

# Bringing the Gospel to Covenant Children

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# Bringing the Gospel to Covenant Children

*Joel R. Beeke*



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# Understanding 1 the Need

Church growth books and manuals flood the market. Surprisingly few address internal growth through the Holy Spirit sovereignly blessing the raising of children in covenantal truth. Yet, historically, Reformed Christians have acknowledged that their most solid, genuine church growth has been through the conversion of youth reared in the church. Charles Spurgeon wrote to Edward Payson Hammond, author of *The Conversion of Children*, “My conviction is that our converts from among children are among the very best we have. I should judge them to have been more numerously genuine than any other class, more constant, and in the long run more solid.”<sup>1</sup>

Andrew Bonar concurred. He also wrote to Hammond, saying, “In awakenings that have been given us, the cases of young people have been as entirely satisfactory as any cases we have had. If conversion be God’s work, in which the Holy Spirit reveals Christ to

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1. London: Morgan and Scott, n.d., 153.

the soul, surely His work can take place in children as really as in the old.”<sup>2</sup>

Children raised in the church need to hear the gospel, that is, the evangel, every bit as much as adults. They too need to be born again. They too need to be evangelized in dependency on the Holy Spirit. In this book we will focus on three concerns:

1. The need for evangelizing covenant children,
2. The content of such evangelizing, and
3. The means for such evangelizing.

### **Understanding the Need**

First, let me define the terms: By “covenant children” I mean those children born to at least one confessing parent (1 Cor. 7:14), who are baptized, and are growing up in the community of the church, with all the riches and privileges that entails, such as being placed under the prayers of the church and the preaching, invitations, and warnings of God’s Word.<sup>3</sup> By “evangelize” or “evangelizing” I mean presenting the gospel of Christ the Savior as the one thing needful in the lives of desperate sinners, including our covenant children, praying that by Spirit-worked faith and repentance they may be drawn to God through Christ, grow in Him, and

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2. Ibid., 158.

3. Susan Hunt, *Heirs of the Covenant: Leaving a Legacy of Faith for the Next Generation* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1998), 98–102; Kay Arthur, *Our Covenant God* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 1999).

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serve Him as Lord in the fellowship of His church and in the extension of His kingdom in the world.

Today, many parents who have confessed their faith and whose children have been baptized are not adequately evangelizing, i.e., bringing the gospel to, their covenant children. Reasons for this include the following:

- Some parents confuse their children by living inconsistent and impure lives. They have faulty views of their covenant responsibilities toward their children, which leads them to respond inappropriately to the spiritual concerns and questions of their children. They often misrepresent God, election, sin, and the gospel to their children.
- Some parents abuse their children by prompting premature professions of faith through the altar call system or through “easy believism.” They offer verbal assurance of salvation to their children without seeing biblical fruits of salvation. Or else, they err to the other extreme by treating their children like adults in this matter, expecting too much from them.<sup>4</sup>
- Some parents neglect their children by ignoring their spiritual needs, by not stressing the importance of the scriptural doctrines of grace, and by

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4. Charles Spurgeon, *“Come, Ye Children”*: A Book for Parents and Teachers on the Christian Training of Children (Pasadena, Tex.: Pilgrim Publications, n.d.), 14.

underestimating the challenge of our wicked and tempting times.<sup>5</sup>

- Some parents fail their children because they do not believe that God can convert them. They do not realize that more Christians have been converted in their youth than during any other stage of life. Such failures caused Robert Murray M'Cheyne to say in the 1850s, "Jesus has reason to complain of us, that He can do no mighty work in our Sabbath-schools, because of our unbelief. Let us pray for the children. Let us labour for the children. Let us hope for the children."<sup>6</sup>

A biblical view of our covenant children would greatly enhance our attempts to evangelize them properly. Before explaining that, let us first examine two errors that many evangelical parents make today in viewing their covenant children:

1. They *overestimate* the covenant relationship. Specifically, some parents overestimate the significance of their children's baptismal membership in the visible church. They view the covenant as a replacement for the regeneration and conversion of their children. This is particularly true of those who adhere to Abraham

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5. Timothy Sisemore, *Of Such is the Kingdom: Nurturing Children in the Light of Scripture* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2000), 9–22.

6. Hammond, 163.

Kuyper's view of covenant children called "presumptive regeneration." Kuyper taught that the covenant warrants the presumption that children of believers are regenerated from earliest infancy and possess saving grace unless they later reject the covenant.

The fruits of presumptive regeneration are often tragic. Parents who presume that their children are regenerate by virtue of the covenant see no need to tell their children that they must be born again and come to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. William Young calls this view "hyper-covenantism," because the relation of children to the covenant is exaggerated to the point that the covenant relation replaces the need for personal conversion. As Young points out, "Doctrinal knowledge and ethical conduct according to the Word of God are sufficient for the Christian life without any specific religious experience of conviction of sin and conversion, or any need for self-examination as to the possession of distinguishing marks of saving grace."<sup>7</sup>

Consequently, what our Reformed forefathers called experimental religion is deemed largely superfluous. Ultimately, though Kuyperian neo-Calvinists may not like to admit it, religious life becomes grounded in external church institutions and activities rather than in the soul's communion with God. "A system for breeding Pharisees, whose cry is 'We are Abraham's children,' could hardly be better calculated," Young concludes.<sup>8</sup>

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7. *Westminster Theological Journal* 36, 2 (1974):166.

8. *Ibid.*, 167.

Other Reformed, evangelical churches hold slightly different views of the covenant, such as dormant regeneration or covenantal regeneration. But in practice, these also place too much weight on externals of the covenant. They also minimize the necessity of a new birth, a personal relationship with God, and self-examination in the light of Scripture.

2. They *underestimate* the covenant. Many Baptists and some Reformed people reduce the covenant to insignificance. They do this by failing to recognize the importance of the covenantal relationship of children with God. From the New Testament era on, they believe, children of believers have no promise extended to them, and thus by implication have lost their special place of belonging to the covenant of Jehovah.

Surely this isn't the teaching of the New Testament. Scripturally, the covenant relationship of children to God is established from texts such as Genesis 17:7 ("And 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"), Acts 2:39 ("the promise is unto you, and to your children") and 1 Corinthians 7:14 ("for the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy"). God sovereignly and graciously establishes a redemptive relationship with believers and their offspring. It is unthinkable that in the fullness of the gospel era, the

children of the New Testament church would have less of a place in the covenant than children of Old Testament Israel. Practically, Christian parents of the New Testament church who cared deeply about their children would have clamored for clarity on the covenantal position of their children had God really intended them to have no promise, no sacramental sign and seal, and no rightful place among His people.

Some Reformed churches depreciate the covenant relation of children, not by rejecting infant baptism and the covenant relation altogether, but by reducing the sacrament to mere form and custom without insisting on what it should mean for the lives both of the parents and their baptized children. In such circles, the church has no eye for the promises of God in baptism, no heart for pleading those promises in prayer, and no clear understanding of how God earnestly calls covenant children to a lifestyle consecrated to Himself and separated from the world.

### **Properly Estimating the Covenant**

The covenant must be viewed neither as a substitute for regeneration and conversion nor as a matter of secondary importance. The covenantal relationship, which is confirmed in infant baptism, means the following to believing parents:

1. Baptized children must be born again. The Form for the Administration of Baptism tells us, “Our children are conceived and born in sin, and therefore are children of

wrath, insomuch that [they] cannot enter into the kingdom of God except [they] are born again. Our children... therefore are subject to all miseries, yea to condemnation itself.”<sup>9</sup> The Belgic Confession of Faith says:

We believe that, through the disobedience of Adam, original sin is extended to all mankind, which is a corruption of the whole nature, and a hereditary disease, wherewith infants themselves are infected, even in their mother’s womb, and which produceth in man all sorts of sin, being in him as a root thereof; and therefore is so vile and abominable in the sight of God that it is sufficient to condemn all mankind. Nor is it by any means abolished or done away by baptism, since sin always issues forth from this woeful source as water from a fountain.<sup>10</sup>

Baptism, the sign of one’s external relationship to the covenant, is not sufficient for our children’s salvation. Baptism affirms that the baptized child is placed under covenant privileges and responsibilities, but does not make the child a partaker of the saving, internal essence of the covenant. The external covenant relationship can be broken when a child grows to adulthood and abandons God’s Word and the corporate worship of His people. Baptized children must be linked to the internal, unbreakable essence of the covenant through

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9. *Doctrinal Standards, Liturgy, and Church Order*, ed. Joel R. Beeke (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1999), 126–27.

10. *Ibid.*, 12.



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the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit (John 3:3–7). Only then shall they be given persevering grace for the rest of their lives.

Without the Spirit's sovereign, saving work, all our efforts to train our children covenantally will do no more than produce Pharisees on the one hand or rebels on the other. Grace is not automatically conveyed from one generation to another through baptism and faithful covenantal child-rearing. Samuel Rutherford, a Scottish divine who stressed the value of the covenant of grace, wrote, "Grace always runs in the covenant of God, but it does not always run in the blood of the veins." Only the Holy Spirit can bless our efforts and grant our children a broken heart and a contrite spirit (Ps. 51:17).

2. Baptized children must be directed to Jesus Christ and His sacrifice as the only way of salvation. Christ's cleansing blood, symbolized by the cleansing water of baptism, is the only way by which our children may be saved. Baptism teaches us and our children "to loathe and humble ourselves before God, and seek for our purification and salvation without [i.e. outside of] ourselves," the Reformed liturgy says.<sup>11</sup> Question 72 of the Heidelberg Catechism says, "Is then the external baptism with water the washing away of sin itself? Not at all; for the blood of Jesus Christ only, and the Holy Ghost cleanse us from all sin" (Matt. 3:11; 1 John 1:7).

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11. *Ibid.*, 126.

3. Baptism demands new, heartfelt obedience to God. As the Dutch Reformed liturgy says, a true covenantal relationship with God requires repentance and love toward God, faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ, and a lifestyle of separation whereby “we forsake the world, crucify our old nature, and walk in a new and holy life.”<sup>12</sup> We must teach our children that they are not allowed to bring their “baptized foreheads” into ungodly places, to bond with ungodly people, or engage in ungodly activities.

We must also teach our children that being outwardly good and obedient falls short of their covenantal obligation to God. We must shepherd their hearts, teaching them daily by our words and example that they are called to holiness of heart and holiness of life. Paul tells us in 1 Timothy 4:4–5 that everything is to be sanctified. The call to holiness is an absolute, comprehensive, and exclusive call involving separation from sin and consecration to God from the heart. “My son, give me thine heart” (Prov. 23:26).<sup>13</sup>

4. Baptism requires parents to instruct their children in the Christian faith and the doctrine of salvation (see Q. 3 of the Form of Baptism). Numerous texts make the instruction of children the primary responsibility

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12. Ibid.

13. See Ted Tripp, *Shepherding a Child's Heart* (Wapwallopen, Penn.: Shepherd Press, 1995), 3–7; Joel R. Beeke, *Holiness: God's Call to Sanctification* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), 6–7.

of the church's parents (Ex. 12:24–27; Deut. 6:4–9; 2 Tim. 3:14–15).

Children are entrusted to us with the divine command that we are not to provoke them to wrath but to “bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4). We are not to raise them according to our own ideas of nurture and admonition but according to “the nurture and admonition of the Lord.” God says that we must train our children in every respect—spiritually, morally, socially, emotionally, and physically—on His behalf and according to His Word.

The entire book of Proverbs illustrates the manner and substance of parental covenantal nurture. The covenant home must be a temple in which God is acknowledged and worshiped (2 Sam. 6:20; Pss. 34:11–14; 90:16; 105:5–6; 118:15; 132:12; 147:13).<sup>14</sup>

5. Baptism teaches that God, in and through the Second Adam, Jesus Christ, is able and willing to be the Redeemer and Father of our children. “As they are without their knowledge partakers of the condemnation in Adam, so are they again received unto grace in Christ,” the Form concludes.<sup>15</sup> Our children are Christ's covenant seed (Ps. 22:30; Isa. 53:10). He calls them “an heritage of the LORD” (Ps. 127:3). They belong to Him. He has a claim upon them, even in their unregenerate

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14. Cf. Douglas Wilson, *Standing on the Promises: A Handbook of Biblical Childrearing* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 1997), esp. chapters 1, 4, 5.

15. *Doctrinal Standards*, 126.

state, just as He had a claim upon all the children of Israel, calling them His even when many were not truly born again (Ezek. 16:20–21).

6. God ordinarily works savingly among His covenant seed. Among the unchurched and uncovenanted, God occasionally draws children to salvation in Christ. Sunday schools and other evangelistic outreaches have been particularly helpful in this respect. As Psalm 68:5–6 says, God is “a father of the fatherless.... God setteth the solitary in families.” But among His covenant people, His saving grace is the norm, due to His amazing covenantal love and His blessing upon faithful parenting. As Herman Witsius wrote:

Here certainly appears the extraordinary love of our God, in that as soon as we are born, and just as we come from our mother, he hath commanded us to be solemnly brought from her bosom, as it were into his own arms, that he should bestow upon us, in the very cradle, the tokens of our dignity and future kingdom; that he should put that song in our mouth, “Thou didst make me hope when I was upon my mother’s breast: I was cast upon thee from the womb: thou art my God from my mother’s belly” (Ps. 22:9–10), that, in a word, he should join us to himself in the most solemn covenant from our most tender years: the remembrance of which, as it is glorious and full of consolation to us, so in like manner it tends to

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promote Christian virtues, and the strictest holiness, through the whole course of our lives.<sup>16</sup>

The covenant creates the context in which we make diligent use of the means of grace, and we believe that the God of the covenant often honors such use of His ordained means, though, being the sovereign Jehovah, He is by no means obliged to do so (Rom. 9:11–13). Nevertheless, Scripture affirms that the Holy Spirit richly blesses the evangelizing and nurturing of covenant children in knowledge, faith, love, and obedience (Gen. 18:19; Prov. 22:6). Faithful parenting, by the Spirit’s blessing, frequently issues in regeneration and a life of covenantal faithfulness (Ps. 78:1–8).<sup>17</sup>

Knowing such things should encourage us more to evangelize our children and to plead for their salvation, never giving God rest until they are all brought safely into His fold. Then, too, we must teach our covenant children and young people to plead with our covenant God on the basis of His promises to baptize them with the Spirit of grace and to grant them regeneration, repentance, and faith.

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16. *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 2:442.

17. See Richard Baxter, *A Christian Directory* (Grand Rapids: Soli Deo Gloria, 2008), 409–31, 449–54; Thomas Manton, *The Complete Works* (Worthington, Penn.: Maranatha, n.d.), 15:463–74; William Guthrie, *The Christian’s Great Interest* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1993), 38–39; Jacobus Koelman, *The Duties of Parents* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2009), chapter 4.

7. We can expect great things from a covenant-keeping God. Malachi 2:15 stresses that God desires a godly seed and Psalm 103:17 promises His mercy and righteousness to children's children.

Scripture offers many examples of God-fearing children. Exodus 20:6 affirms in Hebrew that God shows mercy unto "thousands of generations" that love Him and keep His commandments.<sup>18</sup> The evangelization and nurture of the church's children has been one of the greatest means of church growth ever since the church's beginning in Eden.

Church history also confirms God's faithfulness to His covenant children, shown by the God-honoring fruits in their lives. Thomas Boston, Matthew Henry, William Carey, David Livingstone, and John Paton were all the products of godly homes. Godly lines of succession, as can be found in the Edwards, Mather, and Hodge families in America, can easily be multiplied.<sup>19</sup>

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18. See Jonathan Neil Gerstner, *The Thousand Generation Covenant: Dutch Reformed Covenant Theology and Group Identity in Colonial South Africa, 1652–1814* (Leiden: Brill, 1991).

19. L. H. Atwater, "The Children of the Church and Sealing Ordinances," *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 29, 1 (1857): 13–16; Lewis Bevens Schenck, *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant: An Historical Study of the Significance of Infant Baptism in the Presbyterian Church in America* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale, 1940); D. Jones, "The Doctrine of the Church in American Presbyterian Theology in the Mid-Nineteenth Century" (Th.D. dissertation, Concordia Seminary, 1970), 49–86; Peter Masters and Malcolm H. Watts, *The Necessity of Sunday Schools* (London: Wakeman Trust, 1992), chapter 6; Robert S. Rayburn,

We do not expect children to act like adults, however (1 Cor. 13:11). Their spiritual experiences will usually be commensurate with their age, but the same fruits of grace—such as hatred for sin, love for Christ, and yearnings for holiness—that are evident in adults will be evident in them.<sup>20</sup>

Covenant theology does not negate the need for us to evangelize our children, nor does it discourage us from doing so. Scripture offers no guarantees for the salvation of our children, but the covenant of grace offers us a great deal of hope outside of ourselves in a sovereign, covenant-keeping God, who will not forsake the works of His own hands (Ps. 138:8). Covenant theology should encourage us to evangelize our children as we daily, prayerfully, and expectantly depend upon the triune God for His blessing upon our efforts.<sup>21</sup>

We cannot take this encouragement for granted, however. No matter how well you teach, train, and model godly living for your children, God is still sovereign and He rules (Isa. 14:27; 46:10; Rom. 9:11–13; Eph. 1:5–9). We must rest in the triune God who declares that all things are “of him, and through him, and to him” (Rom. 11:36), then trust that the Holy

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“The Presbyterian Doctrines of Covenant Children, Covenant Nurture, and Covenant Succession,” *Presbyterian* 22 (1996):95–96.

20. Cf. Archibald Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust reprint, 1975), 11–20.

21. *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust reprint), 4:340; Sisemore, 66–68.

Spirit is able and willing to sovereignly and graciously convert covenant children.

If God commanded that children hear the gospel repeatedly throughout the Old Testament era (Ex. 12:25–27; Deut. 30:19; Josh. 4:21–24), shouldn't we also tell the gospel to our children in the fullness of the New Testament age? If Christ commands the church to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature (Mark 16:15), shouldn't we also evangelize our covenant children? If Paul used every opportunity to carry the gospel to people all around the world, shouldn't we seize every opportunity to evangelize our own children (Acts 20:1–16)? If Paul felt it was his duty to bring the gospel to all men, making himself a servant to all (1 Cor. 19:19–22), shouldn't we become servants of the gospel to our own children to evangelize them?<sup>22</sup>

We may never opt out of our covenant responsibility to evangelize our children. Deuteronomy 6:7 says that we must teach God's Word to our children "diligently," that is, with steady, earnest attention, and energetic application and effort. Psalm 78:4–7 says, for God's covenant sake we are to show "to the generation to come the praises of the LORD, and his strength, and his wonderful works that he hath done, [so] that the generation to come might know them, . . . might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments" (cf. Pss. 71:17–18; 145:4).

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22. *Ibid.*, chapter 5.