

## 2.3 Covenant children: evaluative comments and implications (continued)

1A. What are the promises to Abraham and his offspring (Gen 12.1-3; 17.1-10)

2A. Do the Gentiles inherit all the promises God made to Abraham? What point are we trying to clarify when we say, “no, not *the promises*, but heirs *according to the promises*”?

3A. Therefore, the promises to Abraham are unique and this means what?

### 4A. Are the children of believers the children of Abraham (within the covenant)?

**1B. We must define what we mean by “children of Abraham” and “within the covenant.”**

1) Children of Abraham (sons, seed, offspring of Abraham; sons of the covenant)

We have already noted the uses of “children of Abraham”: the elect, eternal covenant children given to Christ (Jn 17.1-2; Heb 2.13, 16), NT believers, even Gentiles (children of Abraham and sons of God by faith, Gal 3.26, 29; 4.5-6), and the actual, literal offspring of Abraham (Gen 12.1-3; 17.1-10; Acts 3.12, 25; Rom 11.1, 16, 29). These may overlap.

2) Within the covenant

a) Under the care of the new Israel

Here, “within the covenant” means that the children are under the nurture and care of the covenant people (at home, where there is faith and at church where the faithful take them, and the covenant family nurtures them).

b) Within the kingdom of Christ

Here all families of the earth (men, women, and children) are “within the covenant” in the sense that all are within the universal kingdom of Christ (in the end, He will gather the sons of the evil one *out of* His kingdom, Mat 13.38, 41). In other words, to focus on the little children of NT saints, they are in His kingdom and the gospel covenant proclamation belongs to them. He is their covenant Lord, even if they do not profess faith. He is their Lord and the gospel calls them to acknowledge His Lordship over them (no one makes Jesus his Lord; in salvation, young and old, acknowledge Him as Lord).

**2B. Therefore, we can speak of the children growing up in the church as covenant children.**

NT believers are children of Abraham because they are children of the eternal covenant and because they are heirs of salvation according to promise (Heb 2.10-16; Gal 3.29). Therefore, little children growing up in Christian homes and in the Christian church are *under the nurture and care of God’s covenant people*. In that sense, we can speak of them as “within the covenant” and as covenant children.

This does not mean that they are the elect children of Abraham, following in the footsteps of his faith; we do not know if they are covenant children per the eternal covenant of redemption, and we do not know their profession until they make it. We know that faith comes by hearing the word of God and that these children have the special privilege of instruction from infancy in the word of God. Since the instruction comes from the covenant family of God, it seems okay to speak of the little ones as children of the covenant family or just children of the covenant.

**3B. However, should we call them the children of Abraham? Should we draw that inference from the fact that their parents are the children of Abraham?**

1) The uniqueness of the promise “to you and your offspring” indicates that it is an error of context to take this as a universal promise to all believing parents. The promise to the historical Abraham and his descendents by God’s choice through Sarah, Jacob, and David has a unique place in the history of redemption. We cannot properly use this promise to infer that profession of faith is not necessary to identify the new covenant people of God.

a) Abraham is the father of all who believe not just parents. This is how he is a “parent” model, namely, in his example of faith that his children are to emulate to become children of God.

b) Is the promise to his literal offspring no longer covenantally or historical-redemptively significant due to fulfillment (as the Baptist, Jewett claims, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace*, p. 115)? Pointedly, this promise continues to be covenantally significant in the blessing of the remnant of Israel and the blessing of all families of the earth through Christ.

2) If we take our cue from the explicit language of Galatians, then we should restrict “children of Abraham” to those who profess the faith of Abraham. Thus, one is Abraham’s child if and only if he is a believer (faith is both necessary and sufficient). Not seeing the heart, we must consider those who profess faith to be the children of Abraham (profession of faith is both necessary and sufficient for the church to identify the new covenant people of God).

3) If calling the children (growing up in the church) covenant children means that we are to treat them as little Christians and the children of God, then this language oversteps its bounds. In the directory for public worship (in the Westminster Standards) on baptism, we have the following statement that baptized infants are Christians, and that is why they are baptized. They are Christians on the basis of “the promise” and so we are to treat them as Christians:

**Before baptism, the minister is to use some words of instruction...shewing...that the promise is made to believers and their seed; and that the seed and posterity of the faithful, born within the church, have by their birth, interest in the covenant, and right to the seal of it, and to the outward privileges of the church...that children by baptism, as solemnly received into the bosom of the visible church, distinguished from the world...united with believers...that they are Christians, and federally holy before baptism, and therefore are baptized... (*Confession*, 382-83).**

Reply: this boils down to the question: who in the NT does God own as His people, as those who belong to Christ? It distills to the question: “who does God address when He says, ‘I will be their God and they will be my people’?” Who does God own as His people?

1 Cor 6.14-18 (quoting, “I will be their God and they will be my people”): He owns and is Father to those who believe and who walk in righteousness instead of unbelief, lawlessness, and darkness-then I will be father to you and you will be sons and daughters to me (v. 14).

Paul (Rom 1.6) tells us that those called to Christ are the ones that belong to Him. How do we identify them? Calling is to faith (cf. effectual calling). We identify the new covenant people by the faith that they display and profess (thus, the church is the household of faith, Gal 6.10). The called are those who love God (Rom 8.28). Saints are such by calling that is into fellowship (Rom 1.7; 1 Cor 1.2); calling is to faith, so, sinners enter fellowship with God and His people by faith. Adopted sons by the Spirit *through faith* call God “Father” (Gal 3-4). For Peter, people of the new covenant nation and royal priesthood are called out of darkness and into the light to proclaim – confess – God’s praise (1 Pet. 2.9). The promise of the Spirit (and forgiveness) comes to all (literal) children that God calls to Himself (Acts 2.38-39), to sons and daughters who call on Him (2.17, 21).

Jesus calls particular people sons of God – the peacemakers, and those who show all the marks of blessedness of the Beatitudes (Mat 5.1-11). He tells us that the sinner who acknowledges his spiritual poverty and unworthiness is the one who is worthy of the title “your son” (a son of God the Father, Lk 15.21). The apostle John says that the ones who we call the children of God are those who make that fact evident in the practice of righteousness, which involves love, commandments, and the fulfilling the command to believe (1 Jn 3.1, 23; 2.29; we are assured if they practice +R, and on that basis, we consider them born of God & into sonship).

## Implication

New Israelites by profession of faith (outwardly Abraham’s children of fulfillment) are the covenant people (Christians), but the true or spiritual new covenant Jew (the true Christian) is the one who has a heart like Abraham. The reason for the shift to profession of faith is the fact that now both Jews and Gentiles become children of Abraham by faith, and ministerial administration can only look at the outward profession.

## Next

How do we nurture the little ones if we do not think of them as little Christians? Does this cut the heart out of meaningful nurture in the Lord?