

*The Covenant of God
and
the Children of Believers*

The Covenant of God and the Children of Believers



SOVEREIGN
GRACE IN THE
COVENANT

David J. Engelsma



*Reformed Free Publishing Association
Grandville, Michigan*

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Authorized (King James) Version

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Jenison, MI 49428

Website: www.rfpa.org
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ISBN 0-916206-91-2
LCCN 2005933184

*In memory of my father, Dewey Engelsma (1914–1994),
and
to my mother, Dena (Koole) Engelsma,
who lived the Reformed doctrine of the covenant
with their twelve children*

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PREFACE

The place of children in the covenant is still controversial in Reformed churches. There is sharp disagreement over the meaning of infant baptism and the proper rearing of the baptized children of believing parents. This is shameful. After almost five hundred years of studying, confessing, and even emphasizing the covenant, the Reformed churches are full of confusion and error concerning this essential teaching of Scripture.

By the appearance in conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches of a grievous heresy—one of the most dangerous threats to the gospel of grace since Dordt—God forces the churches to reexamine their doctrine of the covenant, particularly regarding the inclusion of children. The heretics call their heresy the “federal vision.” In this book, I describe it as “covenantal universalism.” The heresy denies justification by faith alone and, with this fundamental doctrine of the gospel, all the doctrines of grace—the “Five Points” of Calvinism.

The false teaching demands reexamination of the doctrine of the covenant inasmuch as the teaching arises out of, and develops, a certain doctrine of the covenant. This doctrine holds that the covenant is a gracious, conditional promise and contract with every natural child of believing parents. The false teaching cannot be refuted apart from the rejection of the covenant doctrine from which it springs. Indeed, the false teaching cannot even be understood apart from the doctrine of the covenant in which it is rooted.

This book exposes the contemporary heresy of the allegedly new federal vision, that is, *covenant* vision, including the teaching of justification by faith and works. It also traces the heresy to its root in an erroneous doctrine of the covenant, as the heresy itself demands that we do. If the heresy is not taken hold of at its root, resistance to it must fail. False doctrine in the church must be eradicated, that is, removed, not merely in its flowering, but in its root.

The issue in the contemporary controversy is sovereign grace. The issue is sovereign grace *in the sphere of the covenant*.

Cursing the darkness does not avail, however, apart from letting the light shine. *The Covenant of God and the Children of Believers* lets shine the light of biblical, confessional truth concerning the covenant of God. It explains, defends, and proclaims a doctrine of the covenant, particularly regarding the place of children, that honors the gospel of particular, sovereign grace. It applies the dogmas of Dordt and the system of theology of the Westminster Standards to the inclusion of children in the covenant. A deep concern of the book is practical: The right view of covenant children and the right rearing of them.

The covenant doctrine presented in this book is that which has been developed by and is confessed in the Protestant Reformed Churches.

Much of the content of the book first appeared in the editorial column of the Reformed magazine, the *Standard Bearer*. This permitted various opponents of the covenant doctrine taught in the magazine to object in print. The result is that readers of this book are able to contrast the doctrine of the covenant confessed by the Protestant Reformed Churches with the covenant views of the Baptists, the Netherlands Reformed Congregations, and the Canadian and American Reformed Churches. These covenant views virtually exhaust the possibilities.

A concluding section of appendices consists of four reviews by the author of recent books that treat the place of children in the covenant.

May the Reformed and Presbyterian churches at long last and occasioned by the contemporary heresy—emphatically *covenant* heresy—come to agreement in the truth of the covenant—the truth of the covenant of particular, sovereign grace.

DAVID J. ENGELSMA

I

The Reformed Doctrine of Children in the Covenant



The Covenant as Bond

THE covenant of grace is one of the most prominent, most important doctrines of Holy Scripture, if not that grand reality which is the very heart of the whole biblical revelation.

This is how Reformed theologians have always viewed the truth of the covenant. The German theologian of the nineteenth century, Heinrich Heppe, who summarized the Reformed tradition from Calvin to his day, wrote, “The doctrine of God’s covenant with man is thus the inmost heart and soul of the whole of revealed truth.”¹ He quotes the seventeenth century Reformed theologian, J. H. Heidegger: “the marrow and as it were the sort of centre of the whole of Holy Scripture is the . . . covenant . . . of God, to which . . . everything comprised in them must be referred.”²

Herman Bavinck agreed:

The doctrine of the covenant is of the greatest significance both for dogmatics and for the practice of the Christian life. The Reformed church and theology has understood this, more than the Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches and theologies. On the basis of Holy Scripture, the Reformed have conceived the true religion of the Old and New Testaments always as a covenant between God and man.³

In his work on the place of children in the covenant, Herman Hoeksema has written: “If . . . we would speak of a Jachin and Boaz in the tem-

1. Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1950), 281.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (Reformed Dogmatics), vol. III (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1910), 220. My translation.

ple of the truth of God [the reference is to the two pillars in Solomon's temple mentioned in 1 Kings 7:21] we should indeed speak of the truth of God's sovereign grace...and...of the truth of God's covenant... This doctrine [of the covenant] is really more characteristically Reformed than the doctrine of election."⁴

Scripture itself points out the centrality of the covenant. The history of Israel in the Old Testament is a history of God's covenant with Abraham and Abraham's seed (Gen. 12). The goal of that history is Jesus the Christ (Luke 1:68–73). Jesus appears as mediator of the new covenant (Heb. 8:6; Heb. 12:24). The work of Christ, therefore, is the establishment, realization, and perfection of the new covenant (Heb. 13:20, 21).

For this reason, the Bible itself has the names that it does: Its two main divisions are called "Old Testament" and "New Testament." Since the word *testament* really means "covenant," we rightly refer to the Bible as the book about the old and new covenants.

God's Covenant of Grace

What is the covenant of God?

What is that covenant that was established with Abraham and his seed; that has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ; that now is made with believers and their children; and that will be perfected with the church gathered out of all nations from the beginning to the end of the world at the coming of our Lord?

The covenant is the relationship of friendship between the triune God and his chosen people in Jesus Christ.

That the covenant must be conceived by us as a relationship, as a bond of communion, between God and his people is proved from the following biblical teachings. First, when God establishes his covenant with father Abraham, God himself describes the covenant this way: "to be a God unto thee" (Gen. 17:7). The covenant is this: Jehovah's being Abraham's God and Abraham's being Jehovah's man. It is the relationship—the special, close, loving relationship—between them. This description of the covenant is repeated, again and again, in the Old Testament (Covenant)

4. Herman Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed: Children in the Covenant* (Grandville, Mich.: Reformed Free Publishing Association, rev. ed. 1997), 1–3.

when the covenant is made or confirmed with Israel. It appears in the significant prophecy of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31–34. “I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah,” Jehovah says; and then, in virtual definition of the covenant, he adds, “and will be their God, and they shall be my people” (v. 33).

Second, the fundamental earthly analogies to, or symbols of, the covenant are relationships—relationships of the most intimate friendships known to humans. If a person had any doubt whether the covenant is a relationship, these biblical analogies should settle the matter. The Bible requires us to think of the covenant as a marriage and as a father-child relationship. In Ezekiel 16 the prophet describes the Lord’s covenant with Jerusalem as a marriage: “Now when I passed by thee, and looked upon thee, behold, thy time was the time of love; and I spread my skirt over thee, and covered thy nakedness: yea, I swear unto thee, and entered into a covenant with thee, saith the Lord God, and thou becamest mine” (v. 8). Judah is Jehovah’s wife in the covenant.

At the very beginning of Israel’s history as a nation, God made plain that the covenant between himself and Israel, on account of which he would redeem them from the slavery of Egypt, was a Father-child relationship. For Moses must say to Pharaoh, “Thus saith the Lord, Israel is my son, even my firstborn” (Ex. 4:22).

Marriage and the parent-child connection are relationships of love and communion. They are simply special forms of friendship. And the covenant is the real marriage and the real Parent-child relationship.

Third, there is the figurative explanation of the covenant as God’s tabernacling with his people. In Revelation 21 the vision of the new world and of the perfected church is immediately explained by a great voice that says, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them” (v. 3). The reference is to that building at the center of Israel in the Old Testament (Covenant): the tabernacle. That holy building was the place where God lived with Israel and Israel lived with God in sweet communion. Heaven will be the real, and gigantic, tabernacle, inasmuch as the bliss of heaven will be the life of the covenant: dwelling with God. John immediately applies to this tabernacle-life in the coming world the words that we have seen to be descriptive of the nature of the covenant: “and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God” (v. 3).

In this light the church must view the greatest and central wonder of salvation, namely, the incarnation of the eternal Son of God. The meaning of it John gives in John 1:14: “And the Word was made flesh, and tabernacled [such is the literal translation; the KJV has *dwelt*] among us.” In Jesus, the triune God comes close to us for friendship, so close that he becomes one of us. When the Spirit of the crucified and risen Son of God unites us to Jesus Christ by faith, we come close to God, so close that we are God’s bride and God’s children.

The covenant is not a contract consisting of the mutual obligations of God and the believer. Although earthly marriage includes the mutual duties of husband and wife, these duties do not define the marriage. Marriage is not the duties, but the one-flesh union. The covenant is not a treaty (much less a treaty modeled after the profane Canaanite treaties) any more than the relation between a believing father and his children is a treaty. Nor is the covenant a promise, although God establishes the covenant with his people by promise. Ezekiel 16:8 clearly distinguishes between the promise by which the covenant is made and sealed and the covenant which God enters into by way of the promise: “yea, I swear unto thee, and entered into a covenant with thee, saith the Lord God, and thou becamest mine.” Although the bridegroom takes his bride by means of a vow—a solemn oath and promise—this vow is not the marriage. The marriage is the life together of the two.

This understanding of the covenant makes clear what the true covenant members ought to expect from God and what we are required to give to God. We expect, and ought to enjoy, God’s wondrous love, God’s delightful friendship, and God’s comforting assurance, “I am your God, and you are my dear friends.” With this, of course, we expect his care and blessing regarding both this life and the life to come: salvation! Think of the husband’s nourishing and cherishing of his wife and of the parents’ nurture and protection of their children.

In the covenant God calls us to give him our love, our friendship, and our exclusive, wholehearted service: thankfulness! Think of the devoted help that the husband desires from his wife and of the honor that parents look for from their children.

Since the friendship of God is enjoyed only through his word, the covenant people will be marked by reverence for Scripture, for the

preaching of the gospel, and for sound teaching. Since we express our friendship in prayer and in obedience to the law, the covenant people will be characterized by prayer and obedience.

At their very heart, Christian experience and Christian life are friendship with God in Jesus Christ. "Henceforth I call you not servants . . . but I have called you friends" (John 15:15). This is the Reformed answer to the view of the Christian life as a personal relationship with God. This guards the Reformed Christian against the dread error of conceiving of the life of the Christian as a cold, formal, outward observance of prescribed rules and accepted customs. And this determines the lives of Reformed Christians with each other: Marriage is friendship; family life is friendship; life in the congregation is friendship.

Two vital truths about the covenant must be noted before we go on to the matter of the place of children in the covenant. First, the covenant is God's. The covenant is God's because he conceives it, he promises it, he establishes it, he maintains it, and he perfects it. He alone does all this. He does this without the help of Abraham, of Israel, or of the church. Again and again, God says, "I will establish *my* covenant." When Jerusalem has broken the covenant with her abominable idolatries so that no other judgment can be expected than that God solemnly declares the covenant null and void, God amazingly says, "Nevertheless I will remember my covenant with thee . . . and I will establish unto thee an everlasting covenant" (Ezek. 16:60). Never does God say, "Let you and me make our covenant." Never does Scripture teach that the covenant depends for its fulfillment upon sinful man.

The covenant is a covenant of grace. Never is this more clearly evident than in the incarnation of the Son of God. In sheer mercy and awesome power, God did the impossible thing: He established the new covenant. We had nothing to do with it, except that our dreadful guilt, total depravity, and utter helplessness and misery made the incarnation and death of the Son of God necessary for the establishing of the covenant.

To err here is no minor matter, for all of salvation flows from the covenant. If the covenant depends upon man, so also does salvation depend upon man. A doctrine of the covenant that denies the graciousness of the covenant necessarily undermines also the "Five Points" of Calvinism.

But the covenant is God's in a yet deeper sense. It is the revelation to us and the sharing with us of God's own inner, trinitarian life. God's own life is friendship. The life of God is family friendship. The Father loves the Son whom he has begotten; and the Son loves the Father, whose image he is; and they are friends in the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from them both and in whom they embrace. Such is the life of the triune God that "the only begotten Son . . . is in the bosom of the Father" (John 1:18).⁵

A mystery? Granted, if you mean that there are depths here that surpass our understanding. Nevertheless, this is revealed. The life of God is covenant life—life of the nature of Father-Son. And this life God "lets us in on," in Christ, so that the relationship between us and God is Father-son and Father-daughter. How are we to pray? "Our Father!"

This leads to the second truth about the covenant that is vital. The covenant of God with us is all-embracing and all-dominating: The entire life of the believer—body and soul, physical and spiritual, temporal and eternal, toward God and toward man—is taken up into this covenant and is controlled, arranged, and structured by the covenant. As a believer, my whole life is covenant life. God is my God, not only on the Sabbath, but also through the week; not only in my worship, but also in my work; not only in my devotions, but also in my marriage and family; not only as regards my church life, but also with regard to my behavior to the State, to my employer, and to my neighbor. The friendship of God lays claim to everything, controls all, and shows itself everywhere. It makes a radical difference in the believer's experience and behavior. On the one hand, he possesses joy, contentment, and hope. On the other hand, he walks in holiness.


This all-embracing character of the covenant is implied in the biblical figures of marriage and of the parent-child relationship. The whole life of the young woman is affected by marriage and is claimed by her

5. Concerning the trinitarian life of God as family fellowship and the implications for the covenant, indeed for all creation, see David J. Engelsma, "Trinity and Covenant" (Th.M. thesis, Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Mich., 1994), soon to be published as *Trinity and Covenant: God As Holy Family* by the Reformed Free Publishing Association.

husband. The relationship in which our little children stand to us parents controls their entire life. They behave as they do, they speak as they do, they think as they do, they are who they are, because they are our children. The relationship with their parents molds them (a thought that makes God-fearing parents tremble, and should).



“Little Vipers” or Children of God?

NE important aspect of lives that are embraced by the covenant is the family of believers. For the children of believers are included in the covenant.

The Inclusion of the Children of Believers in the Covenant

The children of believers are included in the covenant as children, that is, already at conception and birth. They receive forgiveness of sins through the blood of Jesus, the Holy Spirit of sanctification, and church membership—as children. They are called to love, fear, and obey God—as children. For they have God as their God, and are his people—as children. Therefore, they have full right to baptism. Parents must present them for baptism. And the church that would maintain the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ must see to it.

This is an important feature of the central doctrine of the covenant. It is important to the children. Are they God’s children or the devil’s? It is important to the parents. We love our children and regard our rearing of our children as one of the most important tasks in our lives. May we regard them as children of God? Or are we compelled to regard them as Satan’s “little vipers,” as must all those who deny that children are included in the covenant and as did certain Calvinistic theologians, such as Jonathan Edwards. Inclusion of the children in the covenant is important to the church. The church asks: Are they members of the church or do they stand outside? Does the church have a calling to them, to feed and protect them as lambs of the flock of Christ, or are they nothing but heathens, little heathens to be sure, but heathens nevertheless, like all other ungodly people, whom the church should evangelize?

But above all, the place of the children in the covenant is important

to God. He said, at the beginning of the history of the covenant with Abraham, “I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations . . . to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee” (Gen. 17:7). He inspired the apostle, on the very day that the covenant became new, to proclaim as gospel, “the promise is unto you, and to your children . . . even as many as the Lord our God shall call” (Acts 2:39). Rebuking his unfaithful wife, Judah, God exclaims, like an aggrieved husband and father, “Is this of thy whoredoms a small matter, that thou hast slain my children?” (Ez. 16:20, 21). In Malachi 2:15 God condemns the divorcing that was prevalent in Judah because divorce jeopardizes the “godly seed.” And still today the unchangeable God hates divorce in the covenant community because it is destructive to the children who, as covenant children, are his children.

How important our children’s inclusion in the covenant is to God is shown in the New Testament (Covenant) by Christ’s command, “Suffer little children [infants] to come unto me . . . for of such [infants of believers] is the kingdom of God [made up]” (Luke 18:16). It is shown also by the careful provision God makes for the children as members of the congregation: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord . . . and, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Eph. 6:14).

Here the Reformed faith—Calvinism—parts company with all Baptists. Every Baptist seriously errs regarding a vital truth of the central covenant doctrine in Scripture. Every Baptist holds that the children of believers are lost heathens outside the church, no different from the children of unbelievers. The advertisement that a local Baptist church placed in the paper concerning the superior holiness of the children in their congregation—their obedience to authority and their freedom from drunkenness and fornication, etc.—was deceptive advertising. There are no children in that church. Every Baptist church denies membership to all children. Only sheep belong to the Baptist fold, no lambs. Entrance into the church is restricted to those who are grown up and are able to make confession of their faith. Whatever youth do join the Baptist church do so not as children of believers but as mature individuals. The Baptist church will not suffer the little children to come to Christ, but forbids them.

Among the other implications of this grim teaching and practice is

that there is no ground for any hope of the election and salvation of the children of believers who die in infancy or in early childhood. Indeed, there is every reason to believe that they perish. They are, according to the Baptists themselves, outside the church and covenant of God; and outside the church and covenant of God is no salvation.

In light of our confession of the inclusion of the children of believers in the covenant (about which fact there is no dispute among Reformed people or churches), we must now answer the question, what exactly do Scripture and the Reformed confessions mean when they say that our children are included in the covenant?

The Reformed creeds are clear and emphatic about children's being included in the covenant of God. The Heidelberg Catechism teaches that infants must be baptized "since they, as well as their parents, belong to the covenant and people of God, and both redemption from sin, and the Holy Ghost, who works faith, are through the blood of Christ promised to them no less than to their parents."¹

The Reformed "Form for the Administration of Baptism" assures the believing parents and the congregation that "our young children . . . are . . . received unto grace in Christ."² It insists, with powerful, decisive appeal to the unity of the covenant in both old and new dispensations, "infants are to be baptized as heirs of the kingdom of God and of his covenant."³ And in the prayer of thanksgiving it puts on Reformed lips the words of praise, joy, and comfort, "Thou hast forgiven us, and our children, all our sins, through the blood of thy beloved Son Jesus Christ, and received us through thy Holy Spirit as members of thine only begotten Son."⁴ In the vow at baptism, the parents confess that they believe that, "although our children are conceived and born in sin, and therefore are subject to all miseries, yea, to condemnation itself; yet that they are sanctified in Christ, and therefore, as members of his church, ought to be baptized."⁵

1. Heidelberg Catechism, A 74, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, repr. 1983), 331.

2. "Form for the Administration of Baptism," *The Psalter with Doctrinal Standards, Liturgy, Church Order, and Added Chorale Section*, rev. ed. (PRC) (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 86.

3. *Ibid.*, 87.

4. *Ibid.*, 88.

5. *Ibid.*, 87.

The question of what this means is occasioned by the incontestable fact that not all of the children of believers are saved. Both parents and church experience the hard, painful fact that some of our children grow up to be ungodly, unbelieving, and disobedient, and they perish. God is not their God; and they are not his people. Scripture prepares us for this bitterest of all parental and ecclesiastical sorrows. Abraham had a grandson, Esau, who was a profane reprobate (see Gen. 25:19–34; Rom. 9:6–13; Heb. 12:16, 17). Deuteronomy 21:18–21 prescribes the procedure by which Israelite parents of gluttonous, drunken, rebellious, and stubborn sons were to bring these children to the elders to be excommunicated and stoned. Hebrews 10:29 speaks of the baptized son of believers in the time of the new covenant who treads under foot the Son of God, counts the blood of the covenant, with which he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and insults the Spirit of grace.

We cannot presume that all our children are regenerate and elect. To presume this is contrary to Scripture and experience. Nor may we parents be bitter about this. For it is pure mercy that any of our children is saved.

But what then does the Reformed faith mean by the inclusion of the children of believers in the covenant of God?

There are three possible explanations of the inclusion of children in the covenant. All are proposed by various Reformed churches.

The first explanation is that because of their privileged position in a Christian home and in the environment of the church, these children are more likely to be converted than the children of unbelievers. In fact, the children are unsaved, and must be regarded as unsaved until such time as they give evidence of faith, but they are in a better position to be saved than other children. This was the view of some Puritans and of Jonathan Edwards. It is the view of many Reformed churches today, including the Free Reformed Churches of North America and the Netherlands Reformed Congregations of the United States and Canada.⁶

6. Evidence of the popularity of their conception of inclusion of children in the covenant and of infant baptism is *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, ed. Gregg Strawbridge (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R, 2003). With the rare exception, all the many theologians from many Reformed and Presbyterian denominations advocate viewing all the baptized, covenant children as unregenerate and unsaved until they grow up and have a conversion experience, fulfill a condition, or believe.

This view must be rejected. First, it does not do justice to the language of the Bible or of the Reformed creeds. God does not merely put the children of believers in a more advantageous position, so as to make it more likely that they will be saved; but he establishes his covenant with them, so as to be their God (Gen. 17:7). God gives to the children the promise of the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38, 39; Heid. Cat., Q & A 74). Accordingly, the church does not and may not regard them as heathens with an edge over other heathens. Rather, the Reformed church regards them, and must regard them, as those “sanctified in Christ.” The Reformed “Form for the Administration of Baptism” requires believing parents to “acknowledge that although our children are conceived and born in sin, and therefore are subject to all miseries, yea, to condemnation itself; yet that they are sanctified in Christ, and therefore, as members of his church, ought to be baptized.”⁷ Second, it is not true that our children, considered now strictly from the point of view of their natural condition, are in any better position than the heathens of the world. Our children are by nature dead in sin. A dead person in a Christian home and in the sphere of the church has no advantage over a dead person outside a Christian home and the church.

The second possible explanation of the place of children in the covenant can be more persuasively argued. All the children of believers without exception are in the covenant in this sense, that God promises them all salvation and extends to them all his covenant grace in Christ. However, the actual fulfillment of the promise, the actual reception of covenant grace, and the actual realization of the covenant with them personally depend upon their believing in Christ and thus taking hold of the covenant when they grow up. The covenant consists of promise and demand, which demand is a condition that the children must fulfill. The promise from God is for all without exception. But if the child should not fulfill the demand that he believe, he forfeits the promise. This is the view of the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands (“liberated”), of the Canadian Reformed Churches, and of the American Reformed Churches.⁸

7. “Form for the Administration of Baptism,” *The Psalter*, 87.

8. See J. Kamphuis, *An Everlasting Covenant* (Lanecston, Tasmania, Australia: Publication Organization of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia, 1985); Jelle Faber,

The appeal of this view is that it puts all our children without exception in the covenant. This is naturally pleasing to the parents (although the implication of this view is that not only some but also all of the children can fall out of the covenant, which is not so pleasing). Also, it seems to do justice to the language of Scripture and of the creeds. God said to Abraham, “and to thy seed,” not, “and to some of thy seed” (Gen. 17:7). The Heidelberg Catechism teaches that the infants “are included in the covenant,” not just some of the infants.⁹ In the baptism form, we confess that our children are “sanctified in Christ,” not just some of them.¹⁰

Are not all the children of believers baptized? Are not all the children required to be baptized?

Nevertheless, this view conflicts with cardinal doctrines of the word of God, doctrines which are precious to every Reformed man and woman. For one thing, the promise and covenant grace of God depend upon the work and will of the sinful child. The covenant and its salvation are conditional, dependent upon the faith of the child. But this stands in diametrical opposition to the teaching of Scripture, with specific reference to this very matter of the salvation of the children of believers: “So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy” (Rom. 9:16). Also, the Reformed faith has creedally rejected the notion that faith is a condition unto salvation. The Canons of Dordt deny that faith is a “prerequisite, cause, or condition” upon which election and salvation depend, asserting rather that “men are chosen to faith.”¹¹

For another thing, this explanation of the inclusion of the children in the covenant definitely implies that Christ’s death for some persons fails to secure their redemption. At baptism God promises to all the children that he will give them his covenant and its blessings *on the basis that Christ washed them all in his blood*. The Reformed baptism form grounds the promise of the Holy Ghost at baptism in the death of Christ

American Secession Theologians on Covenant and Baptism (Pella, Iowa: Inheritance Publications, 1996).

9. Heidelberg Catechism, Q & A 74, *Creeds*, 331.

10. “Form for the Administration of Baptism,” *The Psalter*, 87.

11. Canons of Dordt 1, Art. 9, *Creeds*, 583. See also Canons 1, Rejection of Errors, Art. 3; Canons 3 & 4, Rejection of Errors, Art. 6, *The Psalter*, 60, 66, 67; Canons 3 & 4, Art. 14, *Creeds*, 583.

for the one to whom the promise is made: “When we are baptized in the name of the Holy Ghost, the Holy Ghost assures us, by this holy sacrament, that he will dwell in us, and sanctify us to be members of Christ, applying unto us, that which we have in Christ, namely, the washing away of our sins.”¹² But the fact is that the sins of some baptized children are not washed away, and they perish. Thus is denied the doctrine of limited, efficacious atonement, at least within the sphere of the covenant. With regard to the children of believers, there is universal, inefficacious atonement.

Yet another objectionable element in this view is its teaching that the promise of God fails in many cases. God promises salvation to every baptized child of believing parents, but many of them do not receive salvation. The word and promise of God have failed in all these cases. They have failed because the children have refused to fulfill the condition of faith, but the fact remains that the word and promise have failed.

The basic objection to this covenant view—and it is a deadly serious objection—is that it conflicts with the Reformed gospel of salvation by sovereign grace.

The third explanation of the inclusion of children in the covenant we believe to be that of Scripture. Although all our children are in the sphere of the covenant and therefore receive the sign of the covenant and are reared as covenant members, the covenant of God, the relationship of friendship in Jesus Christ, is established with the elect children only. The promise does not depend upon the faith of the child, but the promise works the faith by which every child to whom God makes the promise receives the grace of the covenant. It is the elect children among our physical offspring who constitute our true children, even as the seed of Abraham was not all his physical descendants, but only Christ and those who are Christ’s according to election (Gal. 3:7, 16, 29).

Our grounds for this explanation of the inclusion of children in the covenant are the following.

First, only this view harmonizes with the rule of faith in Scripture. God’s saving, covenant mercy is particular, that is, for the elect alone: “For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion” (Rom.

12. “Form for the Administration of Baptism,” *The Psalter*, 86.

9:15). Predestination makes distinction not only between the visible church and the world, but also within the visible church itself:

And not only this; but when Rebecca also had conceived by one, even by our father Isaac; (for the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth;) it was said unto her, The elder shall serve the younger. As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated (Rom. 9:10–13).

God’s salvation never depends upon the will or action of the sinner: “So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy” (v. 16). Christ’s death is efficacious:

For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life. And not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement (Rom. 5:6–11).

The promise of God is sure to all the seed: “Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace; to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed; not to that only which is of the law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham; who is the father of us all” (Rom. 4:16).

Second, Scripture gives exactly this explanation of the precise matter under discussion. It does this in Romans 9. The concern of Paul is that so many physical children of Abraham perish in light of God’s promise to Abraham to establish his covenant with Abraham’s seed (vv. 1–5). The chief difficulty of the apostle is not that dear relatives perish (although he could wish himself accused for these brothers, v. 3), but that it might seem that “the word of God hath taken none effect,” that is, that the promise of God has failed to establish the covenant with many to whom the promise was given (v. 6). But it is not the case that the promise has proved to be a powerless failure in even one instance.

Why not? Because the seed of Abraham, to whom the promise was given, never was all the physical children of Abraham. “For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel: neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children: but, In Isaac shall thy seed be called.” That is, “They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed” (vv. 6–8). There is a distinction between two kinds of children of believing Abraham: children of the flesh and children of the promise. And this distinction is determined by election and reprobation, illustrated plainly by the history of Jacob and Esau (vv. 9–23).

Paul’s difficulty is exactly our problem. By promise, God includes our children in his covenant of salvation; but not all of our children are saved.

Scripture’s solution of the apostle’s difficulty solves our problem as well. The children of believers to whom God graciously promises membership in the covenant are not all the physical offspring of believers. They are rather the children of God among our offspring. And the children of God are those who are chosen in Christ. These are the ones whom God counts for the seed when he says, “I will be the God of your seed.” These, and these only, are “the children of the promise.” To them, and to them only, is the promise given. In every one of them is the promise effectual to work faith in Jesus Christ.

Third, this understanding of the place of children in the covenant is found in the Reformed tradition. Heinrich Hepppe, who has distilled the essence of the Reformed tradition from the creeds and from the writings of the Reformed theologians, quotes the seventeenth century Reformed theologian, J. H. Heidegger, as expressing the Reformed view:

As for the adults, outward baptism does not seal inward grace for all of them, but for those alone who bear in their hearts a faith the reverse of feigned and confess it in words. Nor yet for the children of believing parents one and all, but only for the elect is baptism the sign of regeneration and universal spiritual grace. Although it is right and godly in the case of individual children of the kind to have good hopes of the judgment in love, in the case of them all it is not so.¹³

13. Heinrich Hepppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 622, 623.

This has been a prominent view in Dutch Reformed theology since the *Afscheiding* (Secession) of 1834. Prof. C. Veenhof, himself an advocate of the position that all children of believers are in the covenant by conditional promise, acknowledges that the position that referred the phrase in the baptism form, “our children . . . are sanctified in Christ,” to the elect children was perhaps the dominant position in the churches of the Secession. This was the doctrine of Simon Van Velzen, the outstanding theologian in the churches of the Secession.¹⁴

Fourth, only this covenant view is in harmony with the Reformed confessions. The Westminster Confession holds the promise of the covenant of grace to be particular and unconditional: “promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto life his Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe.”¹⁵ In the chapter on baptism, this Presbyterian creed teaches that the grace promised in baptism is strictly controlled by God’s eternal predestination:

. . . the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God’s own will, in his appointed time.¹⁶

The Canons of Dordt restrict the promise of the gospel and the sacraments to believers.¹⁷ Since faith is the gift of God to the elect,¹⁸ the promise is for the elect. It cannot, therefore, fail.¹⁹

On no other reading can the teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism in Question and Answer 74 or the statements in the form of baptism that our children are “heirs of the kingdom of God and of his covenant” and that they are “sanctified in Christ”²⁰ be true. If the reference is to every one of the children of believers, not to the elect among them, it simply is not true that “redemption from sin, and the Holy Ghost, who

14. C. Veenhof, *Prediking en uitverkiezing* (Preaching and Election) (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1959), 66ff.

15. Westminster Confession of Faith, Chap. 17.2, *Creeds*, 617.

16. Westminster Confession of Faith, Chap. 28.6, *Creeds*, 663.

17. Canons, 3 & 4, Art. 8, *Creeds*, 589.

18. Canons, 3 & 4, Art. 14, *Creeds*, 591; Canons, 1, Art. 9, *Creeds*, 583.

19. Canons, 5, Art. 8, *Creeds*, 594.

20. “Form for the Administration of Baptism,” *The Psalter*, 87.

works faith, are through the blood of Christ promised to them”²¹ or that they are “sanctified in Christ.”

God realizes his covenant in the line of generations. He gathers his church from age to age from the children of believers. As the Puritans were fond of saying, “God casts the line of election in the loins of godly parents.” For the sake of the elect children, all are baptized.

21. Heidelberg Catechism, Q & A 74, *Creeds*, 331.