

## 2.4 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

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.”

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

3B. Children of believing parents become the children of Abraham by faith (ID: by profession of faith)

### 5A. How do we nurture “covenant” children?

#### 1B. Is some judgment of status necessary to guide nurture?

Are they pagans or little Christians? We know that by natural birth, they are fallen in Adam and they need the redemption that comes only through Christ. We also know that natural birth does not make anyone a child of God (Rom 9.8; it never did and it does not do so now). The question that emerges in this context is this: “Should we *consider or count* the little ones as the children of God by their natural birth to believing parents?” Answer: we should count as children of God those children who confess with their mouths that Jesus is risen Lord (Rom 10.9-10) and who do so out of recognition of their spiritual poverty and need of Christ (Mat 5.3)

How can we teach little ones from their earliest years to obey their parents in the Lord? How can we teach them to obey the Lord by obeying their parents if they are pagans and He is not their Lord? Must we assume that they are Christians as the only way to instruct them *in the Lord*? How do you teach a pagan to pray to God as his Father? How could we rightly have him pray this way in unbelief? We do need some way to focus the status of little ones to guide nurture.

#### 2B. What is the status of little ones born to Christian parents?

1) It is helpful to begin with the fall in Adam and therefore to think of them as fallen image bearers of God; note, they are His image bearers, though marred and fallen, and they need restoration in the image of God.

2) Christ is their Lord. Jesus is universal Sabbath king and covenant Lord; He is their Lord for He is Lord of all families and persons on earth (everyone is in His kingdom, Mat 13.38). No one makes Him his or her Lord. Therefore, we call our children (as little ones, teens, and adults) to *acknowledge* Jesus as their Lord by faith (by confession of faith and repentance). In this way, we call them to become the children of Abraham by faith.

3) The gospel promise, the overture of grace of the new covenant, belongs to them. It is for them in its proclamation to all families (to all men, women, and children) of the earth. In calling them to become children of Abraham by faith, we call them to own the gospel of the new covenant that comes to them in the free offer.

4) The gospel of God’s love is for them and to them in the gifts of the sunshine and the rain. In the context of God’s invitation to fellowship that He gives in creation (Ps 19.1-6), we call the little ones to confess, “God made all things, God made me, and all things,” to receive the comfort of His love in the Scriptures (Ps 19.7-14), and to claim the Lord as “my rock and redeemer” (Ps 19.14).

Is there anything else to add to this list?

#### 3B. Can we teach the little ones in the cradle to sing, “Jesus loves me this I know”?

Yes, we can, and should, because nurture at home and within the covenant community displays His love for them. Moreover, He loves all people by sending the benefits of the rain and sunshine. Furthermore, we can teach them to sing, “He loves me, *this I know*” by calling them to faith (believe and you have eternal life): “You can say, ‘I know the Lord and His special saving love for me’ by entrusting yourself to Him.” The last verse of “Jesus loves me” makes the call of the gospel clear: “If I love Him, when I die He will take me home on high.”

#### 4B. Can we train our children to pray to their Father in heaven?

If they are fallen in Adam, and if we do not take the promise to Abraham and his offspring as a promise to Christian parents and their children (with specific covenantal

significance for that relationship that causes us to call them Christians and children of God), then how can we teach them to pray to “our” Father and “their” Father in heaven (to “my Father”)? Must we wait until the little ones make a profession of faith in Christ before we teach them to pray to their God and Father?

The fact is that though they are covenant breakers in Adam, they are in the kingdom of Christ, the covenant Lord of all. Moreover, the promise of the new covenant gospel belongs to them in the universal offer. Furthermore, they have a place “under the nurture and care of God’s covenant people, the household of faith. These things ground a “yes” to teaching little ones to pray to their Father in heaven.

If we emphasize that God is the Father in heaven, then He is the only Father and He is the Father of the entire earth and of all people. All people are His children, but in the fall, all are His children in rebellion against His fatherhood and against their sonship. They are all prodigals who waste their father’s goods. God is their alienated Father. Therefore, when we teach little ones to pray to God in heaven by saying “our Father” or “my Father,” we are teaching them to say and acknowledge the truth. We are calling them to acknowledge God as Father, to own Him as their Father. We are calling them to submit to the Father to become His celebrated redeemed and reclaimed prodigals. Therefore, we always include in our teaching of the little ones that when they address God as Father, they come unworthy in themselves and we thus teach them to pray, “Father, I am unworthy to be your son.” There is also a warning to give: “God is your Father, but if you do not acknowledge Him and submit your all to Him, then you stand in rebellion against your Father, and that will lead to punishment, to a mess that is worse than the mess in the far country.” Critically, we teach them to pray in Jesus name; we teach them that Jesus is “Jacob’s ladder” who brings young and old to God. We teach them that Jesus is the way to the Father, the only way, and the Father welcomes all who come in Jesus’ name.

### **Implication**

The first question, even before addressing the question of infant baptism, is the question of the status of little ones growing up in the churches. A critical fork in the road on this point is the fact that they are fallen image bearers of God in need of restoration in that image, they are rebellious children of God, they are prodigals who need to return to their Father and say, “I am not worthy to be your child.” It is important to decide the basis on which we count these little ones to be little Christians, and the acknowledgement of unworthiness seems to be a central plank in that basis.

In this light, we can say without fear of contradiction that godly nurture at home and church is far more important than the questions of infant baptism and the validity of baptism; these questions are surely subordinate. Therefore, parents ought to strive for the ideal of a healthy diet on the doctrines of grace and the promises of the new covenant for themselves as teachers to their children in the warp and woof of the home and church. Those who love their children should consider this ideal carefully. To illustrate: if circumstances indicate that that could only be accomplished in a church that has a practice of baptism different from the believing parents (in either direction), then Christian parents should opt for the reformed diet in order to be diligent and make the best use of God appointed means of grace. This is a matter of milieu; it is critical for healthy spiritual growth in the lives of believers and their children.

### **Next**

Of course, such a decision for the ideal must be in good conscience, which leads to the next point that is also prior in importance to the baptism debate, namely, a broadminded view of baptism.