

## Chapter 4 – Our Children in the Covenant of Grace

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 7:1-16

Confessions: Heidelberg Catechism QA 74; Canons of Dort 1.17

We now want to begin looking at some of the ways in which this doctrine has a practical bearing on our lives. In this chapter we will look at how the covenant of grace relates to our children. In the next chapter, we will conclude by learning about how it directs our public worship.

We begin with our children. This brings us immediately to one of the most significant things that separate us from so many of the other church groups in our context. There are churches in North America that hold to the doctrines of grace like we do – by that, I mean that they hold to some or all of the so-called five points of Calvinism or TULIP. They might readily agree that unbelievers are dead in sin, utterly incapable of taking any steps toward God. With us, they might believe that God chose the elect unconditionally before the world was created, and so on. We can and we should rejoice that they exalt God when they hold to these biblical teachings. Yet at the same time, we have to be honest and recognize that there are key differences between us and them. Some of the most important differences have to do with the doctrine of the covenant of grace. This is not a minor or insignificant thing. What you believe about the covenant has an enormous bearing both on daily life as a Christian and on our life together as a church.

Certainly we should be able to agree that our children are important. We are not discussing whether pets go to heaven or something else relatively trivial. This is about our offspring, our flesh and blood, and how God relates to them. Our Baptist friends might argue that God has little to do with them. There is nothing special about the children of believers as opposed to the children of unbelievers. However, because of our doctrine of the covenant of grace, we maintain that the children of believers are very special in the eyes of God. They are privileged, blessed, and have a distinct place in the church of Christ. Indeed, God in his Word assures us that all our children are included in the covenant of grace.

### How We Consider Our Covenant Children

In this chapter, we are not going to get directly into the question of infant baptism.<sup>1</sup> Instead, we want to address the question behind the question. If our children belong to the covenant of grace, and if the sign and seal of entrance into the covenant is baptism, then, yes, obviously we should baptize our babies. But right now the fundamental question is: **do they belong to the covenant of grace, and if so, how?** What does it mean that they are covenant children and how should we then view them?

We must begin with the Old Testament administrations of the covenant of grace. When God made his covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17, this covenant was also established with Abraham's children. This was signified in the fact that all his male children were to receive circumcision. This was well-recognized by the Israelites because they continued this practice. They all knew full well that their children were covenant children. God had made his covenant not only with them, but also with their little ones.

There is no indication in Scripture that this changed with the coming of Christ. In Acts 2, Peter was preaching to Jewish people who had come from all over to Jerusalem. These were God's covenant people -- the males among them had each been circumcised. In Acts 2:39, Peter says those well-known words, "For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself." The promise is not only directed towards the adults, but

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<sup>1</sup> For a helpful and concise treatment of this question, I highly recommend Daniel R. Hyde, *Jesus Loves the Little Children: Why We Baptize Children* (Grandville: Reformed Fellowship, Inc., 2006).

also **to their children**. There is no indication in Scripture that membership in the covenant of grace became more restrictive after the coming of Christ.

Moreover, Hebrews 8:6 tells us that this new covenant administration after the coming of Christ is better. That should lead us to ask: how is a more restrictive covenant membership **better**? How is it **better** to leave the children of believers out? I have never seen a good answer to that question. There is no satisfactory answer to that question.

In fact, imagine if you were a Jewish parent living in the time of the apostles. Imagine if they were preaching the Baptist view, “Yes, I know that a couple of years ago, your children were included in God’s covenant, but now that Jesus has come and done his work, they’re out. Sorry!” As someone once said, a Jewish parent hearing that would probably think, “I thought this was supposed to be good news!” In Acts 15, we read about a controversy in the apostolic church about the application of the Mosaic ceremonial laws. If our Baptist friends are right, would you not expect there to have been a similar controversy over the place of children in the covenant? Would you not expect to read about it in Scripture? However, Scripture says nothing and the silence indicates that on this point the New Testament church simply continued the Old Testament’s inclusion of children. There is continuity on this point between the Old Testament and New Testament.

That brings us to this important passage from 1 Corinthians 7:12-16:

<sup>12</sup> To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. <sup>13</sup> If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. <sup>14</sup> For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. <sup>15</sup> But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. <sup>16</sup> For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?

Here Paul discusses a situation where you have a believer married to an unbeliever. That can be expected to happen in situations where people have come to the faith later in life. From elsewhere (e.g. 2 Corinthians 6:14ff.) we know that believers should only marry other believers, but this situation was different. These people were unbelievers when they got married, and then one of them became a Christian later. Paul uses covenantal language to indicate that this has a bearing on the status of the unbeliever in the marriage relationship. He speaks about being made holy or sanctified. This is covenantal language because God’s covenant relationship is what sets people apart, which is what “holiness” essentially means. We could get into a discussion here of the covenant status of an unbeliever married to a believer, but that would take us down a rabbit trail. Here we want to focus on what Paul says at the end of 1 Corinthians 7:14. He tells us that the child of even just one believer is holy, set apart, sanctified. Again, that kind of language is covenantal. It is not just that this child has a better chance of becoming a Christian because he or she has a Christian parent. As true as that may be, there is far more here than that.

In Exodus 19, Israel was at Mount Sinai and God was establishing another administration of the covenant of grace. That is where he said that, within this covenant relationship, Israel would be to him “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” In the Bible, holiness is something that exists within the framework of the covenant and it is the same here in 1 Corinthians 7. When Paul says that the children of believers are holy, he means to say that they are covenant children. Elsewhere he treats them like covenant children. Think of Ephesians 6:1-3 and how Paul addresses the children in the Ephesian church:

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.<sup>2</sup> “Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise),<sup>3</sup> “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.”

The Ephesian children are addressed on the basis of God’s covenant with God’s law. That can only happen because they really are covenant children.

On that basis, today we do not consider our children to be little heathens or as someone once put it, “vipers in diapers.” Yes, all our children need to be regenerated, and they all need to believe the promises of the gospel for themselves in due time, but yet they are all covenant children and they have a special status. As Lord’s Day 27 puts it, they are distinguished from the children of unbelievers and their baptism publically announces that.

Our Form for Infant Baptism says that they are “sanctified in Christ.” You find that in the first question to the parents. We are asked there, “Do you confess that our children are sanctified in Christ?” That expression has been debated vigorously in our Reformed church history. What does it mean that our children are “sanctified in Christ”? I am not going to review here all the different answers that have been given.<sup>2</sup> Remember: we want to keep this as an easy introduction to the doctrine of the covenant of grace. With that in mind, let me just briefly tell you what I think the best answer is. It means that they are in the covenant of grace, distinguished from the world, and entitled to all the benefits of Christ. God has promised those benefits to them, but to receive those benefits, they are each personally called to faith. “Sanctified in Christ” means that they have a standing in God’s covenant of grace, but it does not mean that they will necessarily relate to God with faith and come under all the blessings and eternal life in the covenant of grace. There is still the call to faith for each and every child in the covenant. That call is all the more urgent because of the very fact that they are “sanctified in Christ.” Their covenant status means that they are more privileged, but also far more accountable for what they do with their privileges. We always ought to remember what Christ says in Luke 12:48, “Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required...” Greater riches and promises entail greater responsibility. That is a biblical principle.

## **How We Concretely Raise Our Covenant Children**

These spiritual truths must have a concrete impact on how we raise our children. Let us look at some of the ways. At home, as we talk to our children, we must teach them that they have been given rich gospel promises by our God. We must explain those promises, how beautiful they are, how rich, and how much good news. As soon as they can understand, we begin telling them about their baptism and what it means. From their youngest days, we tell them that baptism means that they have been claimed by God to be his child. We teach them to understand that claim, accept it, believe it, and then live accordingly. In other words, we disciple our children, we shepherd them. We raise them in the ways of the Lord; we raise them to be Christians.

In many churches, they have special youth pastors. So do confessionally Reformed churches like ours. We actually have a whole army of youth pastors in our churches. They are called parents. Parents are the front-line youth pastors in a Reformed church. Parents, your calling is to do what you promised to do at the baptism of your children: “instruct your child in this doctrine, as soon as he or she is able to understand, and to have him or her instructed therein to the utmost of your power”. Dear reader, if you are a parent, I want to urge you to take that calling seriously. It is **your** calling first and foremost, not the church through catechism classes or the teachers at the Christian school. It is **your** calling to disciple and shepherd the children God has entrusted to you.

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<sup>2</sup> A good starting place for those interested would be chapter 5 of J. Kamphuis, *An Everlasting Covenant* (Launceston: Publication Organization of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia, 1985).

Yet, having made that point, no one should think that Christian education is then optional for Reformed believers. We find this emphasized in article 58 of our Church Order:

The consistory shall ensure that the parents, to the best of their ability, have their children attend a school where the instruction given is in harmony with the Word of God as the church has summarized it in her confessions.

Here our churches have agreed that consistories shall pay attention to what is happening with the education of our covenant children. The elders have a responsibility to ensure that, as much as possible, the covenant children of each congregation are being taught in a way that not only does not conflict with what the church teaches, but which actually harmonizes with what the church teaches. This article in our Church Order follows article 57 about baptism. There is a good and biblical reason for that. Christian education follows from the covenant status of our children. Let me be clear: that does not begin with the consistory breathing down your neck about it. That begins with you being convinced in your heart as a Christian parent that your child has a special covenant status from which necessarily follows a Christian education. At our Christian schools, if they are functioning as they should, your child will be educated in a way that fits with their position in the covenant of grace. That is just not going to happen in a public school. While there might yet be individual Christians teaching within the public system, it is a system dominated by a worldly and anti-Christian philosophy of education from the earliest levels to the highest. We want our children to honour God and acknowledge him in all their ways from their youngest years. Therefore, faithful parents of covenant children will always place enormous value on Christian education and even make great sacrifices to make it happen.

There is another important impact of our children's place in the covenant and that has to do with the church. As participants in the covenant of grace, we believe that all our children are members of the church of Christ. They are not potential members or "members-in-training". All our children, even the very youngest, are members of our churches. Sometimes there is this mistaken notion that our children become members when they do public profession of faith. This is simply **not** true. Our children become members when they come into the covenant of grace, which is to say, from the moment they are conceived in their mother's womb. What happens at public profession of faith is not membership in the church, but a shift from being a non-communicant member to being a communicant member. At public profession of faith, our children take responsibility for their church membership. Yet they have **always** been members of the church. That is an important point of difference with so many around us. So many Christians today do not look at their children as being members of the church. This is not a theoretical question -- it has a practical bearing.

One crucial place the practical bearing comes into play is public worship. If the kids are not members, then they do not really belong in public worship. They do not understand anything anyway; they are not going to get anything out of it and they cannot contribute much, if anything, to it. Therefore, instead of meeting with God along with the adults, the kids can and should go to some program designed especially for them. This is what inevitably follows from restricting the covenant and church membership to believers only.

We take a different approach and we always have. Children belong to the church, therefore they belong in public worship as soon as possible. They belong in that covenant meeting between God and his people, because they are part of God's people. To leave them out would be to say that the call to worship for God's people does not apply to them. If we are consistent with following through on our covenant theology, that would be unthinkable.

There was that occasion in Mark 10 where the disciples tried to keep those covenant children away from Jesus. The disciples thought that Jesus was far too important for these little ones. Scripture says

in Mark 10:14 that when Jesus saw this he became indignant. It infuriated him that his disciples would restrict these little covenant people from having access to him. Then he took these little people in his arms, he hugged them and blessed them. Our Lord Jesus is not here today on earth to hug the little brothers and sisters, but he is still here to bless them, too, whenever we worship. It would make Jesus indignant for anyone to keep them away. Our covenant children belong to the church and they belong in our worship services. Indeed, still today we can say, “Let the little children come to Jesus, do not hinder them!”

As soon as they are able, we want to see our covenant children meeting with their God. “As soon as they are able” means that there is going to be some variation and we cannot set a hard and fast rule about it. Some children are squirmier than others. I get that -- I have kids too. Some kids come into this world naturally more docile and they can sit in church when they are two. Other kids are going to take a little while longer and that is perfectly okay. Yet they all belong there eventually. There are going to be some challenges that come along with that. Sometimes kids learning to come to church are going to make some noise and be a bit restless. The rest of us in the covenant community have to cut parents and kids some slack; be patient, and just rejoice that the kids are there. Let the little children come! They belong with us in God’s presence, all of them. God is present to bless them as well as us.

As parents, there are some things we need to do to make that happen. From as soon as they are able to understand, we start teaching them about what church is and what we are doing when we gather for worship. This is part of discipleship. We teach them to be respectful and reverent in church. When they are able to read, we make sure they have a Bible and a Book of Praise. We make sure they start following along and that they are singing with the rest of the congregation. We teach them to do these things from when they are young. We do not tell them it is optional, that you can sing if you feel like it. No, we are all part of God’s covenant people and so we all sing together, young and old, good singers and not-so-good singers. When the collection comes, we have to make sure that our kids are actively participating in that element of our worship too. They can put money in the collection. That is part of worship too, something they can easily do to worship the LORD. Moreover, what about the sermon? Many times, the minister will work the kids into the sermon. Parents of covenant children should follow up on that and make sure their kids understand. God’s Word is for them too. You can often be surprised what kids pick up and we should encourage them to be listening to God’s Word as it is preached. It is for them too, as they are also being addressed as part of God’s covenant people.

### **The Comfort We Have When Covenant Children Die**

The last area where our covenant theology makes a huge difference is the comfort we have should we lose them our covenant children. That can happen. It has happened to many of us. Many of us have lost covenant children before they ever took a breath outside the womb. Some of us have lost covenant children after they were born, too. All these losses are painful. When you have a little child, you love that child and you have hopes and dreams for him or her. An early infant loss can be a really difficult thing to go through, both for moms and dads.<sup>3</sup>

It is quite remarkable that this type of situation is explicitly addressed in our confessions. We often think of the Heidelberg Catechism as the confession of comfort. However, it is not the Catechism that speaks about this. Instead, we find it in the Canons of Dort. The Canons speak about the doctrines of grace and that includes the comfort that parents of covenant children can have when those children die in infancy:

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<sup>3</sup> An excellent book on this subject is Glenda Mathes, *Little One Lost: Living with Early Infant Loss* (Grandville: Reformed Fellowship, Inc., 2012).

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.

This was written at a time when infant mortality was far higher than what we see today. Many of us have experienced early infant loss, but not nearly anywhere on the scale of what people would have experienced in the 1600s. Far fewer children lived to be adults in those days. Many died of diseases that are today easily treated or vaccinated against. The vast majority of Reformed parents would have experienced not only miscarriage, but even more likely, the death of a young child after birth. What does God's Word say to that? What can pastors say to parents grieving in those circumstances?

Our confession reminds us of what we have already covered: our children are holy because they are in the covenant of grace with their parents. When such children are taken out of this world in their infancy, there is no need for Christian parents to doubt their final destiny. We need not be wondering about their election and salvation. In fact, we can be confident of the Lord's mercy and grace towards them. We can be like David in 2 Samuel 12. When the little child died who had been conceived in that adulterous relationship with Bathsheba, David expressed his confidence that this child went to be with God. He said in 2 Samuel 12:23, "I shall go to him, but he will not return to me." David was sure that when he died, he would be reunited with his son. That solid confidence comes from the covenant of grace that God makes with believers **and** their children.

Reflecting on this further, you might ask, "How does God relate to those in the covenant of grace who are presently unable to relate to him?" An infant child cannot respond to God's promises. Of course, children are only able to do that as they get older, as they reach an age of responsibility (an age which varies from child to child). Some children never make it to such an age of accountability. Additionally, there are not only children, we could also think of those with intellectual disabilities. Sometimes an intellectual disability in a covenant child can be so severe that they are not able at all to relate to God in a responsible way. They are simply not able to respond to God's gospel promises the way the rest of us might and should. So what does God do with them? Did we not learn in the last chapters that there is nothing automatic in the covenant of grace? Does this contradict that? No, not at all.

There can be, and are, individuals in the covenant of grace who cannot relate to God, who cannot respond to his overtures towards them. Yet God mercifully relates to them through their covenant heads. They are in the covenant because of their relationship to a believer. The children of believers are holy because their parents are believers. Their parents are their covenant heads – particularly the father if he is a believer. The man is the covenant head of not only his wife, but also of his whole family. God relates to the children too through their covenant head. If their parents are believers in the gospel promises, and if that child is taken out of this world before he or she could respond to those gospel promises personally, then God views that child through the parents. In his grace, he regards that child as he would a believer who embraced Christ. No one comes to heaven apart from faith in Christ, and that includes covenant children. Even with them, it is not automatic. There is no salvation for anyone apart from faith in Jesus Christ. For covenant children who die in infancy, it is the faith of their parents that makes the difference.

What a comfort that gives us when we face the tragedy of early infant loss! Our children belong to the LORD and if they are called out of this life in infancy, in his grace he takes them to himself. That little child you lost is now in the presence of God, praising him along with the holy angels. That little child you lost – that was not a short life wasted. That was not a pointless loss. God took your child directly to himself and that child did not have to bear the brokenness of a world under the curse. That child is fulfilling God's purpose for him or her, exalting our Father right now. It was a loss to you, and death

is an enemy, also when it comes to our kids. Yet here too we can say that Christ has conquered death and removed its sting. We can have comfort, because we have this covenant theology from the Scriptures; we are taught that God has a covenant of grace that includes believers **and** their offspring.

I want you to see how rich we are with these gospel truths. The covenant of grace shows us a God who loves us **and** our children. He has always included the children with his people and there is no reason to think that he stopped doing that after Christ came and died for us. So, let me ask you, why would you ever want to trade in these truths for something less? Why would you settle for a gospel that is not covenantal? The gospel that is good news is good news not only for us, but also for our dear children.

### **Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

1. Does the covenant status of our children mean that we should presume that they have each been born again or regenerated? Explain your answer with Scripture.
2. Paedo-communion teaches that all covenant children should be able to partake in the Lord's Supper. Part of the argument is that we do not deny them one sacrament (baptism), so we should not deny them the other sacrament. How would you respond to that view?
3. Can you think of a believer in the New Testament who was apparently disciplined from a young age within the covenantal family setting? What lessons might be taken from what Scripture reveals about this?
4. Canons of Dort 1.17 speaks clearly about the infant children of believers. What can we say on the basis of Scripture about the children of unbelievers who die in infancy?
5. Some say that we should send our covenant children to public schools so that they can be a salt and light, so that they can witness for Christ, and also learn how to defend their faith. How should we evaluate that position?

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