

What Is the Status of Children of Believers?

Genesis 17:1–16, Acts 2:29–39

I have preached on these texts many times; their importance to our understanding of the Covenant of Grace can hardly be exaggerated. Today I want to focus particularly on the status of the children of believers, and what this means for us in a practical way as we relate to the children of our congregation and to the children in our own families. I have a number of points today, first,

1. Children of believers are included in the Covenant of Grace.

A little background. In our Old Testament text (Genesis 17), Adam, Noah and the tower of Babel are all history. Back in Genesis 12 God appeared to Abram in Ur of the Chaldees and promised him, “I will make of thee a great nation.” Now, it is 24 years later. Abram is now almost 100 years old, his wife Sarai is almost 90, and the couple are still childless. Time is running out! When will they have the promised son? The LORD appears to Abram and says, “I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless.” He promises to make a covenant between himself and Abram and to multiply him exceedingly. Aware that he has been singularly blessed above the whole population of the human race, Abram falls on his face and worships. He is told that from this point forward his name will be Abraham, *father of a multitude*. God is renewing his earlier promise.

The key verse is verse 7; I will quote it in the words of the King James Version, “I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.” God promises to establish a covenant between himself, Abraham and his “seed.” The word “seed” is singular¹; it is ultimately fulfilled in Christ.² God’s covenant between Abraham and his seed will be “everlasting.”³ God gives two promises: (1) to be Abraham’s God, and (2) to give him the land of Canaan as an earthly possession. Obviously, the greater promise is that he will be Abraham’s *God* (a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee”), for that promise will continue into eternity future. Even into eternity future God will be his people’s God; he will never cease being his people’s God. To have the true God as one’s God is to have eternal life—what a promise!

In our New Testament text the apostle Peter is delivering his impromptu sermon on the day of Pentecost (from the Greek word meaning *fifty*; that is, fifty days after Christ’s resurrection—inclusive time, following the practice of first-century Jews, counting the first and fiftieth, what we would call the forty-ninth day—that is, the

¹ Singular as well in LXX (τοῦ σπέρματός σου) and Vulgate (“seminis tui”)

² “As he spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed (τῷ σπέρματι αὐτοῦ, singular) for ever” (Luke 1:55); “Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed (τῷ σπέρματί σου), which is Christ” (Gal. 3:16)

³ עוֹלָם בְּרִית עוֹלָם everlasting covenant (Gen. 17:7)

seventh Lord's day of the New Covenant era). Christ has just poured out his Spirit upon his church, enabling people who have never studied a foreign language to preach the good news of Christ in the respective languages of all the people-groups gathered in Jerusalem on that festive occasion.⁴ As Peter preaches, he quotes an extended section from Psalm 16 which includes these words: "For You will not leave my soul in Hades, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption. You have made known to me the ways of life." Peter asserts that David in so speaking foresaw "the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption." Peter then declares, "This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses." Here is testimony that Jesus is even now seated at the right hand of God and pouring out his Spirit upon his church, a fact established by the tongues as of fire on the heads of the 120 in the Upper Room, as well as by their fluently speaking languages they had never studied.

Peter's conclusion is powerful: "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ"—that is, Lord and Messiah. When they heard this, a large number in his audience were "cut to the heart"—profoundly moved by the Holy Spirit. They said to Peter and the other apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit Peter declares, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." But then, in words that directly reference God's promise made to Abraham some 2,000 years previously, he added: "For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call."

Notice these two quotes close-up. God had told Abraham, "I will establish My covenant *between Me and you and your descendants* after you." Now he declares through the apostle Peter, "the promise is *to you and to your children*." Don't miss the connection: in the Old Testament God's covenant is "*between Me and you and your descendants after you*"; in the New Testament "the promise is *to you and to your children*." Clearly, the children of believers are included in the covenant promise in both Old and New Testaments!

2. Children of believers need the gospel.

Obviously, there is a difference between adult believers and little children. Adult believers are able to understand and articulate the gospel; little children cannot. Adults are able to understand abstract concepts such as *sin, judgment, righteousness, repentance* and *salvation*; little children before the age of understanding cannot yet understand these things. Yet the gospel is not rocket

⁴ "Even unto the morrow after the seventh sabbath shall ye number *fifty days*; and ye shall offer a new meat offering unto the Lord" (Lev. 23:16). This day occurred on the morrow "after" the Old Covenant seventh-day Sabbath; that is, on the first day of the week—fulfilled perfectly in the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1)!

science; parents can teach it to their young children in simple terms: *Adam disobeyed, but Christ obeyed; I will follow Christ*. “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:31). Oh, how Christian parents must pray for wisdom to teach the gospel to their children! We must teach it to them every day of their lives, as well as take them to a Bible-believing church where they can hear the preaching of the gospel every Lord’s day. It is urgent that they understand! There is nothing more important than this.

Little children, as well as adults, need the gospel. They, like all of us, are sons and daughters of Adam, the first human, and the head of the fallen race. The Bible declares, “as in Adam all die” (1 Cor. 15:22). When Adam sinned, he brought guilt and condemnation upon himself and all his posterity. Paul explains: “Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so *death passed upon all men*, for that all have sinned” (Rom. 5:12). When Adam sinned, he acted on behalf of himself and all his children—the whole human race. Adam, the first human, was not born in sin. Significantly, he was not *born*; he had no human parent; rather, he was *created*—the special creation of God. Moreover, he was created “upright.”⁵ Adam had no sin nature, no predisposition to sin. The Bible specifically says that “Adam was not deceived” (1 Tim. 2:14). He knew what he was doing when he disobeyed God’s clear command and ate of the forbidden fruit. By his disobedience he brought guilt and condemnation upon all his descendants. Even newborn children, who have not personally disobeyed, inherit the guilt and condemnation of Adam’s first sin. It is inescapable. This truth is not understood by every Christian. Many well-meaning Christians speak of an “age of accountability” before which children are innocent—but no such concept is found anywhere in the Bible. Speaking of young children, the doctrinal statement of a very large Bible-believing denomination asserts that “as soon as they are capable of moral action, they become transgressors and are under condemnation.”⁶ But no! It is actually worse than that: because of the covenantal headship of Adam, from the moment of conception *every* human child is a transgressor and under condemnation. “*All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God*” (Rom. 3:23). All have sinned (in Adam) and continue to come short of the glory of God. This is the case with you, this is the case with me, and this is the case with all our children. It is inescapable. In itself it is very depressing news. But thankfully it is not the end of the story! “As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Cor. 15:22). Those who are in Christ—that is, under his covenantal headship, his elect, chosen in him before the foundation of the world—shall, by the Holy Spirit’s unstoppable working, be infallibly brought to Christ and made spiritually alive. We who were

⁵ Eccl. 7:29

⁶ <https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/> accessed 8-14-22

dead in trespasses and sins will be born again, given the gift of faith, and made new creatures in Christ. We will call upon him to save us.

In a few moments you will hear Christian parents presenting a child for baptism publicly acknowledge that “although our children are conceived and born in sin and therefore are subject to condemnation, they are holy in Christ, and as children of the covenant are to be baptized.” Their little daughter, at this point of her life, is incapable of articulating her own personal faith, but God’s Spirit, like the wind that blows where it wishes, is eminently capable of giving the gift of faith even to a very young child. Those who are born of the Spirit are new creatures in Christ; old things are passed away, and all things are become new.⁷ Regeneration is the work of the Spirit. The whole church must fervently pray that God would give the gift of faith to our covenant children. Why do we call them *covenant children*? Because they, like their believing parents, are by the grace of God participants in the Covenant of Grace.

3. What is the Covenant of Grace?

Scripture is the unfolding drama of God’s single Covenant of Grace. The various particular covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses and David—as well as the New Covenant prophesied in Jeremiah 31, fulfilled in Christ, and depicted in the Lord’s supper—are together called “the covenants of promise” (Eph. 2:12).

URCNA minister Daniel Hyde writes, “The essence of the covenant of grace is the same throughout the Old and New Testaments—God saves sinners by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. But its historical administration has varied by time and place. . . . It was administered in the Old Testament through what the New Testament authors describe as “types” and “shadows” (Heb. 8:5; 10:1), such as sacrifices, the priesthood, and the temple, all of which pointed to their reality, Jesus Christ.”⁸ The apostle Paul teaches in Colossians 2:17 that the Old Testament ceremonial law is “a *shadow* of things to come, but the *substance* is of Christ.” The same gospel—the same way of salvation—is present in both, but what was shadowy under the Old Testament is crystal-clear in Christ. When Christ came, the covenant of grace reached its highest point in what the Bible calls “the new covenant.”⁹ Under the covenant of grace Christ accomplished what Adam failed to do under the covenant of works. Adam *disobeyed*, but Christ *obeyed*, and brought salvation to all who look to him in faith.

When plans are made to build a new building, the public may see an architect’s rendering portraying the proposed building situated in its surroundings. The builder might put up a beautiful full-color sign showing the grand building that is planned.

⁷ 2 Cor. 5:17

⁸ Some thoughts in this section are adapted from Daniel R. Hyde, “What Is the Covenant of Grace?” <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/what-covenant-grace> accessed 8-13-22

⁹ Jer. 31:31; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:6; Heb. 8:8, 13; 9:15; 12:24

Passers-by can look over the construction site—at first only a giant excavation, a giant hole in the ground—and visualize what the finished building will one day look like. But the people who hope to one day live and work in that building cannot live and work in the architect’s rendering. No! The architect’s rendering is just a type and shadow of the completed building. Once it is completed, the finished building will far outshine the architect’s rendering. Only a fool will value the architect’s rendering over the finished building. The types and shadows of the Old Testament are like the architect’s rendering. They are fulfilled in Christ and the New Covenant.

The Bible presents a single Covenant of Grace. There is a single people of God, made up of men, women, boys and girls in every generation. All are saved exactly the same way: through faith in Christ. Old Testament saints were saved by believing the promised Savior who *was to come*. New Testament saints are saved by believing in the Savior who *has come*: our Lord Jesus Christ. There is one way of salvation, and one people of God: those who look to Christ by faith.

Are *you* looking to him by faith? Do you confess that you are a sinner with no hope of eternal life apart from Christ? Do you receive him by faith? Do you gladly submit to him as Lord and serve him with his church?

4. What is the status of the children of believers?

Now we come to the main question: What is the status of the children of believers? Some Christians view them as little heathen—no part of the church at all, but strangers to the covenants of promise, just like the Gentiles under the Old Testament. Paul writes in Ephesians 2: “at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.” What a sad condition! Ultimately, those who are aliens and strangers from the covenants of promise have no hope of eternal life. They will die without Christ and go to everlasting punishment.

But are the children of believers little heathen? The Bible presents a different picture. As we showed at the beginning of this sermon, in our Genesis text God’s covenant is “*between Me and you and your descendants after you*”; in our Acts text “the promise is *to you and to your children*.” Note the equivalency of the language. God promises to establish his covenant between himself and the person who comes to him by faith, *and that person’s children*. Clearly, the children of believers are included in the covenant promise in both Old and New Testaments! The children of believers are thus not little heathen but children of the covenant—covenant children!

What happens in baptism is that the children of believers receive the water of baptism, the sign and seal of the covenant of grace. In baptism God symbolically puts his mark of ownership upon the covenant seed. The child of at least one

believing parent is sanctified—that is, regarded as holy—by being the child of a believing parent. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 7:14, “The unbelieving husband is *sanctified* by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is *sanctified* by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are *holy*.” “Sanctified” is the verb form of “holy.” The unbelieving husband is “sanctified” by his believing wife. Having a faithful Christian wife is a great blessing to him; he not only gets to hear the gospel from her lips, he gets to see the gospel lived out in her life. As Peter says, “Wives, likewise, be submissive to your own husbands, that even if some do not obey the word, they, without a word, may be won by the conduct of their wives” (1 Pet. 3:1). In like manner, having a faithful Christian husband is a great blessing to an unbelieving wife; she not only gets to hear the gospel from her husband’s lips, she gets to see the gospel lived out in his life. Unless the unbelieving spouse is born again, he or she will not realize what a great blessing it was to have been providentially put into the same household with a spouse who models the gospel.

But in the same way that an unbelieving spouse is sanctified by his or her believing wife or husband, so a covenant child is sanctified by the great privilege of growing up in a Christian home. (Remember, the Bible specifically states that covenant children are “holy,” 1 Cor. 7:14.) Why is this? The covenant child gets to be part of a family where he or she hears the gospel from the lips of a believing father or mother. The covenant child gets to see the gospel *lived* by the parent. And the covenant child, at baptism, is received into the bosom of the visible church. Just as an infant child is nurtured and cared for by the mother—nursed from her breast, held in her bosom and cared for by her hands—so the covenant child is cared for by the church. The covenant child has the high and holy privilege of worshiping God with the congregation week by week, of being prayed for by the pastor and church members, of hearing the gospel methodically preached from the lips of the minister, of having the care and oversight of godly elders, of being reminded of his or her responsibility personally to confess Christ, and of being warned that if she ultimately rejects Christ, it will be to her eternal peril. As Peter writes, “It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them” (2 Pet. 2:21). How sad, to have grown up in a Christian home, to have known the truth, and ultimately to reject it!

Water baptism saves no one automatically. When a covenant child comes to the age of understanding—when he or she knows the difference between obedience and disobedience—then the covenant child has the responsibility to embrace and confess the faith as his or her own.

5. Application

Let us apply these truths to various categories of people hearing this message today.

If you do not belong to Christ, then what he wants you to do is come to him in faith, acknowledge him as your Savior and Lord, and present yourself for baptism into his church.

If you have been baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—but have never made a public profession of your faith, then you need to profess the holy faith and be received as a communicant member of a faithful church.

If you are a baptized believer and have professed your faith, then you need to *live* your profession in communion with Christ's church. You need to faithfully attend worship, sing, pray and listen to the Word with the congregation, build up the body, use the gifts that God has given you for his glory, support the church with your tithes and offerings, be hospitable, and live an honest and circumspect life before your neighbors, so as not to bring reproach upon the gospel.

If you are a believer in Jesus Christ and have young children, then you ought to present them for baptism, so that they can enjoy the blessings of the Covenant of Grace.

What is the status of the children of believers? They are (1) *included* in the Covenant of Grace, (2) they need the *gospel*, (3) there is a single covenant of grace—a single way of salvation—taught in the Bible, and (4) children of believers are covenant children—Christians, not little pagans. They are Christ's little lambs. A healthy flock has lambs, as well as sheep.

In summary, the Covenant of Grace is the story of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. It is the story of Christ and his great salvation, and the good news that a lost world desperately needs to hear. Amen.