

How to Regard Covenant Children

All children of believing parents are included in God's covenant unless their circumcision (baptism) is neglected (Gen. 17:14). Not all covenant-members are God's eternally elect, however (Rom. 9:6). How are we to look at covenant children, then? Do they have union with Christ? Not all are saved eternally. Can we tell covenant children that their sins are forgiven? People can be recognized as good or evil by their fruits (Mat. 7:16). With this teaching in mind, many look for their children to show evidence of repentance and faith, before they treat them as Christians. In so doing covenant children are presumed to be non-regenerate until there is adult-like expression of faith. They are placed in a waiting room and the covenant is reduced to potentialities. All covenant children are regarded with reserve because some will fall away. Many children, known by God, in grace from their earliest years, are treated with a wait-and-see attitude by their parents and the church, even though the same attitude is not applied to adult members (some of whom will also turn away). Is this approach really patterned after Biblical teaching?

The principles taught in Scripture, in fact, lead to a different approach. First, it is to be remembered that the hidden things are known only to God (Deut 29:29). He knows who are elect or not. It is not for us to discern the condition of a child's heart. We are called to treat all young children as in covenant with God, as God does. When he declares that the uncircumcised have broken his covenant, it follows that the circumcised or baptized are considered to be fully in the covenant until their circumcision becomes uncircumcision (Rom. 2:25). Our children are holy and not unclean (1 Cor. 7:14). Therefore, we must treat them as such. We make no declarations about a specific child's eternal election or reprobation. That is a secret matter, known only to God. All we know is that God has placed these children in the covenant and considers them holy at this specific point in time. Consequently, we must treat them as holy to the Lord and not as if they do not have communion in the blood of Christ, just as all adults in the covenant are regarded as in communion with Christ, even though some later fall away.

If we teach our children that they are holy and belong to Christ, will this not lead to presumption? Will covenant children not neglect the call to repentance and presume that all is well regardless of their heart commitment? No, God's covenant calls his people to faith and obedience and warns that covenant breakers will be cursed. This is what covenant children are taught, even as they are also taught about the Lord's love for them in Christ. Covenant children can fall away and all the warnings of the letter to the Hebrews are to be addressed to them. Nevertheless, the starting-point is that God has made his covenant with them and they are holy to him. They may not be treated as unclean, but as those who have communion with Christ. Only when they break the covenant are they to be withheld from the signs and seals of that communion. There is no Biblical teaching that the means of grace are to be withheld from anyone who is in covenant with God. It is essential to do full justice to God's covenant oath sworn to believers and their households.

It is important to consider the children as legitimately in the covenant. When they are born, they are not just outwardly in the covenant, awaiting regeneration. The Lord has declared them to be in covenant with him. This means that they are legally possessors of God's covenant promises, and not just "in promise". It is sometimes said that like a child who has been promised a bike if

he passes his grade can say, “I have a bike”, even though it is not yet in his possession, so a covenant child can say, “I am saved,” even though he has not yet repented and believed. He is said to have the blessings in promise. Although this may also be true, there is more. Covenant membership is not presented by the Lord only as potential realities. To be legally in the covenant means to have possession of the covenant blessings. In the condition of legally being a child of God, the Lord treats him as forgiven, and so should we. It is possible for such a child to forsake the ways of the Lord. A covenant-keeper can become a covenant-breaker. God has not revealed the future to us and we cannot treat our covenant children in accordance with what they may some day do or become. We must regard them in accordance with what the Lord declares them to be at the present moment in history. In so doing, we make no declarations about their regeneration or eternal election, but speak according to their present legal status as members of the covenant. It is not correct to define the covenant by what it can or cannot mean for little children in terms of their eternal election. The Bible provides no information about what the covenant means for children as distinct from adults. All its teaching concerning the covenant and salvation is addressed to adults and about adults, and it simply makes clear that children of covenant-keepers also belong to the covenant, not on the basis of a personal profession of faith, but of their federal union with their parents. Even though they include warnings about falling away (Heb. 2:1; 3:12; 6:6, etc.) and make clear that salvation language is not applicable to all (2 Cor. 13:5; Eph. 4:21), the New Testament epistles address such language to the whole congregation, that is, to all who are legally in the church. So we, too, should include the children when we read, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.... (Eph. 1:3),” words that are addressed to the church as a whole on the basis of their legal status at that moment in time.

Treating covenant children as true covenant people, rather than only potential covenant participants is to apply to covenant households the same approach as is applied to our understanding of any family. When a child is born, he or she is treated as truly a member of the family, so that he is lovingly embraced by his parents. A time may come that the child becomes so rebellious that the parents have to put their child out of the home, but this possibility does not define the children of the family in their earliest years. The parents do not begin with a wait-and-see attitude – waiting to only love their children once they have arrived at an age where their professions of love for their parents give evidence of being more than childish emotionalism. The very idea makes no sense. In the same way, infant membership in the covenant makes little sense if all children are first treated with a wait-and-see attitude. It may be objected that the Lord’s loving blessing of children in the covenant household is different because the Bible teaches us that we are all born totally depraved by nature. This objection does not hold up, however, because it applies just as much to the parent/child relationship in our families. Also in this case, the children are not loving by nature and are inclined by nature to hate their parents.

The approach of starting by regarding our covenant children as having communion with Christ is well expressed in the first question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism. It teaches covenant children that their only comfort in life and death is that they belong to their only Savior, Jesus Christ, who has fully satisfied for all their sins. Of course, this language can be misused such that some children think they belong to Christ even if they do not walk in union with him, but this danger is not to be addressed by first withholding God’s love. Rather, his love should be presented to the child as a motivation to repentance and working out of salvation with fear and

trembling. Then we may also confidently trust that the Lord will discipline the children he loves (Heb. 12:6,10). Such discipline includes correction by parents and church elders.

This perspective is also what is behind the thought expressed in the Canons of Dort when they say in 1,17:

We must judge concerning the will of God from His Word, which declares that the children of believers are holy, not by nature but in virtue of the covenant of grace, in which they are included with their parents. Therefore, God-fearing parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom God calls out of this life in their infancy.

The famous international Synod of Dort (1618-1619) judged that God confirms a child's election if he takes him to himself while an infant. Along with their concern to reject the Arminian errors, they also taught that covenant children are holy by the covenant of grace, so long as they do not turn from the holiness without which no man can see God.

How do we regard our covenant children? What do we say to them? "Jesus loves you; this we know. The new covenant tells us so. Stay in him; bear fruit divine. If you don't, he'll prune his vine."

When we address them in this way, we are not suggesting that the elect can fall away. Rather, we speak according to the legal covenant status of a person at a specific moment in history. We do not try to reconcile God's love for all covenant members who are not hypocrites with his teaching about eternal election and reprobation. The matter goes beyond the limitations of our understanding. We just try to faithfully express all that the Scriptures teach.

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