

Reflecting the Characteristics of the Covenant

Adapted from *Legacy of Biblical Womanhood*.¹

The covenantal theme is the scarlet thread running throughout Scripture. God deals with His people in covenantal ways, but often we can miss seeing His hand at work because we do not recognize the characteristics of the covenant. Once we begin to recognize what covenantal behavior is, we begin to see it everywhere in Scripture.

One way to evaluate our children's ministry is to look for ways we are reflecting the characteristics of the covenant in the way we "do" ministry. Each characteristic has implications that can help us in planning and leading our children's ministry. The following chart covers seven such characteristics. We will use these characteristics to begin a discussion of how "covenantal" we are being in our approach to intentional discipleship in children's ministry.

EXAMPLE: Let's take the first characteristic from the chart as an example—*Eternally Secure*. God's covenant was not initiated by us, nor is its security dependent upon our actions. Because of this, our ministry should express a confidence in the sovereignty of God and a humility that knows our actions are not the reason for any success. This is the reason we begin to teach our children about the sovereignty of God from their youngest days. We want them to know:

Q. "Why did God make you and all things?"

A. "For His own glory."²

This characteristic could be reflected in the choices we make in curriculum to teach children from a redemptive, covenant framework of Scripture.

Discuss each of these characteristics and its implications in what we do in children's ministry. This can be done with your children's ministry team, teachers, or parents. Answer the following questions using additional paper as needed:

1. What additional applications could this characteristic have related to how we should "do" ministry? Add them in the *Applications* column.
2. Which areas of your current ministry reflect the given characteristic? List them in the *Ways We Are Reflecting* column.
3. Is this a characteristic that you could do a better job of reflecting through your overall children's ministry? What are some other ways this characteristic could be reflected in your children's ministry that you might want to consider adding? Brainstorm on ways you could do this and list the ideas in the *Other Ways to Reflect* column.

¹ Susan Hunt and Barbara Thompson, *The Legacy of Biblical Womanhood* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 200-205.

² "Question 3," *First Catechism: Teaching Children Bible Truths* (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, 2003), 5.

Characteristic	Scripture Reference	Meaning	Applications	Ways We Are Reflecting	Other Ways to Reflect
Eternally Secure	God sovereignly initiated the promise with Abram. (Genesis 12)	Because the covenant is sovereignly initiated and sovereignly sustained, we can know it is eternally secure.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching the covenant framework of Scripture • Teaching redemptively • Teaching the character of God • Teaching God's promises • Making the gospel clear 		
Relational	God initiated a relationship with Abram (Genesis 12)	The God of heaven and earth is a personal God who enters into an intimate relationship with us.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching about God's relationship in the Trinity and His relationship with us • Modeling how prayer is a wonderful part of our relationship with God • Explaining how we are image-bearers and our identity is found in Him • Modeling healthy relationships in the home and in the church • Providing mentor relationships • Displaying grace and forgiveness 		
Familial	God made it clear that this covenant was for Abraham and his family (Genesis 17)	From the beginning God has worked through families (Abraham and his seed).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnering with families in discipleship of their children • Modeling that the church is the family of families • Providing families and children opportunities to serve in the context of church and community • Teaching biblical truths about marriage and gender 		

Characteristic	Scripture Reference	Meaning	Applications	Ways We Are Reflecting	Other Ways to Reflect
Corporate	In Exodus we see emphasized the corporate aspect of the covenant that God has called a people unto Himself.	God relates to us collectively. We are His holy nation, His royal priesthood, His bride, His body.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrating children into all aspects of church life—worship, prayer, serving, etc. Teaching children the elements of worship and the Sacraments Teaching children the structure of the church Providing a process for children to become members of the church 		
Generational	Deuteronomy 6:4-9 & Titus 2:1-5	Each generation is to show and tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord and the wonders He has done.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partnering with parents in the discipleship of the children Teaching the content of the Scriptures so children have biblical literacy Teaching children how to worship Allowing children age-appropriate ways to apply the Word by participating and serving in church and community 		
Compassionate	Exodus 34:6 & Ephesians 4:32	God is a God of compassion, and we are to be a people of compassion.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Providing opportunities for children to serve in mercy ministries within the church and community Providing opportunities for children to learn about missionaries and ways to participate in missions Providing opportunities for individual and corporate prayer for the needs of others 		
Integrative	Acts 17:28 & Romans 11:36	The covenantal framework of Scripture shows the purpose, harmony, and connections of Scripture.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Showing children they are part of God’s covenant plan for the church Showing children that they are included in the body of Christ 		

What Is a Covenantal Approach to Life and Ministry?

This article was adapted from the book, *Heirs of the Covenant*³ and the article, “WIC 201: Women in the Church in the PCA,”⁴ both written by Susan Hunt.

A covenantal approach to ministry is a relational model that flows out of the realities of Covenant Theology. A covenantal approach seeks to balance educational and relational components. If a ministry is only educational, it is academic. If it is only relational, it is anemic. Biblical discipleship combines teaching the content of the covenant in the context of covenantal relationships that validate the gospel of grace. Biblical discipleship imparts a way of life as we live in community with God’s covenant people. This covenant approach includes our children from their very birth. We are to disciple them within the framework of family and church family, working together to pass faith from one generation to the next.

WHAT IS THE COVENANT?

When God created Adam, He made a covenant with him. A covenant is a binding agreement in specific terms. The promise was God’s presence. This is amazing because the Creator entered into an arrangement in which the creature had a claim. The Creator obligated Himself to the creature. The condition was perfect obedience. God would keep the covenant promise. Adam must obey the covenant obligation. He could not eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This was the test. This would demonstrate Adam’s conscious acceptance of the covenant promise. This is called the covenant of works, but it does not mean that Adam worked to earn his relationship with God. God sovereignly initiated that relationship. It means that Adam had to make a choice to remain in God’s presence by subjecting himself to God’s authority.

While Adam and Eve lived in God’s presence, they reflected His glory to one another and to creation. They lived in harmony with one another and with creation. But Adam ate the forbidden fruit. He broke the covenant. His covenant-breaking severed his perfect relationship with God. Because God is holy, there is nothing unholy in His presence. His holiness will consume anything unholy. Now when Adam and Eve faced each other and when they faced creation, they reflected their own selfishness. Adam was our representative in the covenant agreement. The consequences of his covenant-breaking thundered through creation, through history and into every human heart.

Then God made a way for Adam and Eve to return to His presence. He was not obligated to do anything. He could have turned away from the creature and the creation. Instead, He intervened. He came to the garden. He called to the man. And He clothed Adam and Eve in garments of skin (Genesis 3:8-9, 21). Here is the covenant of grace—God came, He called, He clothed. God comes to us while we are dead in our trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1-9). He calls us into a relationship with Himself (Acts 2:38-39). And He covers our guilt with the perfect righteousness of Christ so that we can once again live in His presence (Isaiah 61:10)—glorious, sovereign grace from beginning to end. It must be that way. The penalty of sin is death. And dead people can do nothing—absolutely nothing to regain life.

The Westminster Confession of Faith states:

The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto Him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of Him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God’s part, which He hath been pleased to express by way of covenant (VII, 1).

³ Susan Hunt, *Heirs of the Covenant* (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, 1998), 24-26.

⁴ Susan Hunt, “WIC201: Women in the Church in the PCA.”

When God came to the garden, He made a promise to the man, and He pronounced a curse upon Satan. “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Genesis 3:15).

In his landmark work, *Promise and Deliverance*, S.G. DeGraaf said, “In principle, the whole of redemption is revealed in the mother-promise (Genesis 3:15 NIV).”⁵

This was not the establishment of the covenant of grace; it was the revelation of that covenant. This covenant was not established with Adam, but with Christ. This covenant was not an afterthought. It was not made in response to man’s sin. The divine agreement to redeem man was in place before man was created. Jesus, the Mediator and Head of this covenant, is the “Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world” (Revelation 13:8 NIV). Because redemption was in the divine will of God, it was the same as done. “He will crush your head” was not a hoped-for future event; it was an accomplished fact. Neither were the beneficiaries of the covenant an afterthought. “For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love He predestines us to be adopted as His sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of His glorious grace, which He has freely given us in the One He loves” (Ephesians 1:4-6 NIV).

In the first glimpse of this “mother-promise,” God reveals Jesus the Mediator who will crush the head of Satan and win the victory over sin and death. Even while Adam and Eve are trying to hide their nakedness, God tells them about Jesus.

Despite man’s performance, God returned to the garden and said something like, “I will still be your God; you will be My people; I will provide the way for you to live in My presence; I will dwell among you.” This is grace. It is undeserved. Adam demonstrated his belief in the promise by naming his wife Eve, which means life. He believed that she would bear children, including the Child who would leave the glory of God’s presence in order to secure a place for us in God’s presence.

The condition for life in God’s presence is the same for us as it was for Adam and Eve in the garden: perfect obedience. The terms of the covenant must be met. Our first representative was a covenant-breaker, but Jesus kept the covenant terms for His people. This is grace—God’s kindness, love, and mercy to undeserving sinners.

For this reason, Christ is the Mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that He has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant (Hebrews 9:15 NIV).

The covenant motif runs throughout Scripture. The word *covenant* is mentioned almost 300 times. The biblical covenants give the framework of Scripture. Without understanding this framework, our approach to understanding and applying God’s Word will be cursory and convoluted.

This is where we begin to lay the foundation of passing faith from generation to generation. We must teach the “mother-promise” to our children. We must tell them about Jesus who died to redeem us so that we can live in His presence.

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES THE COVENANT MAKE?

- The covenant provides the way for us and our children to again live in the presence of glory and thus to fulfill our reason for being—reflecting that glory. Jesus said to him. “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6).
- The covenant provides the power for us and our children to fulfill our purpose. “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek” (Romans 1:16 NKJV).

⁵ S.G. DeGraaf, *Promise and Deliverance* (Ontario: Paideia Press, 1977), 21.

- The covenant provides the motivation to disciple and train the next generation. “For Christ’s love compels us . . .” (2 Corinthians 5:14a NIV).

Does it really matter whether a children’s ministry is based on a covenant model? Yes! Covenant children have a special place within the church. They are to be taught that they are members of God’s covenant family, that they have responsibilities within that family, and that the family of God has responsibilities concerning them.

The covenant of grace is what we believe, so the nature of the covenant must determine what we do, why we do it, and how we do it. One way to think covenantally about children’s ministry is to consider some of the characteristics of the covenant. Covenantal ministry is an expression of Covenant Theology, so these characteristics should guide us as we live our lives and as we craft our ministries.

WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE COVENANT?

Obviously, there are many characteristics of the covenant, but we will look at several that are particularly pertinent to this topic and give examples of some practical implications for a children’s ministry.

THE COVENANT IS SOVEREIGNLY INITIATED AND SUSTAINED, AND THUS ETERNALLY SECURE

The more we understand this divine initiative, the more we understand that we deserve nothing but have been given everything. It is a covenant of grace. Our confidence is not in self but in God.

Implications for Life and Ministry

This knowledge produces a humility that frees us to “Do nothing from of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3-4). We have the security to cast our cares on the Lord knowing that He will sustain us (Psalms 55:22).

A covenantal perspective begins with God—who He is and what He has done for us. Then, we consider our covenant privileges and responsibilities because of who He is and what He has done. This perspective helps keep us from getting trapped in moralism or legalism. We must be careful to teach Scripture from a covenantal perspective whether it is a verse-by-verse study or a thematic study. This may seem obvious, but often churches have a sound pulpit ministry, while in the children and student ministries, the children are studying materials from all over the theological map.

Covenant Privilege

An understanding of God’s covenant promise to be our God, and a realization that this does not depend on our performance but on His provision, ushers us into the glorious truth that we live in His presence. His presence gives us purpose. His presence makes us safe. His presence fills us with joy and love. His presence is our life.

Covenant Responsibility

Covenant keeping is evidence of our covenant relationship with God. Covenant keeping is necessary to enjoy covenant blessings. Obedience does not earn entrance into God’s presence. Obedience validates the reality of that relationship. “If you love me, you will keep My commandments” (John 14:15). Living in His presence will distinguish us from all the other people on the face of the earth. When we live in His presence, we see His character. Then we are able to radiate His character as we turn and face every human relationship and situation.

Teaching from a covenant perspective means that we teach about God’s grace and we develop ministries that are done in the power of grace and that cultivate environments of grace. In 2 Corinthians 8, Paul wrote that he wanted us to know about the grace God gave the Macedonian churches. They had given out of the most severe trial and extreme poverty—beyond their ability. If we minister out of the strength of our own resources, it is just self-effort. It is not until we get

beyond our ability that it becomes a ministry of grace. In *Heirs of the Covenant*, these ideas are laid out and more thoroughly explained in the context of children’s ministry.⁶

Reflecting the Characteristic of Sovereign Initiation in Children’s Ministry

There are many ways a children’s ministry could reflect the sovereign initiation and eternal security of the covenant of grace. Some ways an intentional children’s discipleship ministry could reflect the covenant are by:

- Teaching the covenant framework of Scripture,
- Teaching redemptively,
- Teaching the character of God,
- Teaching God’s promises,
- Making the gospel clear.

THE COVENANT IS RELATIONAL

The God of heaven and earth is a personal God who enters into an intimate relationship with us.

Implications for Life and Ministry

Our relationships with each other are to mirror His relationship with us. This is not a relational model built on sentimentalism and felt-needs theology. It is a relational model built on the covenant of grace. There is a huge difference.

The reference point for a needs-based model is experience and feelings. The reference point for a covenant model is the character of God as He shows Himself to us in His Word.

This is a relational model built on doctrines such as justification and adoption. God declares us to be just in His sight on the basis of the merits of Christ. He adopts us as His children and accepts us into His family not because of our performance but because of His grace. This is the basis for the covenant community. These are the reasons we accept and love one another.

Our relationships in the covenant community are not about living up to each other’s expectations. They are about accepting one another and reflecting God’s grace to each other as we are being transformed by the power of the gospel.

People today are unusually primed for covenantal ministry because they want meaningful relationships. They have seen the relationships around them crumble, and they want substantive, lasting relationships. Meaningful, lasting relationships are characteristic of the covenant of grace. Only grace can move us beyond self-serving relationships.

Reflecting the Relational Characteristic of Covenant in Children’s Ministry

There are many ways to reflect the relational aspect of covenant, but some of those ways could be by:

- Teaching about God’s relationship in the Trinity and His relationship with us,
- Modeling how prayer is a wonderful part of our relationship with God,
- Explaining how we are image bearers and our identity is found in Him,
- Modeling healthy relationships in the home and in the church,
- Providing mentor relationships,
- Displaying grace and forgiveness.

THE COVENANT IS FAMILIAL

From the beginning, God worked through families. The covenant promise was given to Abraham and his seed.

Implications for Life and Ministry

As we teach children about marriage and family, it should be from a covenantal perspective. The Christian family is to exist within the context of the covenant family—the family of families—the church. It is imperative that we understand this context because our notions about family are usually shaped more by culture than by Scripture, and we live in a

⁶ Susan Hunt, *Heirs of the Covenant* (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, 1998), 36-37.

culture of individualism, selfism, and materialism. We must teach children to think covenantally about the family. We must teach the interdependence of individual families and the household of faith. We acknowledge our commitment to God's design for families by helping build strong families by partnering in the discipleship of our covenant children.

Reflecting the Familial Characteristic of Covenant in Children's Ministry

Some ways to reflect the familial aspect of covenant through a children's ministry could be by:

- Partnering with families in discipleship of their children,
- Modeling that the church is the family of families,
- Providing families and children opportunities to serve in the context of church and community,
- Teaching biblical truths about marriage and gender.

THE COVENANT IS CORPORATE

Salvation is personal, but God does not just deal with us as individuals. God deals with us corporately as His children.

Implications for Life and Ministry

We are a family, and there should be a deep oneness that reflects the unity of the Trinity. God's Word is to be taught in the context of a loving community. Every ministry in the church, including the children's ministry, should be diligent in seeking to cultivate a sense of community throughout the entire church family.

A covenantal perspective has a high view of and love for the church. A children's ministry should teach children about the beauty and protection of the church. Even when people in the church fail us, our Savior calls us to love His Bride and to pursue her peace and purity. This should be reflected in any ministry of the church.

A covenantal perspective means that we are to be faithful in our vows to help parents raise the next generation to know Him and love Him.

Reflecting the Corporate Characteristic of Covenant in Children's Ministry

Some ways to reflect the corporate aspect of covenant through a children's ministry could be by:

- Integrating children into all aspects of church life—worship, prayer, serving, etc.,
- Teaching children the elements of worship and the Sacraments,
- Teaching children the structure of the church,
- Providing a process for children to become members of the church.

THE COVENANT IS GENERATIONAL

Throughout Scripture there is the emphasis that one generation is to "tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord . . . and the wonders He has done" (Psalms 78:4 NIV). This is the covenant way. This was not just the responsibility of the parents. It was the responsibility of Israel. In Deuteronomy 6:4-9 we read this command to pass faith to our children,

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

As it was the responsibility of Israel, it is now the responsibility of the church to help parents pass faith from generation to generation.

Implications for Life and Ministry

In our children's ministries, this means that we develop programs to disciple children in worship, in knowledge of the Word, in theology, and in service to the church. We pass faith from generation to generation by instruction, modeling, and relationship.

Reflecting the Generational Characteristic of Covenant in Children's Ministry

Some ways to reflect the generational aspect of covenant through a children's ministry could be by:

- Partnering with parents in the discipleship of the children,
- Teaching the content of the Scriptures so children have biblical literacy,
- Teaching children how to worship,
- Allowing children age-appropriate ways to apply the Word by participating and serving in church and community.

THE COVENANT IS COMPASSIONATE

God is a God of compassion, and we are to be a people of compassion.

Implications for Life and Ministry

In our children's ministries, the children must see us care for one another and we must teach them to love and care for others. We must provide opportunities for involvement in ministries of compassion. It is the covenant way of life.

Reflecting God's Compassion through Children's Ministry

Some ways to reflect the compassion God demonstrates to us in His covenant through a children's ministry could be by:

- Providing opportunities for children to serve in mercy ministries within the church and community,
- Providing opportunities for children to learn about missionaries and ways to participate in missions,
- Providing opportunities for individual and corporate prayer for the needs of others.

THE COVENANT IS INTEGRATIVE

The covenant is the thread that holds Scripture together. The covenantal framework of Scripture shows the purpose, harmony, and connections of Scripture. It integrates all the diverse stories and literature into one story that is all about Jesus. The ultimate question of life is how we relate to Him, for it is "in Him [that] we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen" (Romans 11:36).

Implications for Life and Ministry

This integrated framework of Scripture gives us an all-encompassing worldview for us to think about God's truth and apply that truth into all of life.

A covenantal approach to ministry means an integrated approach to ministry. All church ministries are to be united in purpose, vision, philosophy, and strategy. Classes or ministries are often clustered by age or interest, and there is nothing wrong with that. However, we must be intentional in merging the vision for the various ministries into a whole.

A word of caution: it is easy to become so zealous for integrated ministry that we go to the extreme of saying there should be no specific ministries for men, women, children, or youth. That is not a covenantal approach. It fails to consider the corporate nature of the covenant. Susan Hunt shares the response of her son, a director of children's ministry, when he was challenged with the idea that children should remain with their parents and not have separate classes. His response was, "From the time our children arrive at church, they are with family. Whether they are in a class, walking down the hall, or in the gym, they are with their covenant family. They are with people who love and care for them and who are committed to telling the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord. We do not want our children to be deprived of this covenantal inheritance, and we want parents to have a way to tap into this inheritance."

We are convinced that an integrated approach to ministry must begin with the pulpit, but we are just as convinced that it must not stop with the pulpit. Too often there is a huge disconnect between what is preached and what is happening in

the church programs. We must be careful that the children's ministry does not function independently of the rest of the church. We are to be helpers who cultivate community and who are channels of compassion to the whole church.

Reflecting the Integrative Characteristic of Covenant in Children's Ministry

Some ways to reflect the integrative aspect of covenant through a children's ministry could be by:

- Showing children they are part of God's covenant plan for the church,
- Showing children that they are included in the body of Christ.