

THE PRESBYTERIAN DOCTRINE OF CHILDREN IN THE COVENANT

P&R reprint of a 1940 book by Lewis Bevans Schenck

A REVIEW WORTH READING by Rev. Steven Smallman

The title seems a little sleepy, but this is one of the most helpful books I have read in a long time. Schenck was a theology teacher at Davidson College in the 30's and 40's, and wrote this to protest the growing ignorance of the meaning of baptism in the Presbyterian church. The historic meaning was being lost to an evangelical expectation that our children need to experience the same sort of conversion that non-Christians need. The result is a loss of appreciation of "Christian nurture" on the part of parents, and more importantly a loss of resting in God's promises for their children.

The book is fairly academic and would have been much more readable with defined chapter and division headings. But those are very minor problems compared with the value of the book.

Ch. I. The Historic doctrine of the Presbyterian church Concerning the Significance of Infant Baptism.

The author shows quite convincingly that the understanding of the Reformers, which was also reflected in the Westminster Confession, is that children of the covenant are **presumed** to be regenerate because of God's promises to save succeeding generations. Because that is true our children are baptized as a sign of forgiveness, but also a seal of their regeneration. Thus children were received as members of the church.

Baptism has no significance for Calvin if it does not mean admission to the visible church on the ground of the covenant promise, which includes the presumptive regeneration of the children in the covenant. Calvin looks upon the child in the covenant as God's child, forgiven of sin and regenerated, with the new life as a latent seed, already at work in its heart. The child then opens its eyes redeemed on a world in which by careful nurture it is expected to grow and develop in the Christian ideal of life and character. The important point is that this child is presumably a Christian. P. 13

The chapter includes a helpful overview of the development of covenant theology, and traces all this up to the writing of the WCF and the Directory for Worship (which includes the actual wording of the original Directory with regard to the baptism of children, p. 45,46)

Ch. II. The Great Awakening and Development of Revivalism.

This was a fascinating chapter, particularly if we have always assumed that the Great Awakening was all good, and any pastors who objected were just spiritually dead. He begins by describing the abuse of infant baptism and then the solutions, like the half-way covenants (what to do with children of adults who had been baptized as children but had never professed faith for themselves). Part of the problem was the Puritan demand that to join their church a person give a full and detailed account of his or her own regeneration and conversion—and they had very high expectations of what that meant.

The Great Awakening began as a reaction to the formalism that had come from that. But key to the Great Awakening was the expectation of a dramatic conversion.

In its reaction to the formalism of the times, the Great Awakening “with vehemence and exaggeration” emphasized one ground only for recognizing the children of God. “Everyone’s religious experience must be broken into the prescribed measure and form.”

This included what came to be known as the “Law-work” which was used to describe a certain form of conviction of sin. This was particularly pressed by the Tennent family, who were leaders of the Great Awakening.

The fact that a child was the 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....Until by conscious conversion children of the covenant came out of the darkness and evil of despair, in which this theory placed them, all recognition of their standing in the sight of God as his children was lost. (p. 65, 67)

He demonstrates how the “revival spirit” became the prevailing spirit in the church including their understanding of conversion.

Ch. III. The Threat of Revivalism to the Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant.

Because of the reliance of the church on revivals, and the insistence on conversion experiences, the importance and understanding of the baptism of covenant children gradually dwindled.

One theory that was offered was that the covenant with Abraham had two levels, a spiritual one—which would relate to the invisible church; and a legal one—which was more of an ecclesiastical covenant, relating to the visible church. Hence baptism was valuable, but only because it conveyed the blessings of the visible church, not the spiritual blessings. Thus children should be considered unregenerate baptized children.

This difference showed up in an extended debate in the middle of the 19th century, when the Presbyterian church was revising its Directory for Worship and got stuck on the language to be used in describing the membership status of baptized children. Thornwell and Dabney, along with others primarily from the South wanted the wording to be changed to read that children are under the “government and training” of the church rather than the “government and discipline,” thus suggesting that children are not full members. The primary opponent on this question was Charles Hodge who argued that baptized children are members of the church and therefore under its discipline.

In the end the revised wording became part of the S. Presbyterian documents, and although eventually changed the author contends that the revivalistic view of children and conversion had prevailed, at least in the South.

Ch. IV. The Defense of the Doctrine of Children in the Covenant.

This is the heart of the book, and although I had some sympathies with those who questioned whether we should presume children of the covenant are regenerate, I found this very compelling.

The author goes step by step through key ideas that lead up to the doctrine he wishes to prove. If the doctrine of the Presbyterian Church rests on Scripture as its objective ground, the inward, subjective ground is a consciousness of being under the condemnation and power of sin. “The doctrine of original sin was admitted to be

fundamental to the Calvinistic system.” This original sin included infants—who needed salvation by virtue of their connection to lost humanity.

This leads to a very helpful discussion of regeneration (p. 116 ff), and the various ways it has been defined. Again, infants as well as adults need to be regenerated. And since we are all dead and helpless to act, it is no more difficult for God to regenerate an infant than an adult. Then he includes a discussion of infants who die in infancy. (Hodge, Warfield, and many others came to the conclusion that all infants who die are “elect infants”.)

Regeneration leads to a presentation of the covenant. “The plan of salvation in the Reformed theology of the Presbyterian Church was presented under the form of a covenant.”

A covenant is a contract involving mutual stipulations. God requires of parents who stand in covenant relationship with Him two things especially: that they accept the covenant and the covenant promises by faith, and they enter upon the life of the covenant, and that from the principle of the new life born within them, they consecrate themselves to God in a new obedience. (p. 121)

The author demonstrates that the covenant with Abraham was the covenant of grace, only secondarily a national covenant, and therefore the blessings of that covenant are spiritual. Circumcision spoke of regeneration (p. 125).

What then is the true theory of the church? “It was believed that the church considered as the body of Christ, consisted of the regenerated” (p. 127)—the communion of saints.

But explaining that gave the key to the issue, in my mind. While the true nature of the church visible as well as invisible was a communion of the regenerate, in practice there is no way to determine with absolute certainty who they are.

The terms of admission into this body, or in other words, the terms of Christian communion, were not an infallible evidence of regeneration. It was recognized as a sheer impossibility to carry out the principle of treating men according to their state in the sight of God. “We not only are not required, but we are not allowed, to demand evidence of regeneration satisfactory to ourselves, as the condition of church membership.” [quoting Hodge]

Since we cannot determine with certainty who is regenerate, we are left to receive into membership those who credibly profess the true religion—and their children. He quotes Hodge again:

*“When, therefore, we assert the church membership of the infants of believing parents, 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**”.* (p. 129, 130)

This means that the concept of presumptive regeneration is true for adults as well as infants. For adults who join we presume they are regenerate because of their confession of Christ; and for infants who join we presume they are regenerate because of the promises of God to believing parents.

This brings the author back to his original point that children are to be considered members of the church, which he then reinforces: 1) that children were included in the covenant of grace from the time of Abraham; 2) that there is nothing in the NT to say

children should be excluded from membership; 3) the very nature of baptism as a sign and seal of the covenant and therefore the church. This is the doctrine coming from Calvin and Westminster and reaffirmed by Charles Hodge and the Princeton theologians.

The author points out that there was a slight difference between Calvin and Hodge in that for Calvin baptism signified and sealed actual union with Christ. Hodge felt it was a sign of election, which may not yet have been realized. So Hodge still presumed the child's regeneration, but not necessarily presumed it had taken place at the time of baptism or before. In either case they were to be regarded as Christians (pp. 135-137). He mentions a third view, that presumption of regeneration is not made until the child makes a profession of faith (a view the author totally disagrees with, leading back to the focus on conversion experiences).

This leads to a discussion of Christian nurture as the great means for the salvation of the children of the church. The key to this is the parents obeying their vows to raise their children as Christians. In this Charles Hodge agreed with Horace Bushnell who wrote a book called *Christian Nurture* that advocated that children were to be raised thinking of themselves as Christians.

Dr. Hodge said that the child born in a Christian family was to be taught that "he stands in a peculiar relation to God, as being included in his covenant and baptized in his name; that he has in virtue of that relation a right to claim God as his Father, Christ as his Saviour, and the Holy Ghost as his sanctifier; and assured that God will recognize that claim and receive him as his child if he is faithful to his baptismal vows." (p. 143)

Bushnell taught that this passing along of faith to the children was a natural and organic process, whereas Hodge and others disagreed and believed that Christian nurture was the ordinary means that the Spirit used by which the children of believers were made truly the children of God. But it was still necessary for God to act supernaturally on the child, just as it was for any person.

Ch. V. The Resultant Confusion concerning Children in the Covenant and the Significance of Baptism.

This is a brief chapter identifying the confusion that has resulted from the dominance of the Great Awakening idea of conversion, particularly as it relates to how our children should be taught.

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. Dr. Atwater makes the statement, "we are sure it is no exaggeration, when we say that in a considerable portion of our evangelical churches there is not 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." Instead of growing up with the spirit and character of members of Christ's family, appreciating their privileges and feeling their responsibilities, they were supposed to grow up with the spirit and character of the world. The children of the church, with the seal of God's covenant on their foreheads, were practically cast out, to be classed and thence to class themselves in form and feeling with the ungodly and profane—a course from which, Dr.

Atwater believed, they and the cause of religion with them would suffer irreparable loss.
(pp. 153, 154)

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. (Concluding words, p. 158)

I found this book enormously enlightening and helpful as a starting place for helping parents understand their privileges as well as responsibilities for their children. It was also very helpful in my studies of conversion experiences and what we should expect from our children. I endorse his all too brief discussion of Christian nurture as the ordinary means by which our children will come to professed faith.

But I also think the debate with the brothers in the Southern church highlights a dilemma. The author was arguing for the fact that our children are full members of the church and therefore under its discipline--*and yet they are not full members*. They do not take communion, which is the most fundamental privilege of church membership. As careful as he was in developing the thesis of the book I was disappointed that he spoke of communion only in passing. I am not advocating paedocommunion, which would be consistent with full membership for children. But this does point to the fact that while we *presume* our children are regenerate (and now I understand that doesn't mean we actually *know* they are), we nevertheless also recognize that an additional step is necessary before they are received fully into the communion of the church. This doesn't need to require a conversion experience, as the revivalistic tradition insists, but it does point to the need for our children to have some *experiential* desire to publicly confess their faith. So we need to instruct them, but I also think some steps need to be taken so that the process of professing faith is not an automatic result of reaching a certain age or finishing a course of instruction.