

# TO YOU & YOUR CHILDREN

EXAMINING THE BIBLICAL DOCTRINE OF  
COVENANT SUCCESSION

Edited by  
Benjamin K. Wikner

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*This book is dedicated to my beloved wife, Erin, who has been my helper extraordinaire in life and in my ministry in the church and to our children. A father could not ask for a better mother for his children, nor a husband a better wife for himself. She is God's gift to me in nurturing our five children in the Lord. We have confidence together in the promises of God in Christ that our precious children will reap the heavenly reward of God's covenant blessings. Soli Deo Gloria.*

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## Foreword: The Children's Crusade

R. C. Sproul, Jr.

Because we are myopic, parochial, individualist Americans we tend to think that myopic, parochial, individualist Americans invented myopic, parochial individualism. The particular error of individualism isn't peculiar to Americans, nor is it peculiar to the modern age. We meet at least one such creature in the book of Acts. We are all familiar with the story. Paul and Silas languish in prison, guilty of "troubling the city." As the two men pray and sing, an earthquake comes, shaking the foundations of the prison, loosing everyone's chains and opening every door. The jailer awakes, sees the doors open, and decides life is no longer worth living. Paul calls out, "Do yourself no harm, for we are all here." The jailer comes and falls down before Paul and Silas and exhibits both great wisdom and great folly by asking, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

Though he doubtless was rather ignorant of the fullness of the answer, he did well to ask about his salvation. Where he erred is evident in the answer given him: "*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household.*" Before we seek to understand how the grace of God works in the lives of our children, and even before that grace is actually at work, we ought first to hope for our children. The jailer's problem was not that he was insufficiently covenantal in his theology, but that he was not sufficiently concerned for his family. He cared first and foremost for himself and his own sal-

vation. Even before he prays the sinner's prayer, he is learning from Paul and Silas to care more for his family.

My own experience was rather the opposite. I was raised in the nurture and admonition of the Lord by believing parents. In fact, many Reformed folk have felt the pangs of jealousy toward me because of how lucky I was in the parent lottery. In, through, under, and around their covenant faithfulness and in, through, under, and around my heavenly Father's covenant faithfulness, I am an heir of the covenant. I do indeed believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

To one degree or another, I'm ashamed to say, I took that grace for granted. I was "in," and was making a reasonable effort toward my sanctification the Calvinist way. That is, I equated learning more theology, which is a good thing, with growing in grace, which is likewise a good thing. But confusing the two is not such a good thing. Calvinists, and I am among them, tend to measure their own sanctification on a peculiar scale. You are a simple novice when God regenerates you and you trust in the finished work of Christ alone. You become a first-degree believer when you understand the difference between Calvinism and Arminianism. The next step is actually to read a Calvinist or two—Piper, Boice, or Sproul will do. The next steps up the ladder correspond to the relative difficulty and obscurity of what you are reading. Calvin is better than Piper, but Turretin is better than Calvin. The next plateau has you reading Beza, Bullinger, and Bucer. You become an officer when you can actually quote Van Til. You reach the thirty-third degree when you actually understand that quotation.

Everything was going along swimmingly in this stream of least resistance until God did something shocking—He blessed me with a child. Suddenly I knew I had to get serious about my sanctification, because now it had eternal consequences beyond myself. In the grace of God, I was more zealous for the soul of my little girl Darby than I was for my own soul, which in turn focused my attention back to my own soul. Suddenly that whole "getting in by the skin of my teeth" thing, which had looked so appealing when I was a single man, now horrified me because it meant that my own daughter could end up be-

ing wood, hay, and stubble. Because of the work of Christ on my behalf, God was covenantally faithful enough to me to make me realize that I had to be covenantally faithful to Him and my daughter if I wished Him to bless her covenantally.

Since that time God has so blessed me five more times. Each time my own heart bursts with the truth of God: “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in the truth.” We are, of course, to be singularly focused on pursuing the glory of God. We are to long for the fullness of God’s blessing, for the beatific vision, for that day when we shall be like Him, for we will see Him as He is. But there can be no greater earthly desire, yearning, or passion than that which yields the greatest joy—knowing that not only we but also our children walk in the truth. If such doesn’t enflame our hearts, I’m afraid we have no hearts to enflame.

The doctrine of covenant succession, then, misses the mark. It is not that the doctrine is false, but that it is false that it is merely a doctrine. We aren’t here talking about competing theories of the nature of free will. We aren’t dicker over what year John wrote his Apocalypse. We aren’t fussing about whether the Spirit proceeds from the Father only or from the Father and the Son. We are talking about eternity, heaven, hell, and our children. We are talking about the pursuit of joy, the very substance of life.

Such doesn’t mean, of course, that we should descend into sloppy sentimentalism. It would indeed be a deadly mistake to assume our children will be on our side of the great divide simply because we really want them to be there—which is why it is a good thing that Ben Wikner has assembled such a team of scholars to tackle the thorny questions of covenant succession, and why it is a good thing to read this book, and read it with all due care. But my prayer is that as you read, behind every argument, beneath every syllogism, you will see the radiant face of your own children, reflecting the radiant face of the Savior, as “He took them up in His arms, laid His hands on them, and blessed them” (Mk. 10:16).

# Introduction

Benjamin K. Wikner

Not too long ago, as I was discussing this book project with a fellow minister, he warned me, “Be careful—the subject of parenting can be as sensitive and uncomfortable as discussing love-making technique.” I was somewhat taken aback, if by nothing else than the discomfort of the analogy. Nevertheless, I must agree. Parenting *is* highly personal, involving one of the most precious and intimate parts of our lives—our children. Most parents have given the better part of their lives, and their fortunes, in the raising of their children. What parent, therefore, can be blamed for taking personally their children’s well-being, and the outcome of their lives?

It’s not only the parents’ sacrifice—it’s also their pride. The fact is, children are reflections of their parents. When a child’s misbehavior becomes known, it is an embarrassment not only to him personally but to his parents as well. But inquiring into someone’s parenting ability typically results only in defensiveness. We like to take pride in our children and in our raising of them, and most parents are jealous for the right to make the decisions and set the parenting program. The retort “Don’t tell me how to raise my kids!” is never far from most parents’ lips.

Yet the Word of God is clear that the wise man seeks counsel, even a multitude of godly counselors. Experience also shows us our need for help. We know only as much as we have learned, and much of what

we have learned has been wrong, whether from worldly teachers or from the misguided (albeit well-intentioned) lessons of our own parents. All parents carry baggage into their parenting, some of which can be so burdensome that it overwhelms them and greatly hinders the spiritual progress of their children.

So is this another book on parenting technique? A how-to manual on raising your children, disciplining them, and generally keeping them out of trouble? Not exactly, though such things are addressed. This book offers no magical “blue pill” of parenting that will make parents perform their duties well and scientifically assure satisfying results in their families. Covenant nurture could never be so artificial or mechanical, especially when done biblically and spiritually. As in all things spiritual, God requires faith, obedience, and perseverance. For such things, there can never be a formula, pill, or methodology that will guarantee a particular result.

That said, covenant nurture begins with a promise—God’s promise to us and to our children that He will be our God and we His people. In light of this promise, we see that *the nurture of our children begins with covenant succession*. Just as a builder cannot begin without a blueprint from the architect, so also the covenant nurture of children cannot properly be understood or applied without an understanding of covenant succession. The expectation of spiritual success in our covenant children comes by faith—faith in God’s promises to us and to our children. Without such faith, we cannot please God.

The term *covenant succession* may not be altogether familiar to you. In past generations it may have been called *covenant expectation*, *the doctrine of children in the covenant*, or just simply *practical covenant theology*. Notably, it really had no specific title, in part because it was not a matter of particular controversy in Christian circles. It seems that only within the past century has the issue of the spiritual standing and expectation of covenant children been substantively assailed. Nowhere in the writings of the early magisterial Reformers will you find anything other than the full belief that children of believing parents were set apart as holy and expected to own the faith into which they

were born. If anything, some may fault the early Reformed theologians for being *too* strenuous in their advocacy of children in the covenant (see Trouwborst's article for a full presentation of the historical progress—or regress—of the doctrine).

In the last century and a half, many have called into question and even upended the biblical (and historically Reformed) doctrine of children in the covenant. The influence of baptistic thought has casually entered into Reformed circles, even bringing about a generally recognized segment in the Reformed community called Reformed Baptists. The doctrines and practices of revivalism have also taken root and have further eroded the view that children have strong standing in the covenant. Additionally, the increasing exodus of covenant children away from the church and into unbelief has greatly heightened the practical relevance of the subject and influenced the pragmatic disposition against the historic doctrine.

Typically, when an issue becomes controversial, terminology tends to become more prolific and specific. The term *covenant succession* naturally results from the need to bring clarity to this discussion. Needless to say, this is no arcane, academic controversy. On the contrary, our children—who are the future of the church—are at stake in this discussion.

To be specific, *the doctrine of covenant succession presents the Scriptural teaching that the children of believers (covenant children) are expected to succeed in the faith of their parents, and this is accomplished through the divinely ordained means of covenant nurture.* While the term *covenant succession* has likely been used in this context in various writings, it was effectively cemented for our day in an article written by the first contributing author of this volume, Rob Rayburn, entitled “The Presbyterian Doctrines of Covenant Children, Covenant Nurture and Covenant Succession.” In this article, he presented the doctrine in its historical context along with some of its implications and applications for the church and family. To the degree that this article led the way for the contemporary evolution of this discussion, we might consider Rayburn the modern patriarch of covenant succession thinking.

Much has happened since 1996 when Rayburn's article first appeared. The world continues to change. Theological discourse has evolved. Today, covenant succession has become embroiled in the justification controversy that has recently spread throughout Reformed denominations. This ought to come as no surprise. At the heart of this controversy is a renewed emphasis on salvation by faith alone. This is good. But this emphasis seems to discount or depreciate the instrumentality of works, the cause-and-effect relationship between obedience and consequence in the Christian life. No one in the present controversy (that I am aware of) suggests that we are saved by our works or that works are in any way meritorious. Neither do any advocates of covenant succession say that our works save our children. Instead, covenant succession merely applies the biblical teaching that our conduct as parents has real consequences and is instrumental according to the covenant promise.

Thus the topic of covenant succession has taken on much greater significance in the eyes of some than it did when it *merely* dealt with our children and nurture. Apparently, in the minds of some, upholding the doctrine of covenant succession undermines the pristine glory of the doctrine of justification by faith alone. You can follow the logic: If the children of the church are saved by a faith which is nurtured by diligent and faithful parenting, then they are saved not by faith *alone*, but by faith *and* the works of their parents! Thus (the argument goes) upholding the historic doctrine of salvation by faith alone means rejecting the doctrine of covenant succession (see the essays by Rayburn, Kloosterman, and Wilson for excellent treatments of this topic).

Assuredly, we must agree to uphold the historic doctrine of justification. But it is the *historic* doctrine of justification that we must uphold—a doctrine which does not sacrifice covenant consequences, the obedience of faith, and the spiritual succession of our children. It is a dreadful dilemma to contemplate sacrificing our covenant expectation for our precious children's spiritual success for the sake of upholding the doctrine of justification by faith! We certainly don't see such a dilemma in the writings of the magisterial Reformers when

they wax eloquent on the glorious doctrine of justification. Truly, the doctrine of covenant succession should be much less controversial.

One is inclined to wonder, which was the cart and which the horse? What is the real issue? Is it that covenant succession really undercuts justification by faith alone, or is the doctrine of justification inadvertently (to put the best light on it) being used as a means to undercut covenant succession? Why is there the felt need to undermine such a precious and biblical doctrine? We suggest it stems from the modern church's already low expectation for her covenant children. But then, why would the church have such a low expectation for her children? Does it?

We answer sadly that in too many Reformed churches the answer is yes. The influences of non-Reformed theology and a fleshly culture have taken their toll. The path downward seems to be increasingly precipitous in its slope. Has there ever been a graver time for the families and children of believers? That's hard for us to answer, having lived only in our day. But based upon the memoirs and writings of past saints, and a comparison of their faith and their families to our own, we are convinced that the church needs a clarion call, a call faithful to the Bible and enriched by the covenant, to take captive her families and her children to the obedience of Christ. Thus the reason—nay, the necessity—for such a volume as this.

Any honest evaluation of our society's moral decay and general decline, especially of its youth, should give every Christian grave concern and lead to fervent prayer. But what is even more frightening is what is happening in our churches. Maybe we have made peace with the fact that the neighbor kids are going to be bad influences upon our children. Maybe we have resolved to separate from the mainstream of culture in order to protect our family and our faith. But we expect the church to be an oasis in a wilderness world. Here, at least, Christian parents should be able to let their guard down a little and receive inspiration and help with their children. Certainly the leadership of the church should be exemplifying such spirituality in their own homes and instructing others to do the same.



Herein lies the grave concern that I and each of the writers of this volume share. We write out of love and concern for the church of Jesus Christ, a church in which families and children are struggling to survive spiritually. How often do our churches suffer the loss of their beloved children—lost to sin, unbelief, and rebellion? How many Christian parents are grieving over a broken relationship with one of their children? How many right now feel the sinking despair and pounding desperation at the thought of losing one of their little ones to unbelief? How many have any idea what to do or are getting any real help in reclaiming one of these precious, wandering sheep?

This is the reality in our churches today, punctuated by the surprising nonchalance of so many Christian parents about the unbelieving state of their grown children. Yet this should come as no surprise considering the weak, unbiblical, and unfaithful teaching that exists in regard to our children and families. The expectation of faith has been replaced by the pragmatics of experience or even the passivity of an imbalanced theological perspective. “Who can know, who can say,” we are told, “how one’s children will turn out?” “We hope for the best and trust God for the rest.” That sounds spiritual, but is in reality as shallow as “Let go and let God” or even the opposite extreme of “God helps those who help themselves.”

Thus, concentrated instruction and diligent attention upon such practical and essential matters as family and parenting are often neglected. Instead, many pastors pound the pulpit on the fine points of justification, predestination, or whatever else gives them a sense of theological superiority over those “in error.” Meanwhile, the families in our churches are flailing about for answers, the children are rebelling, and the spiritual well-being of the churches is disintegrating. Were it more predominately the case that the church’s children were following in the footsteps of faith, this volume would not be needed, and the issue not nearly so controversial.

It is our contention that the scandal of apostate covenant youth is only surpassed by the scandal of church leaders and teachers who dismiss the problem, finding theological excuses for it. The church of

Jesus Christ is not well served by such (lack of) spiritual leadership. For the sake of Christ, His church, and our children, we offer this volume as both an alarm and a collection of positive instruction for the people of God.

This volume seeks to increase the church's faith. In order for this to happen, such faith must begin in the leadership of the church—pastors, elders, and teachers. The present crisis in the church is evident particularly in its leadership, for in the households of the church's leaders we see the direction of the church as a whole. If the men who lead a congregation as elders and overseers are men of little faith and piety, the members of the church will, like good sheep, follow in the same immature example. If the leaders' households, including their children, are in disarray, we cannot expect other families in the church to do any better. The Bible speaks to this principle very clearly: followers will not be greater than the leader, sheep not more spiritual than the shepherd.

As teachers and preachers in the church, we recognize the sensitivity of the subject matter. The clear implication of covenant succession is that if a child of Christian parents rejects the faith, there has been a failure of covenant nurture on the part of the parents as well as the church (particularly its leaders). Some will say that tender hearts which have already been broken by the spiritual loss of a child should not be put through the wringer of acknowledging their parental and covenantal failings, but this is well-intentioned sentimentalism. We don't say to the unbeliever who is suffering some terrible consequence of his sin, "It is enough that you are suffering. I won't mention the fact that you are a sinner who needs to repent and receive Christ." On the contrary, we recognize that the way to forgiveness and healing is confronting sin and repenting of it. The doctrine of covenant succession, properly understood and applied, not only lifts up believing families to greater expectation in faith but also to better obedience, not only when children are succeeding in the faith but also when they have rebelled.

So where do we begin? We begin at the foundation—the very

promises of God as proclaimed in the covenant made with Christ and His church. Without a grasp of these divine promises, we cannot comprehend what we should expect, or know what we should properly desire. To mitigate the promises is to limit the blessings. Thus the first part of this collection deals with the doctrine proper—what is the biblical, theological, and historical basis for the teaching of covenant succession? The second part presents some implications of the doctrine—what does covenant succession look like in the church? The third part covers some practical applications of the doctrine of succession by answering the question, “How do we implement covenant nurture in the home and church?”

The God who has been so gracious to His people and so beneficent to His children in the covenant is to be praised and thanked for allowing this volume to come together. It was just over a year ago that I happened to call Doug Jones of Canon Press, with whom I had previously never spoken or even met, to talk to him about some unrelated matter. We began to speak about the need to address the church on the topic of covenant succession. As I recall, I said, “A book needs to be written,” and Doug responded, “Actually, we have been working on such a book for awhile now, but the project has stalled for lack of someone to take it on. Are you interested?” I was, of course, deeply interested—and also somewhat taken aback that Doug could make the offer on such a short acquaintance. (I don’t think that is how he typically finds authors for the books Canon publishes!)

Now, a year and countless work hours later, I can guess why Doug was so eager to offer this project to someone—anyone—even one he barely knew. Despite its difficulty, it has been a labor of love, not so much for the work, but for the intended benefactor—the church of Jesus Christ. The church is composed of families which make up *the* family of God. The children of the church grow up to become the children of God in maturity. If Christ was willing to give Himself for His bride to sanctify her, cleanse her, and present her holy and unblemished to Himself, what are a few hours to me and the contributors of this volume to bless and beautify the bride of Christ?

That has indeed been the constant theme and character of this effort—each contributor has a deep and sincere love for the church, for her children and her future. In putting together a roster of writers and making the calls to ask for their participation, I was blessed to see how eager and united these ministers, scholars, and churchmen were towards this effort. That they were willing to entrust this project to a neophyte such as I shows their eagerness (or recklessness, but that is hardly possible considering the godly maturity of these men) to see it accomplished. Each in his own place of ministry had been thinking similar thoughts, expressing similar concerns, and seeing a similar vision for the improvement of Christ’s church and kingdom. God has providentially brought us together to offer this book for the edification and improvement of the church.

Each one of the contributors is an ordained minister or elder in Christ’s church, and together they have a combined ministry of some two hundred and fifty years and a joint family of fifty-six children and thirty grandchildren. We share a deeply-held love and conviction for the church, her families, and her children. It is our desire that having read these essays you will be inspired to faith by God’s gracious promises to your children, both biological and covenantal, that you may be convicted of the need for humble reflection upon any previous sloth or error, that you will be equipped to implement faithful covenant nurture in your home and in your church, and finally, that you will be blessed to enjoy the godly fruit of your faithful nurture in your children and your children’s children. The promise of covenant succession is to you and your children. May you, like the apostle John, be able to say, “I have no greater joy than this, to see my children walking in the truth” (3 Jn. 1:4).

## Contributors

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