience of many covenant children whose experience is otherwise. Neither did the Puritans themselves who generally spoke in the same way. But, unwittingly or not, the diminishment of covenant succession as a primary instrumentality and distinctive experience of divine grace was the result. This left the doctrine vulnerable to the counter-influences of the revival period.

THE DOCTRINE OF COVENANT SUCCESSION IN SCRIPTURE

Interesting and valuable as an historical-theological account of the Reformed doctrine of covenant succession and its development and present fortunes may be, to Presbyterians the fundamental issue must remain the teaching of Holy Scripture. The eclipse of this doctrine and the distinctive child-rearing derived from it should be chiefly dismaying to Presbyterians not because it amounts to an abandonment of their theological tradition, but because Holy Scripture is straightforward in developing this doctrine in its various parts and emphatic in describing its momentous consequences. The doctrine of covenant succession was founded on the plain statements of the Bible and the drift away from the former amounts to a betrayal of the latter. The power and persuasiveness of the Reformed theology has always derived from the simplicity and clarity with which it reproduces the Bible's teaching, from the straight line which connected it to biblical commonplaces.

The Biblical data themselves yield a series of conclusions which, taken together, form an anatomy of the biblical doctrine of covenant succession. That doctrine itself presupposes that the family, as biblically described, is by divine appointment the fundamental principle of organization of human life. From the beginning to the end of Holy Scripture it is by the commandment, the wisdom, and the kindness of God that he "sets the lonely in families" (Ps. 68:6). The significance attached in Scripture to family relationships and connections requires no demonstration.

It is a principle the validity of which is as easy to demonstrate in contemporary life as from Holy Scripture. Not only do children derive their appearance, intelligence, physical health, etc. from their parents -- all which bear so mightily on the outcome of one's life -- but, likewise, they are greatly influenced for good or ill by the family environment and quality of parental nurture. But Scripture goes further in teaching that God weaves his purposes of grace and judgment within the threads of an individual's family life. The family is not the sole instrumentality of the divine purpose, of course, but it is

³⁴ A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life, Wheaton, 1990, p. 172. Bavinck provides a striking example of this phenomenon in an autobiographical reference concerning childhood in the separatist Dutch Reformed churches. V. Hepp, Dr. Herman Bavinck, Amsterdam, 1921, pp. 22-23.

of vast importance.³⁵ This becomes all the more apparent as the doctrine of covenant succession is constructed on the foundation of this family solidarity.

The doctrine of covenant succession as it is taught in Holy Scripture, as all other doctrines, is composed of parts, each of which must be integrated with each of the others.

I. Grace runs in the lines of generations.

This is not only a principle, which can be persuasively demonstrated in any church, but, is a biblical commonplace. It is a fact emphasized at the headwaters of revelation. Immediately following the dismal report of the generations descending from Cain, whose own viciousness comes to its ugly consummation in Lamech, is the genealogical record of "the sons of God", generations of righteous fathers and sons from Seth to Noah, with Enoch a luminary among them (Gen. 4:7-6:2). Subsequently the Scripture offers numerous examples of similar successions of faith and godliness: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph; Boaz, Jesse, David, and Solomon; Lois, Eunice, and Timothy, etc. The number of faithful men and women of biblical history whose lineage is provided with sufficient detail to determine that they were the children of God-fearing parents is very large, including most of the faithful kings of Judah, most of the heroes of faith mentioned by name in Hebrews 11, and such New Testament figures as John the Baptist, the Lord himself, and Mark the Evangelist. No doubt many other such men and women, the spirituality of whose parentage is not indicated in the Bible, were the products of believing households.

What is customary in Scripture is likewise a fact everywhere to be observed in subsequent history. In the early church the faith of Polycarp, Origen, Chrysostom, and Augustine, to name but a prominent few, lived first in their parent or parents.³⁶ This succession of faith continued in the modern era. Thomas

³⁵ "...the family ... is the New Testament basis of the Church of God. ... [God] does, indeed, require individual faith for salvation; but He organizes His people in families first; and then into churches, recognizing in their very warp and woof the family constitution. His promises are all the more precious that they are to us and our children. And though this may not fit in with the growing individualism of the day, it is God's ordinance." B.B. Warfield, "The Polemics of Infant Baptism," *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, vol. IX, New York, 1932, pp. 405-406. Herman Bavinck, who was himself raised in a Christian home and often bore witness to the happy effect of his parents' instruction and godly example, offers this panegyric to the family in his "Het Christelijk Huisgezin." "The family is not of man's making; it is a gift of God and full of life. Upbringing in the family bears a quite special character. No school or educational institution can replace or compensate for the family. Everything educates in the family, the handshake of the father, the voice of the mother, the older brother, the younger sister, the baby in the cradle, the sick loved one, the grandparents and the grandchildren, the uncles and the aunts, the guests and friends, prosperity and adversity, the feast day and the day of mourning, Sundays and workdays, the prayer and the thanksgiving at the table and the reading of God's Word, the morning and evening prayer. Everything is engaged to educate one another, from day to day, from hour to hour, unintentionally, without previously devised plan, method or system. From everything proceeds an educative influence though it can neither be analyzed nor calculated. A thousand insignificant things, a thousand trifles, a thousand details, all have their effect. It is life itself that here educates, life in its greatness, the rich, inexhaustible, universal life. The family is the school of life, because there is its spring and its hearth." In A.B.W.M. Kok, Herman Bavinck, Amsterdam, 1945, pp. 18-19.

³⁶ Paeon and Euelpistus were two Christians martyred with Justin c. A.D. 165. They were asked by their inquisitor where they learned their Christianity. Paeon replied, "From our parents we received this good

Boston used to spend days and nights in prison with his covenanter father. Donald Cargill, the Presbyterian martyr is reported to have told his accusers: "I have been a fearer of God from my infancy."³⁷ Matthew Henry was the product of a godly Presbyterian manse. The Wesleys were the sons of a most pious and spiritually principled mother as was John Newton, as was a hero of mine, Alexander Whyte. The modern missions effort has been carried on the backs of sons and daughters of the covenant. William Carey, Robert Morrison, David Livingstone, and John Paton were all the products of godly homes.³⁸ Jim Elliot is a recent example.³⁹ In the church history of America it is no different. Godly successions such as that of Richard, Increase, and Cotton Mather or Charles, Archibald Alexander, and Caspar Wistar Hodge,⁴⁰ or that of the family of Jonathan Edwards are everywhere to be found.⁴¹ And what is true of notable Christians is no less so of great multitudes of believers of little or no reputation. I pastor a church rich with evidence of the fact that grace runs in the lines of generations. I am myself the third in a line of believing ministers in my Presbyterian family.⁴² The evidence for this principle of succession in grace can be collected from every theological tradition, from every Christian denomination, and from every period of church history. It is as surely the experience of Christians who would repudiate covenant succession as a theological principle as it is of those who embrace it. The families of Charles Spurgeon, Billy Graham, or Paul Crouch serve the point as well as those of Abraham Kuyper or J. Gresham Machen. I do not hesitate to claim that far and away the largest part of the Christian church at any time or place -- excepting that historical moment when the gospel first reaches a place and people -- are those who were born and raised in Christian families and that this is true whether one is considering Christendom as an outward phenomenon or only the company of the faithful followers of Christ.

II. It is God's will and declared purpose that his saving grace run in the lines of generations.

confession." Euelpistus said, "I willingly heard the words of Justin. But from my parents also I learned to be a Christian." *The Martyrdom of Justin Martyr*, ANF, vol. 1, p. 306.

³⁷ J. Howie, *Lives of the Scottish Covenanters*, reprinted, Greenville, 1981, p. 391.

³⁸ There is an especially exquisite account of the spiritual world which John Paton's devout parents provided for their children and the force of their instruction and example in his autobiography, *John G. Paton: Missionary to the New Hebrides*, reprinted, Edinburgh, 1965, pp. 3-26.

³⁹ E. Elliot, *The Shadow of the Almighty*, New York, 1958, pp. 23-27.

⁴⁰ The latter was the grandson of Charles, the nephew of Archibald Alexander, indicating the width as well as the depth of piety in the Hodge line.

⁴¹ On the Christian patrimony of Jonathan Edwards consult I. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography*, Edinburgh, 1987, pp. 3-9. On the manner in which Edwards bequeathed the same to his own children, see pp. 401-420.

⁴² When I came to my present pastorate I was delighted to discover that one of the elders of the congregation was the son of a man who had been converted through the preaching of my grandfather in 1914, becoming thereby the first Christian in his family. This elder's daughter is also a member of the congregation and now has children of her own who are being raised in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

The remarkable phenomenon of succession of Christian faith through generations, fundamental as it is to the life of the church in the world, is provided a comprehensive explanation in Holy Scripture. It is neither an actual coincidence that the largest number of Christians have Christian parents nor is it simply a phenomenon left unaccounted for. Everywhere in the Bible the Lord declares it to be his purpose that Christian marriages produce a holy seed (Mal. 2:15). One of the primary features of the covenant the Lord established with his people is that it embraces families and has always in view the continuation of its saving blessing for generations to come (Gen. 17:7-9). The place this feature occupies in the divine economy of salvation is indicated by its comprehensive and emphatic reiteration throughout Scripture (e.g. Exod. 20:6; Deut. 4:37-40; Ps. 100:5, 102:28, 103:17-18; Isa. 44:3, 54:13, 59:21, 65:23; Jer. 32:38-39, 35:19; Ezek. 37:25; Zech. 10:6-7; Acts 2:38-39, 16:14-15, 31). It must be plainly stated that the promise made to the children of the covenant is not that of a special status of privilege but is precisely the promise of the gospel, eternal life in heaven. Whether the form of the promise is that God should be their God (Gen. 17:7), or that he will extend to them his righteousness (Ps. 103:17), or his Spirit (Isa. 59:21), or his forgiveness (Acts 2:38-39), or his salvation (Acts 16:31), the covenant which thus embraces the children with their believing parents is the covenant of grace.⁴³

That the Lord should so direct his saving love down the lines of generations is only to be expected of a Father who knows what it is to love a son and to suffer a son to fall under the divine wrath and who teaches his own children that "everyone who loves the father loves his child as well" (1 John 5:1). It is only to love his people genuinely and deeply that the Father should also love their children, whom John Flavel, with a parent's insight, somewhere describes as "pieces of themselves wrapped in another skin." Imagine the contrary: that Christian parents brought children into the world with no confidence at all that the saving grace which had been pitched upon them -- among the comparatively few in all the world so favored -- would likewise be pitched upon their children, whom they love as they love life itself. Christian parents do not imagine themselves to be populating hell when they bring sons and daughters into the world! Their hope and expectation are otherwise (Ps. 90:16). The fact that so many whose theology provides no ground for such an expectation nevertheless do not anguish over bearing children is sobering evidence of the appalling lack of seriousness which characterizes the generality of Christians today. As McCheyne put it in one of his characteristically solemn sermons, if anything would spoil the joy of heaven, it would be to know that one's children were not there.⁴⁴ Contrarily, there is no joy that surpasses

⁴³ This assertion is, without question, the pivot upon which the entire discussion of the doctrine of covenant succession must revolve. It is for this reason above all others, that one can speak of a Reformed consensus, because Reformed theology did recognize from the beginning that the promise God made to Abraham and his seed was, as Paul confirms, nothing more nor less than the gospel. It was on this ground that they held that covenant infants, dying in infancy, must be saved. For God to be that infant's God and yet that infant not be saved would make a travesty of the Lord's promise and empty his words of all meaning. "To be our God" is the Scripture's way to comprehend the whole of eternal salvation in the fewest words. The predicament of the unbeliever is precisely that he is "without God in the world" (Eph. 2: 12) and heaven is the place where God is our God and we are his people (Rev. 21:3). This point was not missed in Reformed theological reflection, however much its implications may not always have been adequately elaborated. Cf. C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, reprinted, Cambridge, 1960, pp. 365-366; J. Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, vol. xi, reprinted, Edinburgh, 1965, pp. 204-225; and, with particular application to the matter of covenant children, L. Atwater, "The Children of the Covenant, and their 'Part in the Lord'," *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review*, vol. XXXV, no. 4 (Oct. 1863) pp. 622-643. The Reformed always argued that baptism was to be given to covenant infants because, according to the covenant, the things signified therein belonged or pertained to them, viz. the forgiveness of sins, regeneration, and the kingdom of heaven. F. Turretin, *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae*, Pars Tertia, Geneva, 1690, p. 465.

⁴⁴ Sermons of Robert Murray M'Cheyne, Edinburgh, 1961, pp. 30-31.

the joy of a spiritually minded parent who sees his or her children walking in the truth.⁴⁵ It is a true Father and a perfect fatherly love that made and then so often repeated the promise to be a God to his people and to their children.⁴⁶

III. The biblical paradigm is for covenant children to grow up in faith from infancy.

It is surely remarkable, the voluntarist and revivalist mentality of the modern evangelical church notwithstanding, Holy Scripture furnishes only one unquestionable example of a covenant child, reared in a pious home, growing up in unbelief to be converted in adulthood, and the usefulness of that sole example to justify a paradigm of "covenant conversion" is severely compromised by its peculiar place in salvation history. The Lord's brothers did not believe in him during the days of his ministry, but are found together with the disciples following the resurrection (Acts 1:14). The purpose they thus serve as witnesses to the resurrection suggests itself as the primary explanation for their youthful unbelief rather than that adolescent or young adult conversion is commonly to be expected of covenant children, much less that it should be the norm. The Bible may offer a few other examples (e.g. Josiah, 2 Chron. 34:3) of the conversion of covenant children in adolescence or young adulthood, but these statements could be otherwise explained and little weight should be placed upon them. Attempts to demonstrate that Jacob was converted at Peniel or Bethel are sheer speculation. It is not to be doubted that sometimes covenant children do grow up in unbelief and are subsequently converted. It is striking, however, that many memorable examples of this phenomenon (e.g. Augustine, John and Charles Wesley, Charles Spurgeon, and A.W. Pink) suggest that there was a peculiar divine purpose in exposing such men as the Lord would make these men to be to the experience of unbelief, conviction, and conversion.⁴⁷ For all the tacit assumption in the evangelical world that the church's children will have a "conversion experience," a conscious stepping from darkness into light, this is surely not the biblical expectation. Several times witness is born to faith stretching back to infancy (Ps. 22:9-10, 71:5-6⁴⁸; 2 Tim. 3:15; cf. 1 Kgs. 18:12), and even beyond (Luke 1:15). Further, it is emphatically clear from Deuteronomy to Proverbs to Ephesians that nurture, not evangelism, is the paradigm of child-rearing in the covenant home, a nurture which presupposes a heart, however young, set free, or soon to be set free, from the native blindness and

⁴⁵ The reference is to 2 John 4 which may have to do with an actual mother and children or may instead refer, under the figure of a Christian *materfamilias*, to a church and its members. F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John*, London, 1970, p. 137.

⁴⁶ William Romaine told a correspondent of his: "Mr. Whitfield used often to say to me, 'how highly favoured I was; that whereas, none of his family were believers, all mine were like those blessed people, Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus.' My father and mother, and my three sisters, share in his love." *Works of William Romaine*, vol. 8, London, 1796, p. 18.

⁴⁷ It is worth noting as well that in the cases of Augustine or the Wesleys, an unbelieving father or a very poor example of a Christian father may well have been the providential instrumentality of their youthful unbelief. In the cases of Spurgeon and Pink, the conversions in young adulthood were still not unrelated to the faithful nurture of their parents.

⁴⁸ These thoughts run parallel to those of 22:9ff., though they are differently expressed. Here the psalmist looks back to the limits of his memory (5) and beyond (6), to be reassured by the threefold cord of a relationship that was lifelong, that had sufficed in other times of frailty, and that was not of his own devising. On his side there had been filial dependence, but God had been already at work for him,

opposition to the truth into which the fall has cast all mankind from conception (Ps 51:5). It can only be thought remarkable that the contrary paradigm -- adolescent unbelief overcome in an experience of new birth -- now so securely fixed in the evangelical mind, never once appears in Scripture in an exemplary role and almost never appears at all. Instead, there is everywhere the assumption that the covenanted grace will overtake covenant children at the headwaters of life so that, in response to a faithful parental and ecclesiastical nurture, they will both claim the promises made to them and respond to the summons issued to them in a way appropriate to each stage of life according to the measure of faith.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Whether it is wise to speak of covenant infants as presumptively regenerate, as do Kuyper and Schenck, is a separate question. Even Kuyper himself was careful to say that to speak thus was not to suggest that all covenant infants were born again in infancy, only that they were to be considered regenerate and treated accordingly. A. Kuyper, "Calvinism and Confessional Revision," *Presbyterian Quarterly*, vol. V, No. 4 (Oct. 1891) pp. 502-503. The problem, in my judgment, lies less in the notion of this presumption, carefully circumscribed as it could be, than in Kuyper's view of regeneration which he took over from certain Reformed theologians of the scholastic period. Voetius, for example, maintained that regeneration was essentially the implanting of a *habitus* or a seed of grace, which can for a long time slumber in the heart without coming to expression in actual conversion. In this sense Voetius held that the Apostle Paul and the thief on the cross had been born again from their earliest infancy. "De Statu Electorum ante Conversionem," D. Gysberti Voetii Selectarum Disputationum Fasciculus, Amsterdam, 1887, p. 262. Witsius thought similarly. See van Genderen, Herman Witsius, pp. 218-219. Cf. C. Graafland, *De Zekerheid van het Geloof*, Amsterdam, 1977, pp. 151-152. The always judicious Bavinck preferred to say that Reformed theologians always held that such regeneration in infancy can occur, often does occur, and that the church is to consider and treat her children, according to the judgment of love, not as heathen children but as true children of the covenant until they prove the contrary. *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, vol. 4, Kampen, 1918, p. 116; cf. pp. 30-35. Sibrandus Lubbertus, for example, wrote in 1618 that while it cannot be known with certainty that any particular child has received the Holy Spirit, we may be certain that the Holy Spirit is given to covenant infants as a class on the grounds of the covenant and the promise of God. C. van der Woude, *Sibrandus Lubbertus: Leven en werken, in het bijzonder naar zijn correspondentie*, Kampen, 1963, p. 374. Van der Woude goes on to say that in holding this opinion Lubbertus shows himself a good disciple of Beza and Ursinus. On the controversy on this point in the Dutch church, cf. Veenhof, *Prediking en Uitverkiezing*, pp. 290-312. Hodge wrote, "we do not assert their regeneration, or that they are true members of Christ's body; we only assert that they belong to the class of persons whom we are bound to regard and treat as members of Christ's Church. This is the only sense in which even adults are members of the Church, so far as men are concerned." "The General Assembly," *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review*, vol. XX, p. 351, cited in Schenck, *op. cit.*, pp. 129-130. Warfield speaks of a "fair presumption of inclusion in Christ's body" built upon a divine promise. "The Polemics of Infant Baptism," *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, vol. IX, New York, 1932, p. 390. J. Murray says that "Baptized infants are to be received as children of God and treated accordingly." *Christian Baptism*, Philadelphia, 1972, p. 59. Any of these constructions is greatly to be preferred to the view of Archibald Alexander who held, as did Thornwell subsequently, that "The education of children should proceed on the principle that they are in an unregenerate state, until evidences of piety clearly appear." *Thoughts on Religious Experience*, reprinted, Edinburgh, 1967, pp. 11-13. For a period of several years during his ministry Alexander doubted the validity of infant baptism [See J.W. Alexander, *The Life of Archibald Alexander, D.D.*, reprinted, Harrisonburg, 1991, pp. 203-224]. His description of what should constitute evidence of regeneration in the young, if applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to adults, would leave the largest part of the believing church in a state of perpetual anxiety. I do not know what Scripture text could be cited in support of Alexander's theory. He cites none. William Young subjected Kuyper's "presumptive regeneration" to severe criticism in his "Historic Calvinism and Neo-Calvinism," *Westminster Theological Journal*, vol. XXXVI Nos. 1-2 (Fall-Winter 1973-1974) pp. 48-64 and 156-173. He does demonstrate the tenuousness of Kuyper's claim that the Reformed theology in its formative period typically defined the status of covenant children specifically in terms of presumed regeneration ..

Though not impossible, it is clearly not the normal expectation in Scripture that a covenant child should experience a conscious conversion or endure a period in which he or she has a sense of standing outside the covenant community, without God and without hope in the world. Rather, the normal experience of the children of believers should be that of David, who trusted in the Lord from his mother's breasts. No doubt this is in fact the experience of many covenant children who, nevertheless, "have" a conversion experience in adolescence because it is required of them by their ecclesiastical tradition. My own observation confirms some recent research suggesting that both the frequency of conversion experiences and their type vary distinctly according to church background.⁵⁰ That such "experiences" in the case of covenant children actually represent passage from darkness to light is, in many cases, highly doubtful, though they may well represent certain particularly important crises of illumination or repentance.⁵¹

The significance of the biblical expectation of infant faith for both the importance and the method of parental nurture in a covenant home cannot be overstated. The incalculable mercy that it is to grow up in the faith should be often acknowledged in home and in church.⁵²

IV. The children of the covenant are members of the church.

This part of the biblical doctrine of covenant succession needs less elaboration because it is better represented in the standard works of Reformed ecclesiology and defenses of infant baptism.⁵³ By virtue of their sacramental initiation, of the requirement of their presence at renewals of the covenant (Deut 29:9-15; Joel 2:16), of their being addressed as among the saints and as part of the church with corresponding obligations (Eph 1:1; 6:1-3), of their holiness (1 Cor 7:14), of the kingdom of God being theirs (Matt 18:13-15), they are members of the church. All the more, given the presumption of early faith, they meet the requirements of church membership. Another lovely and highly important way of making this point in Scripture is the Lord's practice of speaking of covenant children as his children (Ezek 16:20-21; Mal 2:15; cf. Isa 29:23). It is again extraordinary how thoroughly rooted in evangelical culture has become the practice of covenant children "joining the church" when Scripture provides neither instruction or illustration supportive of the practice but rather, in every way, regards such children as

He does not demonstrate, however, that there was not, in fact, a presumption -- based on the divine promise and the church membership of covenant infants -- upon which these children were considered and treated as Christians. Young's appeal to Alexander's viewpoint as typical of Reformed and Presbyterian thought is clearly a mistake and substantially vitiates his general criticism of what he calls Kuyper's "presumptivism." My own opinion is that to speak of a presumption of regeneration is not helpful. It is not the way the Scripture speaks and introduces unnecessary complications. Further, in current usage, "presumption" may well imply to many minds an unwarranted assumption.

⁵⁰ M. Barker, "Psychological Aspects of Inner Healing," *Pulpit and People: Essays in honour of William Still on his 75th birthday*, Edinburgh, 1986, pp. 93-94.

⁵¹ So John Murray, *Collected Writings*, vol. 2, Edinburgh, 1977, pp. 199-201.

⁵² The Duke of Buccleuch, at the unveiling of the [Sir Walter] Scott monument at Westminster some years ago, said he had spoken with Scott (perhaps been fondled by him), but it was before he could remember, and yet it was one of the great memories of his life. Baptism should not be less to any than that. P.T. Forsyth, *Lectures on the Church and the Sacraments*, London, 1917, p. 168.

⁵³ R. Baxter, *Plain Scripture Proof of Infants Church - Membership and Baptism*, London, 1651.

already part of the community of the saints from the beginning of their lives. Indeed, the recognition that covenant children are church members from their infancy furnishes the simplest resolution of certain practical objections commonly raised against the doctrine of covenant succession. If, for example, it be objected that it cannot be known that a very little child is or will eventually become a faithful follower of Christ, it needs only be pointed out that, so far as human judgment is concerned, that uncertainty applies equally to those who enter the church from the world by profession of faith.⁵⁴ Just as those who enter the church from the world, covenant children are required, as all church members, to grow up in the grace and knowledge of God and to live worthy of the calling they have received. As with older church members, others are appointed to help them do so.⁵⁵

The immensely important consequence of this infant membership is that the duty of parents and the church becomes, thereby, to train their children to believe, feel, and live as becomes the children of God and members of his household, which they are! Especially parents, who are the masters of their children's thoughts in the formative years, are responsible to ensure that the children of the covenant grow up fully aware and appreciative of the promises which have been made to them by name and the summons which was issued to them at the headwaters of their lives. Surely one of the most dismal evidences of the debasement of this doctrine in Presbyterian churches is in the general insensibility of covenant children themselves to their status, their breathtaking privileges, and their sacred obligations.⁵⁶

V. Parents are charged to nurture their children in Christian faith and love.

The spiritual culture of their children, their instruction in the works and will of God, their preparation for a life of faith is made the direct responsibility of the church's parents according to a great many texts (Gen. 18:19; Exod. 10:1-2, 12:24-27, 13:8, 14-16, 31:12-13; Deut. 4:9, 6:4-9; Ps. 44:1, 78:1-8; Isa. 38:19; 2 Tim. 3:14-15). The entirety of Proverbs is illustration both of the manner and substance of that covenantal nurture (the covenantal name of God is used throughout the book). According to Scripture the covenant home is to be both a school of faith and a temple in which the acknowledgment of God and his worship confirm and adorn the instruction (cf. Ps. 118:15; 2 Sam. 6:20). The larger community of faith

⁵⁴ So Warfield, "Polemics of Infant Baptism," p. 390; C. Hodge, *The Church and its Polity*, p. 216.

⁵⁵ Thornwell's opinion, elaborated above, that covenant children were but quasi members of the church with an entirely different status from that of professors, is so far removed from the statements of Holy Scripture itself and so alien to the Bible's entire approach to the question, that it serves well as both a warning of the power of even an evangelical spiritual culture to deafen the church to the Bible's actual words and as a reminder that, even among our Reformed authorities, from time to time it is to be observed that bonus dormitat Homerus! On the other hand, it cannot be denied that the common practice in Reformed churches of allowing persons, baptized in infancy and thus members of the church, who grow up to spiritual indifference or active rebellion and who, accordingly, never "join the church," to be treated as if they were never members of the church is practically Thornwell's view, however unwittingly. It has not been so always and everywhere. John a Lasco's method with baptized children who, once adults, did not seek the Lord's Table was to warn them and then to expel them from the church. A.G. Honig, Alexander Comrie, reprinted, Leiden, 1991, *Stelling XIII*.

⁵⁶ "But O how we neglect that ordinance! treating our children in the Church, just as if they were out of it. Ought we not daily to say (in its spirit) to our children, 'You are Christian children, you are Christ's, you ought to think and feel and act as such!' And, on this plan carried out, might we not expect more early fruit of the grace than by keeping them always looking forward to a point of time at which they shall have new hearts and join the church? I am distressed with long-harbored misgivings on this point." J.W. Alexander, "Forty Years- Familiar Letters," II, p. 25, cited in Schenck, p. 81.

and especially the ministry also bear responsibility for this nurture of mind and heart (Hos. 4:6; Mic. 2:9; Jer. 2:8-9; 2 Chron. 24:2, 26:5; cf. Zech. 11:16).

VI. Faithful nurture of covenant children is the divine instrumentality of their awakening to spiritual life.

The Scripture repeatedly and emphatically connects the fact and the quality of the nurture of covenant children with the spiritual outcome of their lives. It draws this connection both positively and negatively.

First, over and again the Scripture declares that the nurture of covenant children in knowledge, faith, love, and obedience will issue in a life of covenantal faithfulness. Faithful parenting will result, by covenanted grace, in believing children. Immediately upon the definitive revelation of the promise of covenant succession in Gen. 17:7, covenantal nurture is identified as the instrumentality of its fulfillment (18:19 cf. 22:16-18, 26:3-5; Deut. 28:1-4). The straightforward connection established between the meeting of this condition and the fulfillment of this promise must neither be ignored nor minimized. That the faith and salvation of the covenant's children is suspended on the faithfulness of their nurture is a biblical commonplace. The point is made repeatedly and emphatically. Psalm 78:1-8 may be regarded as a locus classicus (cf. Gen. 18:19; Deut. 4:40, 5:29; Ps. 102:28, 103:17-18, 112:1-2; Isa. 59:20-21). The fact of the connection between faithful nurture and covenantal faithfulness in the life of the church's children is one of the grand themes of Proverbs (e.g. 2:1-7:27, 14:26, 19:18, 22:6, 15, 23:14) and is unquestionably the presupposition of these many texts, (some of which are listed under V supra) which urge upon parents the duty of instructing their children in the faith and leading them in the ways of God! We find Paul in Eph. 6:1-4 playing the role of the godly father to the church's children and in the same breath admonishing parents so to raise their children as to bring their spiritual blessing to pass.

The same connection between parents' faithfulness and their children's salvation is also made negatively. This is a specific application of the general laws, comprehensively taught and illustrated in Scripture, that children will suffer for the sins of their parents (Ex. 20:5; Jer. 2:9; 32:18; 36:31; Lam 2:11; Hos. 4:6; Luke 11:50) and will imitate their parents in wrongdoing (1 Kgs. 22:52; 2 Kgs. 17:41; Ezek. 20:24,27). Responsibility for the betrayal of the covenant on the part of the priests Hophni and Phinehas is laid at the feet of their father, Eli (1 Sam. 2:29, 3:13; note "young men" in 2:17). It is surely intended to be instructive that the account of Amnon and Tamar (2 Sam. 13) immediately follows upon the account of David's adultery. David was no Job (1:1-15). It is no slander to acknowledge that he was an inattentive and ineffective father who by his instruction, to the extent he gave it, showed his children the way to heaven, but by his example too often led them by the hand to hell. The sorry history of his indulgence of Absalom demonstrates his parental incompetence, the rebellion of his son Adonijah is directly attributed to his parental failings (1 Kings. 1:6), and Solomon's spiritual collapse in his maturity is a striking imitation of his father's. It is most instructive how the chronicler pays attention to the influence of parentage for good or ill on the kings of Judah. All the righteous kings have Hebrew mothers, so far as can be determined, and the fact that these women are identified as they are strongly suggests that they were to some significant degree responsible for the faithfulness of their sons. Contrarily, in two cases (12:13-14, 22:3), the identity of the king's mother is offered as an explanation for his betrayal of the covenant it was his duty to obey and protect. A particularly noteworthy and solemnizing instance of a godly parent nevertheless horribly failing his children is that of Hezekiah, perhaps Judah's best king, whose cruelly self-centered response to the announcement of impending judgment upon the nation for his own sin must have had a profound effect upon his young son, Manasseh, who was soon to succeed him.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ It is worth pondering the fact that Manasseh was at a most impressionable age when Hezekiah so terribly betrayed his faith, but Josiah was at a similarly impressionable period during Manasseh's late

Further, there is the very important evidence of Titus 1:6 where Paul lays down the requirement that to qualify for consideration for the eldership a man must have believing children.⁵⁸ Upon this rock must finally shatter every attempt to argue that parents are not directly accountable for the spiritual issue of their children's lives. A man with unbelieving children is a man with a defect, which disqualifies him from the leadership of the church.

It is to be noted, finally, that nowhere does the Scripture suggest the contrary, that blameless parental nurture might still result in one's children growing up to a life of unbelief.⁵⁹ That faithful nurture should

repentance. Manasseh was Josiah's grandfather, but the facts that Josiah's father, Amon, became king when he was only twenty-two years of age and reigned for only two years suggest that the imposing grandfather, with his immensely interesting and impressive personal history as well as his furious repentance, may well have made the far greater impression on the boy growing up at court than his own father's weak and inconsequential life.

⁵⁸ Paul uses here the adjective rather than the participle, but the authorities agree that the sense is "believing" in the sense of "believing in Christ" or "being a Christian." BAG, p. 671.

⁵⁹ It is not enough to imply, as is often done, that taking with full seriousness the suspension of the fulfillment of the promise to the children upon the faithfulness of the parents somehow undermines the sovereignty of grace. Bruce Ray writes: "Neither reading the Bible nor praying will bring a man to salvation unless God is pleased to do a mighty work of grace within his heart. So it is with our children. We can administer the rod under God's authority with all firmness, and with all persevering consistency in a context of love, and it will come to nothing unless God works a work of grace in their hearts. ... We can never assume that if we properly raise our children they will automatically be Christians. There are too many examples in the Scriptures of godly parents who had wicked offspring." *Withhold not Correction*, p. 67. But that is a misstatement of the case in more ways than in his speaking of covenant children "automatically" becoming Christians, an idea it would be very difficult to demonstrate has ever been held by any Christian writer, much less Reformed one. The question is not whether a parent is godly, but whether he or she was faithful in the matter of parenthood. Even the most godly of men and women fall short in many ways. And where does the Scripture ever suggest that a blameless nurture could end in a son or daughter's unbelief? The texts, which Ray cites as teaching the responsibility of parents, seem rather explicitly to exclude that possibility. It is highly significant that not once in his entire book devoted to the spiritual nurture and discipline of Christians' children, does Ray ever appeal to the promise of God to be our children's God. But to put parental obligations ahead of or to consider them in isolation from a divine promise is to place works before faith. That promise may indeed be suspended upon conditions, as are all the promises of the gospel, conditions which divine grace will ensure are fulfilled in the case of the elect, but there remains the promise of God. It is a false disjunction to pit that promise against the sovereignty of grace. It is to doubt God's Word to believe that His promise will not be kept even if the required conditions are met. Grace does not abolish conditions, it fulfils them. The appeal to Jacob and Esau does not serve the purpose. It is not at all clear that the two sons were similarly nurtured in the faith or that either one was given a godly upbringing. God's grace may well cover many parental sins. His promise only constrains him to crown his own gift when, by his grace, parents raise their children faithfully in the love and fear of God. Why in the same family one believes and another does not can often be accounted for by the different nurture or example each received. Joseph did not receive the same upbringing as his brothers. There are many factors, however, which are known and can be weighed only by God. On the "divinely constituted relation between the piety of parents and that of their children" and on the conditionality of the divine promise to be the God of believers' children, cf. Hodge, "Bushnell on Christian Nurture," pp. 504-507 and Atwater, "The Children of the Church and Sealing Ordinances," pp. 16-17. The whole point was put in a more homely way by the mother of Wilhelmsus a Brakel, the celebrated figure of the Dutch Nadere Reformatie. Brakel himself often acknowledged that he could not

be a real condition of the fulfillment of the promise of covenant succession is, after all, only to be expected. It is exactly parallel to other such conditions and to the stress placed on other instrumentalities of saving grace. Just as those who are far off will not be brought near unless someone is sent to preach to them, just as the church will not remain faithful to God unless her ministry remains faithful, so the church's children will not awaken to a life of living faith without covenantal nurture. Such are the appointed means of grace, which divine sovereignty, with its secret purposes, provides for all who are being saved.⁶⁰

I am entirely aware of the poignant pastoral dilemma posed by the necessity of preaching the accountability of parents for the salvation of their offspring. In almost any congregation there are parents grieving over the unbelief of their children. No faithful pastor wishes to rub salt in an open wound. Further, the calculation of any parent's accountability is no simple matter and distinctions, even when carefully noted, are too easily ignored to the further dismay and confusion of everyone. Scripture itself clearly introduces mitigating factors and points, by analogy, to the possibility of others. How old were the children when the parents became believers? It would seem that virtually all accountability for a failure of nurture could, in some cases, be thus expunged. Were both parents Christians (note Paul's indefiniteness in 1 Cor. 7:14-16)? Was the unbelieving parent passive or hostile? How well served were the parents by the instruction of their church (Isa. 3:14, Jer. 2:8-9, 10:21; Lam. 4:13)? In many cases it would seem that a church and its ministry would be directly responsible for the unbelief of children whose proper nurture was undermined by the teaching of false views of the relation between God, the gospel, and the church's children. What was the general condition of the church at the time (Judges 2:10, 19, 3:6)? Accountability for a covenant child's betrayal of the gospel lies chiefly with him or her (Ezek. 18:1-4). The remainder of that accountability parents bear with church and minister -- but always according to such aforementioned principles of equity introduced in Scripture. Further, God's dealings are an impenetrable mystery and latitude must be given to God's freedom to be merciful in varying degrees (Lk. 7:41-50; Matt. 20:1-16). The Lord has a right to cover more parental sins in one case than in another and is free to require that one

recollect a time in his life when he was an unbeliever, having trusted in the Lord from his mother's breasts. His biographer notes that the principle of grace, which had been so early implanted in his heart by the Spirit of God, was nurtured by the faithful instruction, discipline, and godly example of his parents, especially their prayers. His mother prayed so incessantly that her son would walk with God that, he remembers her frequently saying to him, "O, what you will have to answer for, if you do not fear God!" F.J. Los, Wihelmus A Brakel, reprinted, Leiden, 1991, pp. 25-26.

⁶⁰ It is the faithful acknowledgement of the seriousness with which the Lord views this parental nurture as a condition of the fulfillment of his promise that is the true protection against a nominalism which denatures the doctrine of covenant succession and bases upon it a false presumption of the eternal security of the church's children. Holding fast to the clear connection drawn in Scripture between the fulfillment of God's promise and the divinely appointed instrumentality of its fulfillment is a much more effective deterrent to a careless presumption than having accurately stated the ground of infant baptism. Both Kuyper and his critics lay the stress on the latter rather than the former. Cf. Veenhof, *Prediking en Uitverkiezing*, pp. 290-305; Young, "Calvinism and Neo-Calvinism." It is interesting that it is precisely this Biblical emphasis upon the divinely appointed instrumentality of the promise's fulfillment which is missing both in the Reformed Baptist treatment of Bruce Ray and the arguably "hyper-Calvinistic" treatment of Herman Hoeksema. *Believers and their Seed*, Grand Rapids, 1971. In both works the concern is to protect the absolute sovereignty of grace. It seems to me that in both works there is a failure to do justice to the covenantal character of that divine grace and a similar propensity to argue from God's secrets, instead of resting content with the actual statements of the Bible. A grateful and faithful undertaking of the appointed means in reliance upon the required and promised grace is what is asked for in Scripture. H. Bavinck, *Paedagogische Beginselen*, Kampen, 1904, pp. 90-92.

parent see the fruit of his parental sins while hiding it from another. Moreover, no doubt in regard to parental nurture, as everything else in the Christian life, "to whom much is given, much is required."

All of this notwithstanding, it needs finally to be faced squarely that in our day Christian people suffer from a terribly diminished estimation of sin. The generality of Christians today genuinely and feelingly acknowledge only relatively innocuous transgressions. The defensiveness of most Christians, even when accused of relatively minor and common misdeeds, is only to be expected of people who have come to measure their guilt chiefly in terms of those sins which are generally tolerated in the church as common frailties. There is an eerie disjunction between the contemporary Christian's measurement of his or her own sin and the same Christian's doctrines of an infinitely costly atonement and an everlasting hell. Few Christians today are prepared to acknowledge that they have a direct responsibility for someone else's eternal damnation. Even among ministers there are few who seem actually to be bearing the terrible weight of their accountability, notwithstanding the Scripture's plain-speaking (Ezek. 3:17-19; Acts 20:26-27; Heb. 13:17). But Christians must be made to see that the sins which sent our Redeemer to the cross are not peccadilloes, but titanic things, high crimes, and among those terrible evils which are found in the life of even some of the most godly men and women, such as David himself, are those sins of parental unfaithfulness which contribute to the spiritual death of their children. Consequently, no Christian, thinking rightly, should pray any less solemnly and urgently than this about his or her parenthood.

Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, give us such a seed! Give us a seed right with Thee! Smite us and our house with everlasting barrenness rather than that our seed should not be right with Thee. O God, give us our children. Give us our children. A second time, and by a far better birth, give us our children to be beside us in Thy holy covenant. For it had been better we had never been born; it had been better we had never been betrothed; it had been better we had sat all our days solitary unless our children are to be right with Thee. ...But thou, O God, art Thyself a Father, and thus hast in Thyself a Father's heart. Hear us, then, for our children, O our Father.... In season and out of season; we shall not go up into our bed; we shall not give sleep to our eyes nor slumber to our eyelids till we and all our seed are right with Thee.⁶¹

CONCLUSION

It is imperative that the doctrine of covenant succession be recovered in our churches. Its loss has deeply diminished the church's appreciation of and wonder over the liberality and perfection of divine grace.⁶²

⁶¹ A. Whyte, *Bunyan Characters*, vol. 3, London, 1902, pp. 289-290. Whyte, I believe, beautifully sums up the Lord's own summons and invitation to parents when he writes: "God cannot resist a parent's prayer when it is sufficiently backed up with a parent's sanctification." *Lord Teach us to Pray*, London, n.d., p. 124. In a similar vein P.T. Forsyth writes: "Prayer is one form of sacrifice, but if it is the only form it is vain oblation. If we pray for our child that he may have God's blessing, we are really promising that nothing shall be lacking on our part to be a divine blessing to him. And if we have no kind of religious relation to him (as plenty of Christian parents have none), our prayer is quite unreal, and its failure should not be a surprise. To pray for God's kingdom is also to engage ourselves to service and sacrifice for it." *The Soul of Prayer*, London, 1916, p. 28.

⁶² "It is precisely this which Satan is attempting in assailing infant baptism with such an army: that, once this testimony of God's grace is taken away from us, the promise which, through it, is put before our eyes may eventually vanish little by little. From this would grow up not only an impious ungratefulness toward God's mercy but a certain negligence about instructing our children in piety. For when we consider that immediately from birth God takes and acknowledges them as his children, we feel a strong stimulus to instruct them in an earnest fear of God and observance of the law." Calvin, *Institutes*, IV, xvi, 32.

Further, the appropriation by faith of this divine promise and summons is the means appointed to furnish the church with generation after generation of great multitudes of Christian servants and soldiers who reach manhood and womanhood well taught, sturdy in faith, animated by love for God and man, sophisticated in the ways of the world and the Devil, polished in the manners of genuine Christian brotherhood, overshadowed by the specter of the Last Day, nerved to deny themselves and take up their cross so as to be counted worthy of greater exploits for Christ and Kingdom. Presently the church not only suffers a terrible shortage of such otherworldly and resolute Christians, superbly prepared for spiritual warfare, but, in fact, is hemorrhaging its children into the world. Christian evangelism will never make a decisive difference in our culture when it amounts merely to an effort to replace losses due to widespread desertion from our own camp. The gospel will always fail to command attention and carry conviction when large numbers of those who grow up under its influence are observed abandoning it for the world. Recovering our Presbyterian inheritance and inscribing the doctrine of covenant succession upon the heart of family and church must have a wonderfully solemnizing and galvanizing effect. It will set Christian parents seriously to work on the spiritual nurture of their children, equipping them and requiring them to live the life of covenant faith and duty to which their God and Savior called them at the headwaters of life. And, ever conscious of the greater effect of parental example, they will forsake the easy way, shamelessly and joyfully to live a life of devotion and obedience which adorns and ennoble the faith in the eyes of their children. This they will do, who embrace the Bible's doctrine, lest the Lord on the Great Day should say to them: "You took your sons and daughters whom you bore to me and sacrificed them to idols."⁶³

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"Before my infant heart conceived From whom these comforts flowed."

Kidner, Psalms, (TOTC) vol. 1, p. 251.

⁶³ "They incur the guilt of an infamous robber or thief," as Bucer has gravely observed, *de Regno Christi*, lib. ii c. 9, "who are not at the greatest pains to bring up and form those they have consecrated by baptism to the Lord Christ, to the obedience of Christ. For by this neglect, as much as in them lies, they again rob God of the children they gave up to him, betray and enslave them to the devil." Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants*, vol. II, p. 441.