

Editorial: More on Baptism (4)

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The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant Lewis Bevens Schenk

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“And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee” (Genesis 17:7).

“Yet ye say, Wherefore? Because the LORD hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously: yet is she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant. And did not he make one? Yet had he the residue of the spirit. And wherefore one? That he might seek a godly seed. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously against the wife of his youth” (Malachi 2:14-15).

“For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy” (I Corinthians 7:14).

Introduction. In three previous reviews we have looked at the arguments that baptism must be by immersion (and shown that it is exegetically untenable) and that it must be administered to “believers alone” (and seen that it fails in the clear light of the New Testament testimony to household baptisms). We then positively set forth the case that “Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptized” is scriptural and confessional in Reformed Churches.

A Question. But a correspondent asks, “What is the nature of the efficacy of this outward sign ordinance in both OT and NT? What does the outward covenant procure for its recipients? Maybe you would offer some thoughts on this.”

Now we who are evangelical—that is gospel—believers may appear to have a problem. We accept, Bishop J. C. Ryle’s definition of evangelical religion: “the absolute supremacy it assigns to Holy Scripture,” “the depth

and prominence it assigns to the doctrine of human sinfulness and corruption,” “the paramount importance it attaches to the work and office of our Lord Jesus Christ,” “the high place which it assigns to the inward work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of man,” and “the importance which it attaches to the outward and visible work of the Holy Ghost in the life of man.”

We find these beliefs in our own hearts; we observe them in the lives and converse of fellow believers and we note their development in those who are converted from the world. But we grow up, in most cases marry, and often God blesses us with children. We cradle the largely unconscious individual in our thankful arms. But here is the problem: all our loving instincts are towards the child, but our theology appears to tell us that it is “totally depraved” and that what has entered our family is, to use a famous phrase, “a little viper!”

But our instincts are right—it is our theology that is wrong! It has been corrupted by baptist, nay anabaptist, thinking! We who are Reformed bring our children to be baptized, so they must in some sense be members of the church. But in what light are we to consider them? Here, it must be admitted we are in some confusion. Anglicans, Congregationalists/Independents, Presbyterians, and Reformed display varying views! It is the merit of Schenk’s important work that it brings us back to the Reformers and to Scripture. In the light of our problem let us follow his solution.

In a lengthy first chapter, **“The Historic Doctrine of the Presbyterian Church Concerning the Significance of Infant Baptism,”** Schenk looks at the position of Calvin, and other Reformers, and then the confessional position. Calvin takes Genesis 17:7 (quoted above) as a basis for the everlasting covenant, sees that baptism replaces circumcision, recognizes that children need the forgiveness of their sin, and argues that regeneration is bestowed by God before birth when they become church members. He does not hold baptismal regeneration. Rather their baptism is the recognition of their status and the subsequent requirements of both parents and church to “bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.” Schenk writes, “The visible church ... includes the whole multitude, throughout the earth, who profess their faith in God through Christ, and who are initiated into His church by baptism.” He adds, “we must accept the children of believing parents as presumably God’s children, on the basis of the covenant promise of God.” Calvin wrote, “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." Zwingli and Bullinger held similar views.

Chapter 2 is entitled **"The Great Awakening and the Development of Revivalism."** In order to understand what happened next in our American colony a little history is necessary. Unlike Scotland the progress of the Reformation in England was partial. After the Reformation was started under Henry VIII, it was continued by his son Edward VI. The country was then plunged back into popery by the reign of Mary I. On her death Elizabeth I restored the situation existing under Edward. An uneasy balance was then maintained, the liturgy containing Romish elements while the doctrine was Calvinistic. A Puritan group arose during the reign of Elizabeth seeking a more thorough Reformation and high hopes were placed on James VI of Scotland when he acceded to the throne of England as James I. These came to nothing. In due course came the Civil War, and, in 1662, with the return of Charles II, one hundred years of hope of further Reformation came to an end.

But among the groups seeking a more thorough Reformation were those who took a congregational line, emigrated to Holland and from whom came the Pilgrim Fathers who settled in New England 1620. That colony prospered under the blessing of God and others immigrated. Churches were founded as the colony extended and there were notable ministries.

But no ecclesiastical situation prospers long. As the earlier settlers died so the churches filled with their children and grandchildren. Upright, moral, diligent, they nonetheless did not come up to the searching requirements of the original covenant of their forefathers. They did not come into membership or take the Lord's Supper, and though they were baptized in infancy they no longer possessed the qualification to bring their children to the ordinance. Similarly in England the non-conformists, having obtained their liberty of worship, declined in some cases into Arianism.

In America one pastor wrote "religion was in a very low state, professors dead and lifeless, and the body of our people careless, carnal and secure. There was but little power of godliness appearing among us." Then came the Great Awakening. Partly assisted by "The Log College" and encouraged by visits from George Whitfield, revival swept the country and Schenk does an excellent job of setting out the situation:

The doctrines preached by the leaders of the Great Awakening were the doctrines of the Reformers; the doctrines of origi-

nal sin, regeneration by the supernatural influences of the Holy Spirit, its absolute necessity for salvation and Christian character, effectual calling, justification by faith on the ground of the imputed righteousness of Christ, perseverance of the saints, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit with the consequent divine consolations and joys.' 'In its reaction to the formalism of the times, the Great Awakening "with vehemence and exaggeration" emphasized one ground only for recognising the children of God. "Everyone's religious experience must be broken into the prescribed measure and form ... Everyone must believe certain things, and do certain things, and pass through a certain process, or he is lost." The fact that a child was a child of believing parents, included in the covenant promise of God, made no difference. It was believed that they too must have this experience of conviction and conversion.

But a censorious spirit developed and some pretty unwise things were said and done. As Dr. Charles Hodge said, revivals "may be highly useful—or even necessary—just as violent remedies are often the means of saving life, but such remedies are not the proper and ordinary means of sustaining and promoting health."

The third chapter discusses **"The Threat of Revivalism to the Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant."** Reliance on revivals as the only hope of the church meant that the "cause of Christ was to advance, 'not by a growth analogous to the progress of spiritual life in the individual believer, but by sudden and violent paroxysms of exertion.' Some points of doctrinal teaching were exaggerated far beyond their true importance. Alternation of decline and revival was looked upon as the normal condition of the church." The result was that infant baptism decayed in the church. Dr. J. W. Alexander wrote in 1845,

But O how we neglect that ordinance! treating 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.

Schenk writes,

If the church had no assurance that the infant children of believers were truly the children of God, if it did not treat them as Christians under her special love and care and watchfulness, if it ignored practically their baptism, this was the reason for the decline of the ordinance.

In 1832, Dr. Ashbel Green wrote,

The truth is that in most of the churches of our denomination there is a mournful disregard of the duty which ought to be performed towards baptized children. They are not viewed and treated as members of the church at all, nor more regard shown to them than to those who are unbaptized. This is a grievous and very criminal neglect.

When the Presbyterians revised their *Book of Discipline* in the nineteenth century, it became clear that leaders in the South such as Dabney, Palmer and Thornwell took a different view. Thus Dabney spoke of “unregenerate baptized children.” Meanwhile in the North, Miller and Hodge resisted. The former quoted Calvin:

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.

Hodge held it would be “abandoning the ground to the Independents and Anabaptists.” Schenk adds that though the views of Dabney, et. al.,

were largely accepted throughout the Southern church. Yet these views were an aberration from the Reformed doctrine of children of the covenant and of the significance of infant baptism. They were, on the other hand, in accord with the

conception of the child, principally if not exclusively emphasized in the revival movement.

In chapter four on **“The Defense of the Doctrine of Children in the Covenant,”** Schenk writes,

The fact that the older doctrine and practice of the Presbyterian Church had nearly perished under the distemper of revivalism and divergent views of children in the covenant was deplored by many competent theologians and observant leaders. They knew that much lost ground remained to be recovered in the Presbyterian doctrine of children in the covenant and in the view of infant baptism consistent with the church’s Standards.

It is clear that throughout the nineteenth century there was a lively discussion among the American Presbyterians about the whole issue. It was complicated by the fact that they were inextricably involved with New England Congregationalism and New England theology. “Hodge and other Presbyterian leaders were battling to save the church from the growing influence of a theology that was both ‘anti-confessional and provincial,’” writes Schenk. “Inspiration was its premise, and induction its method. Consequently, as Dr. Patton put it, ‘a speculative theology was as valueless as real estate in Utopia.’”

Following a discussion of the covenant of grace, we read that A. W. Miller held “the parent was to regard the child, first and chiefly, as the child of the covenant, and in this sense, the child of God.” And the view “of the Princeton theologians was the doctrine of the historic Reformed church; namely, that since the promise is not only to parents but to their seed, children are by the command of God to be regarded and treated as of the number of the elect.” Hodge wrote,

It was believed that the church considered as the body of Christ, consisted of the regenerated. [But as] God had not given to man the power to search the heart, He had not imposed upon them any duty which implied the possession of such a power. In other words, Christ had not committed to men the impossible task of making a church which consisted exclusively of the regenerate.

As Warfield said,

All baptism is inevitably administered on the basis not of knowledge but of presumption, and if we must baptize on presumption the whole principle is yielded; and it would seem that we must baptize all whom we may fairly *presume to be member's of Christ's body*. Assuredly a human profession [as in adult baptism] is no more solid basis to build upon than a Divine promise [as in infant baptism].

Implicit in infant baptism is the duty that falls on the parents and the church to bring up the children "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." God's promise is to those who keep His covenant, and to all who remember His precepts to do them. Surely He does not fail to distinguish between faithful and unfaithful parents, between those whose children are brought up in the nurture of the Lord, and those who utterly neglected their religious training. Dr. Samuel Miller asserted,

The truth is if infant baptism were properly improved, if the profession which it includes, and the obligations which it imposes, were suitably appreciated, and followed up, it would have few opponents. I can no more doubt, if this were done, that it would be blessed to the saving conversion of thousands of our young people, than I can doubt the faithfulness of a covenanted God. Yes, infant baptism is of God, but the fault lies in the conduct of its advocates. The inconsistencies of its friends has done more to discredit it, than all the arguments of its opposers, a hundred fold.

The fifth and final, brief chapter is entitled **"The Resultant Confusion Concerning Children in the Covenant and the Significance of Infant Baptism.** Dr. Atwater declared,

The Presbyterian Church has a glorious doctrine. Our Standards surely set forth nothing less than this: they direct that baptized children be taught and trained to believe, feel, act and live as becomes those who are the Lord's; not merely that it is wrong and perilous to be and do otherwise ... but that

such a course is inconsistent with their position as members of the Church, placed in it by the mercies of God.

As Calvin declared, "it is no small stimulus to our education of them in the serious fear of God, and the observance of his law, to reflect, that they are considered and acknowledged by him as his children as soon as they are born." Quarles wrote, "this is the Lord's way to perpetuate and extend his Church. It is the growth from within, like the mustard seed ... The regular, normal mode of increase is through the multiplication of Christian families, the blessings descending from generation to generation in an ever growing ratio."

But though this was and is clearly Reformed and scriptural in practice it was neglected so that believing parents were led to expect their children to grow up very much like other children, unconverted, out of the church, and out of covenant with God. Wrote Hodge, "We cannot doubt that this is the case, and that it is the source of incalculable evil."

The principle of the Reformed faith, that the child brought up under Christian influence should never know a time when love to God was not an active principle in its life, was displaced by an assumption that even the offspring of the godly were born enemies of God and must await the crisis of conversion.

This great and harmful error, an assumption of the Great Awakening, had taken fast hold on the mind of the church. In fact, Dr. Charles Hodge said, "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."

And if the layman was confused, so were the ministers! And that in the light of the Standards to which they had assented. Writing in 1940 Schenk concludes,

Those who pride themselves on being the orthodox are really the unorthodox. The Presbyterian Church has a glorious doctrine received through the medium of John Calvin and the Westminster Standards. Yet the church as a whole does not know it. The historic doctrine of the church concerning children in the covenant and the significance of infant baptism has been to a large extent secretly undermined, hidden by the intrusion of an aberration from this doctrine.

Discussion. 1. Almost immediately after the promulgation of the covenant of grace with Abraham (Gen 17:7 above) we read in Genesis 18:19,

For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment; that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him.

No doubt in the 2000 years that lay between Abraham's day and our Lord's there were many glitches, but many Jewish children received an exemplary upbringing in accordance with the teaching of Proverbs.¹ Before a child could speak it would have noted the recurring Sabbath; the "Mesusah" on the door posts and the annual festivals of Chanukah, Purim, Booths and the Paschal Supper. Early he would have learned Scripture texts by heart; home teaching began at three: the Hebrew letters were to be learned and the child taught to read fluently. At five the Bible was studied, starting with Leviticus, and at six or seven he went to the school, probably attached to the synagogue.

To this the New Testament bears witness. We do not know how Eunice came to marry a heathen Greek or live in Lystra where there was not even a synagogue, but to Timothy, Paul writes,

When I call to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice; and I am persuaded that in thee also ... And that from a child [i.e. infant or baby] thou hast known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus (II Tim. 1:5; 3:15).

There was also that greater home at Nazareth. Socially the family had fallen on rough times, but He was of the royal line and the implication must be that it possessed a complete copy of the Hebrew Scriptures.

But the point we wish to bring out is that Jewish families brought up their children as Jews! What else could they do? And we who have entered into their inheritance bring up our children as Christians—what else!

2. It is the merit of Schenk's book that it brings us back to our Refor-

¹See Dr. Alfred Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of Christ*.

mation and scriptural roots. We bring our children to baptism not to make them church members or “regenerate” but in recognition of the fact that they already are members and to formally bring them under the care and discipline of the local church. Reformed churches have always recognized this; I am not certain that all Presbyterian churches are equally clear!

3. Those of us who have sadly looked on the faces of newly born dead children realise there is nothing more we can do but reverently bury them. But the Scriptures tell us of the living: “ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.” Such a command and the other directions of the Scriptures, such as those in Proverbs, imply not only physical life but spiritual also. We must go to work on that assumption.

4. There is nothing automatic about this. From its earliest days the child must be surrounded at home with not only loving physical care and nurture, but spiritual nurture as well. Prayer, the reading of the Scriptures, and attendance at public worship will all be part of the ethos.

5. The church through its minister and elders also has an active part to play in Christian education. There lies before me as I write copies of “The Heidelberg Catechism for Junior Catechumens” and “Workbooks” on the Heidelberg Catechism; New Testament History; Old Testament History—all part of an extensive system of instruction regularly carried out by one Reformed denomination. I am told that instruction usually starts at 7 or 8 and carries on for ten or twelve years when normally there is profession of faith. “Go—and do thou likewise!”

6. General education will initially in most households fall on wives as “keepers at home.” But the responsibility is placed on the husband. Initially it will be the three Rs. But the increasingly poisonous nature of our society must raise a question about the appropriateness of public education. Historically Reformed churches have sought to build Christian schools. Since most church buildings are unoccupied most week days it would seem worthwhile to explore this option.

7. But (there is always a but!) someone will point out that however carefully we nurture and educate, some children will sadly prove reprobate! True, but this does not pose a problem. Return to Genesis. At the specific command of God, Abraham was circumcised, “a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised.” Ishmael was circumcised, as were Abraham’s household and Isaac when he was eight

days old. In due time Isaac married Rebekah and to them were born Esau and Jacob. Although we are not told so, by good and necessary consequence, doubtless both were circumcised. There is no evidence that Ishmael was reprobate, but of Esau we read, "And Esau was forty years old when he took to wife Judith the daughter of Beerli the Hittite, and Bashemath the daughter of Elon the Hittite: Which were a grief of mind unto Isaac and to Rebekah" (Gen. 26:34-35). Jacob seems to have been a bit of a mother's boy. He was over 80 when he was forced to leave home and around 90 when he married Leah and Rachel! But God is sovereign. "As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated" (Rom. 9:13).

8. The antithesis does not imply that normal domestic duties are at an end.

And these are the days of the years of Abraham's life which he lived, an hundred threescore and fifteen years. Then Abraham gave up the ghost, and died in a good old age, an old man, and full of years; and was gathered to his people. And his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, which is before Mamre; The field which Abraham purchased of the sons of Heth: there was Abraham buried, and Sarah his wife ... And the days of Isaac were an hundred and fourscore years. And Isaac gave up the ghost, and died, and was gathered unto his people, being old and full of days: and his sons Esau and Jacob buried him (Gen. 25:7-10; 35:28-29).

9. We thought we had finished our task when on opening the June 2005 issue of the *Banner of Truth* magazine we found the esteemed Rev. Maurice Roberts had written a review of Schenk—and come to precisely opposite conclusions. Mr. Roberts writes with that apparently easy classical style which characterised his editorials and which those of us who sweat at the word face find so enviable. I have been reading or re-reading these in their book form over recent months and I cannot forebear recommending them in passing as minor Christian classics.² But to return, his concluding sentence is: "Presumptive regeneration of church children is about the last thing we wish to see in our churches at this hour." Does Mr. Roberts then believe in presumptive unregeneration of his baptised church children?

In fact, it is a fault of Schenk to use the word presumptive. Theologically it goes back to the seventeenth century and currently is perhaps best known in connection with Kuyper's position.³

A better way of looking at the matter is in terms of promise. We started our review by quoting Genesis 17:7. That promise was renewed on the day of Pentecost: "For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call." And is beautifully exemplified in the response to the Philippian jailers anguished cry in Acts 16, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" And they said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house." The result: "And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes; and was baptized, he and all his, straightway." Then "he brought them up into his house, and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, with all his house, having believed in God" [ASV].

We baptize our children and educate them as Christians in response to the promise of God. But we recognize that "they are not all Israel who are of Israel." As Hoeksema put it, "The line of election and reprobation cuts directly through the generations of the covenant."⁴

10. It has been remarked that whether Baptist, Presbyterian or Reformed the bulk of church members are descended from Christian parents. God is sovereign and in spite of our theologies keeps His promises and saves our children, our elect children. Schenk is right. After reading him I re-read the relevant sections of Calvin's *Institutes* and found that Schenk has correctly presented Calvin's view. This is the doctrine of the Reformers; of the Confessions and, I submit, of the section on baptism in the Westminster Directory for the Public Worship of God. Baptists have got it wrong; Reformed have got it right, and Presbyterians are in a muddle as illustrated by this valuable book and our previous review. We must proceed with their education on the assumption of their election. We cannot obey our Lord's command to "Feed my lambs" unless the lambs are actually alive!

As ever our "Letters to the Editor" page is available for comment or correction from those who have more scriptural light on the subject.

³*The Thought of God* (1993); *The Christian's High Calling* (2000); *Great God of Wonders* (2003).

³Herman Hoeksema refuted presumptive regeneration in general and Kuyper in particular in *Believers and their Seed* (RFPA, rev. 1997), pp. 29-56.

⁴A most valuable resource on these issues is Professor David Engelsma's pamphlet, "The Covenant of God and the Children of Believers" (1990).