

Our Children – Mission or Nurture?

Glenn N. Davies

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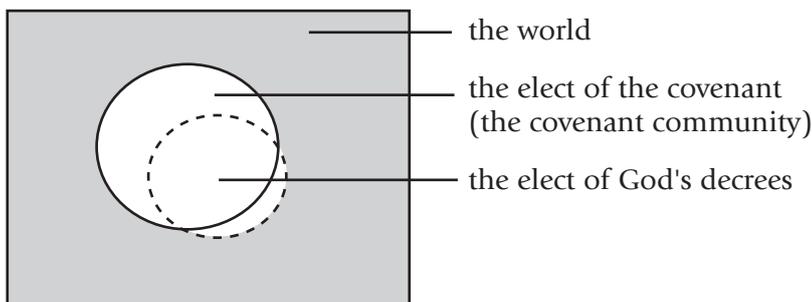
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After two years in parish ministry at St Stephen's Willoughby in Sydney, Glenn was invited to join the faculty of Moore College as a lecturer in Old Testament.

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Our Children – Mission or Nurture?

Introduction

It is easier in this State to gain a marriage licence than it is to gain a driver's licence. The latter is gained after passing through a number of training segments. First, a driver knowledge test must be passed before you are issued with a learner's permit. After a minimum period of six months and at least fifty logged hours of instruction under the guidance of an experienced driver, you are eligible to take a driver ability road test before you are issued with a provisional licence. However, this provisional licence with its various restrictions only lasts for eighteen months. After a minimum of one year and the successful completion of a hazard perception test, you are eligible for a second provisional licence, with similar restrictions. It is only after a further two years and the successful completion of the driver qualification test that you are finally able to receive an unrestricted licence in NSW. A minimum period of three and a half years, though in practice it can take up to six years. On the other hand, to gain a marriage licence, you need only give 30 days' notice to the relevant authorised celebrant and, without training, testing or instruction you are free to marry.

The licence to marry is effectively (though not exclusively) the prelude to having children. Strangely, in our modern society, we see less need to train people in the rearing of children as we do in the rightly regulated area of driving a car. Presumably we see the dangers of bad driving, but we have been somehow less concerned about the effects of bad parenting. Yet the rearing of children is arguably one of the most important aspects of a healthy society. It is the means whereby the society reproduces itself. Unless we pass on to the next generation what we have learned, we condemn them to make the same mistakes that their forebears have made.

As the psalmist reminds us 'Children are a heritage from the Lord' (Psalm 127:3). They are a precious gift from God. We do well to treasure such a gift and value the children that God has given us.

The purpose of this lecture is to consider the nature of the heritage from God that our children represent. The 'our' of the title of this lecture is a personal reference to those children whom God has given us, as parents or guardians. This will be the primary focus of the lecture, though we shall briefly draw out the implications for teaching children at church or school. In broad terms it means to address the question: 'What is our responsibility for *our* children?' More specifically, to answer the question 'How will our children have faith?' In the language of Proverbs 22:6, it is to understand how to apply the charge given to parents in Ancient Israel: 'Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.' In order to address this question, we shall consider four models of viewing our children in terms of their relationship to God. These four approaches may be broadly described as the sacramental model, the catechetical model, the confessional model and the covenantal model.

1. Four Models for Raising Children

1.1 The Sacramental Model

The word sacrament, according to the Catechism, is 'an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given unto us, ordained by Christ himself, as a means whereby we receive the same, and as a pledge to assure us thereof.' Strictly speaking, there are only two sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper. Although the 39 Articles acknowledge five other 'commonly called' sacraments, they are not sacraments of the gospel. Nonetheless, the Oxford Movement of nineteenth century England revived the language of sacrament to describe the nature of the church and its ministry. This development identified the church as the bearer of divine life. The church as sacramental community is the medium and bearer of spiritual life. Any concept of individualism must be grounded in the organic life of the church – the body of Christ.

By baptism the children of the church come to participate in that organic life and are thereby inserted into that sacramental community. Baptism is therefore closely identified with regeneration. Parents are to believe that their children are now part of the sacramental community. Their children have entered the life of the church through baptism and the divine life is formed in them by the church. Thus they are prepared for the second 'sacrament' of the church, namely confirmation, in order that they might eat and drink at the Lord's table in holy communion. Only then are they complete as members of the church.¹ Evangelism consists of calling men and women into the organic life of the church and its sacraments.

The growth of the child is nurtured by the rites of the church and the means of grace. While the education of the child in the ways of God will vary from parent to parent, the essential qualities of being a part of the church become the main focus. They are taught that baptism has removed original sin and that they are therefore secure in God's family through their participation in the sacramental life of the church. Nurture rather than mission is a defining feature of the sacramental model.

1.2 The Catechetical Model

One of the most influential books of the 19th century on this topic was *Christian Nurture* written by Horace Bushnell (1847). Here the educative model of catechesis is seen as the basis upon which children grow into faith. The environment of their parents provides the groundwork of the nurture of the child. Thus the children are presumptively Christian and are to be brought up as Christians, nourished by the education of their parents. Such an approach sees little need for repentance or confession. Rather the life of the family is the means of grace. Children are not taught the need for regeneration in baptism (as in the sacramental model), but the need to be nurtured in the faith. The family rather than

1. Baptism is 'radically incomplete without its positive complement of confirmation and its fulfilment in the communion.' Dom Gregory Dix, "The Seal" in the Second Century', *Theology* Jan (1948), 7ff.

the church is the significant factor of Christian experience for the child. In fact, for Bushnell the evangelisation of children is an unnecessary exercise. Thus nurture again is the dominant feature of this approach with an accent on education as the means of grace. Where the sacramental model seeks to divinise nature, the catechetical model seeks to humanise the divine.

1.3 The Confessional Model

The confessional model on the other hand recognises that all children are born in sin and in need of salvation. Even those born to Christian parents are in need of God's grace, which comes through profession or confession of faith. Only the confession of the lips that Jesus is Lord will evidence belief in the heart (Romans 10:9). The goal of evangelism is an elect and regenerate church membership. Where such a goal exists baptised children are a problem. This is the position of Reformed Baptists, who acknowledge the reality of predestination but desire proof of election before accepting a person into membership.² The Puritans in a similar manner identified the children of believers as 'heirs apparent' of salvation, awaiting the security of their status through profession. Many Anglicans also hold this view, despite advocating infant baptism, but seeing such a rite as promissory of things to come rather than a statement of things as they are. Thus Roger Beckwith prefers to speak of a baptised infant as 'a potential Christian only', not a Christian 'in the full sense'.³ It is only the confession of the child, often seen as the result of a crisis in the life of the person, marking a point of conversion, which allows them to be received into the fellowship of the church. On this model, the withholding of holy communion until such a time of confession is made is the natural concomitant.

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2. 'Our children are born into the Adamic race and we dare not presume that they have been regenerated until they give real evidence of the saving change', David Kingdon, *Children of Abraham* (London: Carey Publications, 1973), p. 99.
 3. Roger Beckwith, 'The Age of Admission to Communion', *The Churchman* 85/1 (1971), 17.

Thus mission is the defining feature of this model. Christ is constantly put before these children until a prayer is prayed to welcome Jesus into their life. Without the evidence of such a prayer, the children are treated as ‘potential Christians’ or worse, non-Christians, in need of Christ and in need of salvation.

1.4 The Covenantal Model

The covenantal model is founded upon the promises of God: the one who promises to be God to us and to our children. Thus baptism does not mysteriously make a person a believer, any more than education makes a person a believer. Rather it is God who joins people to himself. However, God has appointed families as the cradle of his covenant. This was true of Adam and his family, Noah and his family, Abraham and his family. While the distinctives of the Mosaic covenant with the attendant nationalism of Israel do not carry over into the new covenant, the basic framework of family units as found in the tribes of Israel continues across the testamental divide. The notion of covenant is built upon promise, God’s promise to be our God. It is a relationship under sanctions. It is only upon the reality of this relationship that sacraments, education and confession can be rightly seen.

The sacrament of baptism, therefore, is the mark of God upon a child, signifying that he or she is a child of the covenant. It recognises that the child needs the washing of regeneration (Titus 3:5), and accordingly declares that the child is a recipient of such grace.⁴ It is a means of grace, in that the faith of the parents in the promises of God identifies their child as belonging to God’s family, a fully fledged member, in the same way that the child is a full member of their human family.⁵ Baptism signs and seals what

4. Note the declaration by the minister following the baptism of an infant. “Seeing now, dearly beloved brethren, that this child is regenerate and grafted into the body of Christ, let us give thanks unto Almighty God for these benefits, and with one accord make our prayers unto him, that this child may lead the rest of his life according to this beginning.” *Book of Common Prayer* (1662).

5. The child is not a member of God’s family because of the parents’ faith; rather, their faith lays hold of the promise that God has made to them *and* their children, that they belong to him.

God has promised. Hence, believing parents treat their children as Christians. The education and nurture of such children in the fear and knowledge of the Lord is the consequent privilege of their status as members of Christ's church. There is no necessity of a crisis of conversion in the life of the child, any more than there is need for a crisis of realisation as to who their parents are. While certain information will naturally raise a more profound understanding of their biological origin as children of their parents' union, so their growth in understanding of God's Word will enhance their realisation that they are children of God and heirs of eternal life through the grace of Christ.

The process of gospel apprehension in the life of the covenant child is the process of discipleship. The importance of nurture for the covenant child is likewise part of that process. The mission of the parents is to bring up their children in the fear and knowledge of the Lord. As the gospel shapes the life of the parents so it will shape the environment in which the children are reared. The mission of Christian parents is to recognise and realise the inclusion of their children in God's covenant of grace, baptising them in the name of the triune God, in accordance with Christ's commission and teaching them all the commandments of Christ (Matthew 28:18–20).⁶

2. Theological Foundations for a Covenantal Approach

2.1 The Witness of Scripture

Children in the Old Testament were inheritors of *all* the blessings that belonged to Israel. Circumcision set them apart as God's children, separate from the world, bearing a sign of national identity, as the inheritors of the faith of Abraham. However, circumcision was also a sign or seal of the righteousness that

6. As Graeme Goldsworthy aptly puts it, "The nurture of Christian children should be clearly distinguished from evangelism among outsiders even though the gospel is central to both." "The Pastoral Application of Biblical Theology", *In the Fullness of Time: Biblical Studies in Honour of Archbishop Robinson*, ed D Peterson & J Pryor (Homebush West, NSW: Lancer, 1992), 308.

comes by faith (Romans 4:11). While the new covenant did away with the necessity of this outward sign for Gentiles, the reality of which it spoke is constitutive of the new covenant, where believers experience ‘a circumcision made without hands’ (Colossians 2:11). Moreover, a new sign of water baptism now marks out believers, a sign of identification with Christ in his death and resurrection (Matthew 28:19–20; Romans 6:4; Colossians 2:12).

Under the new covenant, the inclusion of the children of believers in the family of God continues (Acts 2:39), even though circumcision is no longer required. The blessings of salvation equally belong to such children under both the old and new covenants. Thus when Paul writes to the ‘saints’ at Ephesus, some of these saints are children (Ephesians 1:1; 6:1; cf Colossians 1:2; 3:20), and Paul’s admonition to them is for obedience ‘in the Lord’. Such an exhortation is not made to pagans or unbelievers, but only to those who are in Christ and members of the covenant community. To be sure, such children need education in the ways of the covenant and the gospel is always the context of this nurture, but the children do not need evangelising any more than Christian adults need evangelising. They are already holy, otherwise they would be unclean (1 Corinthians 7:14; cf Malachi 2:15). It is the unclean who are outside the blessings of God’s covenant grace and who are in need of evangelising.

The children of unbelievers, on the other hand, are without salvation and without Christ. Of course, it may please God to save some who die in infancy, but we have no warrant from Scripture to declare that such children are saved. However, if a child of the covenant dies in infancy, then we have good warrant from Scripture to declare that the child is with Christ (cf. 2 Samuel 12:23). If this were not the case then there would be little point in baptising our children. For in baptism we declare them to be forgiven, grafted into Christ and members of his church.⁷ They

7. At the end of the service for the Ministration of Publick Baptism of Infants (BCP), it reads: “It is certain by God’s Word, that children which are baptized, dying before they commit actual sin, are undoubtedly saved.”

are not in a halfway house, until the age of discernment. Rather, they *are* Christians, part of the covenant people of God, and their baptism declares this to be so. Baptism is a symbol of belonging to Christ and being joined to him (1 Corinthians 12:13) and it conveys the same promises to each candidate, regardless of whether they be adult or infant.⁸

2.2 Practical Considerations

The raising of covenant children is not an extraordinary concept. Australian citizens raise Australian-born children. It is not that their children need to *become* Australian, they *are* Australian – a gift from the Government! Nonetheless, parents rightly impart to their children the consciousness that they *are* Australian. They nurture the child's sense of being Australian. They accordingly learn Australian values, the Australian Anthem and the colours of our Olympic team. In similar manner, children bear the surname of the family. They don't choose their family name, any more than they choose their own family. Yet no loving parent is content to think that as long as their children own their family name, all will be well! On the contrary, they teach them the virtues and values that the family hold dear, so that their children might both honour and emulate these qualities in their own beliefs and behaviour.

God likewise treats us as members of his family, imparting his values to us by his Word and Spirit. The responsibility of parents is likewise to train up their children in the fear and knowledge of the Lord (Proverbs 22:6). Thus we can teach our children the Lord's Prayer from the earliest age, knowing that the opening words are true for them: '*Our* Father in heaven ...'. For God is their Father in heaven who loves them and has forgiven them. Moreover, faithful

8. This is not the place to defend the practice of baptising infants of believers, rather it is to demonstrate that the practice of infant baptism among the Reformed Churches, let alone most of Christendom, eloquently testifies to their incorporation into Christ's body, the church. For a defence of infant baptism see Pierre Marcel, *The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism*, tr P. E. Hughes (London: James Clarke & Co., 1953); John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1962); Colin Buchanan, *Infant Baptism and the Gospel* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1993).

parents teach their child the importance of repentance and faith, not as a means of entering into relationship with God, but as the way of the covenant, the way that members of God's family behave. If it were not the case, then every parental exhortation to obedience becomes an invitation to obey in the child's own strength, rather than as a response to God's grace. Parents don't love their children because their children are obedient. Parental love is prior to a child's obedience. It is because the children know that they are loved that generates the fruit of obedience. Furthermore, such fruit is Spirit-borne in a covenant home, for is it pleasing to the Lord (Colossians 3:20).

The dynamic of the covenant is 'grace—response'. God's grace is prior and it is the child's learning of that priority that enables him or her to respond with faith and obedience. This is the principle behind God's mandate to Abraham (Genesis 18:19): 'to charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice; so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him.' Abraham does not raise Isaac with a view to an adolescent crisis of faith, or a prayer to let Yahweh into his heart at Camp Melchizedek. Rather, it is in the ordinary course of life that Abraham shares with Isaac that he is an inheritor of the kingdom of God, a child of the covenant, teaching him how to respond to God's grace in faith and obedience. Thus Moses exhorted God's people to love the Lord their God with all their heart, with all their soul and with all their strength. God's commandments are to be upon their heart. 'You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.' (Deuteronomy 6:7). Covenant training teaches first the priority of God's grace and then the appropriate response to such grace, the obedience of faith.

However, one of the problems that parents often face is the disobedience of their children, which causes them to doubt their child's salvation. What parents often fail to realise, of course, is that they too are disobedient. The only difference

being that adults have learned to mask their disobedience, whereas children are yet to learn the subtleties of how to disguise their sins. Sin is unfortunately an ever-present reality for the saints. The more vital question is how do we deal with sin: do we persist in it or repent of it and seek God's forgiveness and strength to flee from it?

Psalm 128 declares: 'your wife shall be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table.' Olive shoots may not yet bear the mature fruit of the older branches, but they are still part of the vine. They are not bramble bushes waiting to be grafted in! The discipline of love will chastise the disobedient with patience and forgiveness (Proverbs 22:15), for that is the nature of God's love towards us (Proverbs 3:11–12; Hebrews 12:5–6). Children, like adults, need to learn the responsibilities of being in Christ and the demands of obedience, but they also need the reassurance of knowing that they belong and that they are loved, thus providing the fertile soil in which they can blossom and mature.

3. The Language of the Covenant

However, an objection to this line of reasoning might well be raised. Since experience demonstrates that some children of the covenant grow up rebellious and depart from the faith, how can we claim that they were 'in Christ' in the first place? This is not an insignificant objection and needs to be addressed. Yet it is not a new problem.

Consider Israel who were described as God's 'royal priesthood and holy nation' (Exodus 19:6) and 'sons of God' (Deuteronomy 14:1). The language of the covenant described the whole nation in this way, and this description included everyone (including infants). Thus the Old Testament describes Israel's exodus from Egypt as a salvation for all the people. Paul even describes their passage through the Red Sea as a baptismal experience (1 Corinthians 10:2). All (including infants) were baptised into Moses. Moreover they all participated in Christ through the spiritual food (manna)

and the spiritual drink (water from the rock).⁹ Yet God was not pleased with them all (1 Corinthians 10:5). In other words, not *all* Israel were finally saved, even though *all* were baptised and *all* participated in Christ. Covenant membership carries with it covenant responsibilities. Not all those who participate in covenant relationship with God are finally saved.

There is a mystery here, for we know that God has elected some to salvation and not all those who are in the covenant community are elect according to God's decrees. Yet those who are faithful to the covenant prove their election (2 Peter 1:10). However, the Bible still uses the language of salvation to describe all who are part of the covenant community, even though not all will be finally saved. The reason for this is that God has not revealed to us who are his elect from the perspective of his decrees (Deuteronomy 29:29). Rather, what God has revealed are those who are elect from the perspective of the covenant. Moreover, God uses the characteristics of salvation to describe *all* those in covenant with him, even though some will break covenant with God and fail to gain their inheritance.

The Old Testament gives clear expression to this distinction. For while Israel is described as a holy nation (Exodus 19:6), not all within Israel are holy. In Paul's words, 'not all of Israel are Israel' (Romans 9:6). In other words, the covenant community is not coextensive with those who will be saved at the last day. However, this distinction is not restricted to the old covenant. When Jesus speaks of the discipline of a brother who fails to repent he describes a process which sees the change in status from 'brother' to 'Gentile' (Matthew 18:15-17). In other words, the one who began as a covenant member is later excluded and declared to be outside the covenant community, no longer an inheritor of the kingdom of God. Whether that person is elect from the perspective of the decrees is not the concern of the church in the

9. For the relevance of this passage to the practice of admitting children to communion, see Glenn N. Davies, 'The Lord's Supper for the Lord's Children', *RTR* 50/1 (1991), 12-20.

exercise of discipline. It may be that the person under discipline repents and is restored to the fellowship of the church; it may be that he continues in his unrepentant ways and receives God's final judgment. However, what is important is that the church does not try to discern who is elect and who is non-elect, from the perspective of God's decrees. Rather, the church discerns who is in the covenant and who is not. Those in covenant membership are those who are marked as Christ's disciples (by baptism) and who live their lives in accordance with the commandments of Christ (Matthew 28:19–20).

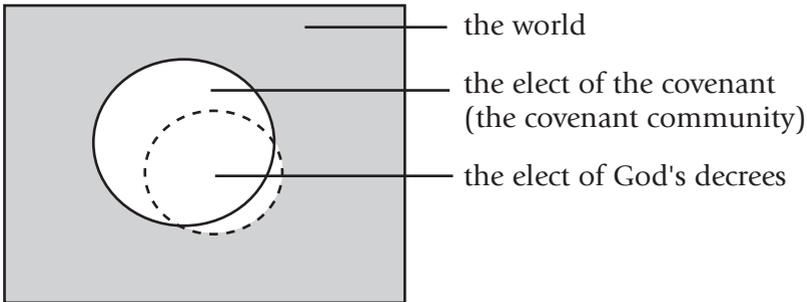
We only know who are members of the covenant community. Yet it is this community that the New Testament describes as being 'in Christ', 'saints' and 'saved'. The apostles can even describe the recipients of their letters as 'elect of God' (Colossians 3:12; 1 Peter 1:2; 2:4; cf 2 John 13). In other words, the language of 'saint' has both a decretal meaning and a covenantal meaning, which are not coextensive. This is the language of the covenant. God does not allow us (let alone require us) to discern who are his elect from the perspective of his decrees. However, we may well discern who are the elect from the perspective of the covenant. When a person confesses faith in Christ, we cannot see their heart (Romans 10:9). Rather we believe their profession and accept them as members of God's church. We declare them to be a Christian.¹⁰

Jesus spoke in such covenantal language when he described Judas as one of the twelve who would sit on thrones judging the tribes of Israel (Matthew 19:28), even though such an event was not to be Judas' destiny. Yet at the time Judas was part of the covenant community, he shared in the apostles' ministry and was one of them (Acts 1:17). In the imagery that Jesus used in his farewell discourse, Judas was a fruitless branch (John 15:1–8). Those branches which do not bear fruit are cast forth as a branch and burned. Yet Jesus describes them as branches *in union*

10. In Philippians 4:3 Paul describes his co-workers as those whose names are written in the book of life, however, this was not an insight into the decrees of God but a covenantal description of his team, one of whom was later to apostasise (2 Timothy 4:10).

with the vine before they are taken away. The imagery of the vine is covenantal imagery, originally applying to Israel (cf. Psalms 80:8–19; Isaiah 5:1–7), demonstrating how God exercises judgment *within* his people. Yet the doctrine of election is not compromised by this figure, for it is a vine of the covenant rather than of the decrees that Jesus is describing. The covenant community is not coextensive with the elect of God's decrees.

We may diagram this understanding in the following way.



When the Bible describes the community of faith as the people of God, it is describing the covenant community, and it does so with the language of salvation. However, as in the Old Testament where 'not all of Israel are Israel' (Romans 9:6), so too in the New Testament not all who are members of the covenant community will be saved at the last day, *even though the language of salvation may properly be used to describe their condition prior to the last day*. Thus although it is true that those whom the Father has predestined before the foundation of the world will be saved (Ephesians 1:4–5), and none of those whom the Father has given to the Son shall be lost (John 6:39), we do not know with certainty who these people are! Yet we do know who are members of the covenant, and the warrant of Scripture encourages us to describe these people as Christians, brothers and sisters, members of the household of grace. These are not vacuous titles devoid of meaning, but they are covenantal descriptions of those to whom the promises of God belong. The boundary markers for the covenant people are clear (hence the unbroken circumference

in the diagram), whereas the boundary markers of those who are elect according to God's decrees are unknown to us (hence the broken circumference in the diagram). We may therefore speak of people falling away from the faith, as the Bible does, without jeopardising the equally important truth that those whom God has predestined from eternity will never fall away.

Thus to answer our question at the beginning of this section, it is perfectly legitimate to describe covenant children as being 'in Christ', just as it is to describe an adult who believes and is baptised as being 'in Christ'. The possibility that they may commit apostasy does not prevent us from using the language that the Bible uses to describe such members of the covenant community. For we can never know *categorically* that anyone is in the kingdom, if we are attempting to articulate God's decrees, whether they be children or adults. Yet this does not mean that we cannot describe people as Christians just because we do not know whether or not they are elect according to God's decrees. This was not Paul's practice. Although he had no special insight into the decrees, this did not prevent him from using the covenantal language of salvation to describe those who were members of the new covenant community – including the children (Ephesians 6:1–3)! Not all people can be described in this way, but only those who are identified with God's grace in Christ Jesus. For although God does not tell us whom he has elected in accordance with his decrees, we do know who are members of his covenant people.¹¹

Covenant membership implies covenant responsibilities. As in the Old Testament the disobedient were cut off from the people

11. In terms of personal knowledge of salvation, an individual can know that they are a child of God because the Spirit of God bears witness with their spirit that they are a child of God (1 John 2:20–21, 26–27). However, the Spirit of God does not bear witness with our spirit that others are children of God. Assurance of salvation is only given to individual believers with respect to themselves, not to others. Nonetheless, that does not mean that a husband need be suspicious of his wife's salvation (nor vice versa), rather they rightly embrace each other (and their children) as members of Christ's body and heirs of eternal life, even though such statements are of necessity covenantal in character and not decretal.

of God, so it is in the New Testament (Matthew 18:15–17). The writer to the Hebrews describes a similar situation where members of the covenant community commit apostasy. Although now clearly under God’s judgment rather than under his grace, they had previously ‘once been enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come’ (Hebrews 6:4–5). The letter is speaking of those who were covenantally ‘members of Christ’, but who proved themselves to be never part of the company of the elect from the perspective of God’s decrees (cf Hebrews 10:26–31)¹². Members of the covenant have a high privilege and a high responsibility. Faithfulness to the covenant will bring the blessing of God. However, faithlessness and disobedience will bring God’s judgment upon his people. As Paul reminds Timothy:

If we have died with him, we shall also live with him;
if we endure, we shall also reign with him;
if we deny him, he also will deny us;
if we are faithless, he remains faithful –
for he cannot deny himself.
(2 Timothy 2:11–13)

4. Implications for Ministry to Children

4.1 *Our Children*

The upshot of this understanding of covenant membership is that children of believers are members of the covenant, that is, they are saved (covenantally speaking). They are not in need of evangelism, but of nurture in the faith. Christian nurture

12. Texts such as Hebrews 6:4–8 and 10:26–32 are notorious for their interpretative difficulties. However, once one is freed from the constraints of trying to understand the text from the decree down, rather than from the covenant up, the apparent difficulties evaporate. Both texts teach that members of the covenant, unless they remain faithful to the God of the covenant, can fall away. Yet this is not incompatible with the truth that those whom God has elected (by decree) can never fall away. Note Jesus’ compatible teaching in John 6:37–45 and 15:1–7.

is laying hold of the promises of God in Scripture that he will be our God, both to us and to our children. Christian parents who pray for their children's conversion are sadly mistaken; for in essence they are treating their children as non-Christians in anticipation of their child's conversion. It is all too often true that where parents treat their children as unbelievers, they grow up as unbelievers. Yet their children are already God's, and God has placed upon the parents the responsibility of bringing up his children in his ways. Parents should be concerned that their children grow as Christians, and put no obstacle in the path of their growth. Fathers are to bring up their children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4). They must not provoke their children, lest they be discouraged (Colossians 3:21). The possibility of discouragement is a real one, and it is for this reason that faithful parenting is a prerequisite for church eldership (Titus 1:6).

Nonetheless, influences beyond the family may affect covenant children, to the extent that they disown the faith and break covenant with God. This more often sadly happens after the child has left home. Yet as devastating as this is for Christian parents, their influence is often minimal at this point in time. Like the Waiting Father, they can only hope that the prodigal child returns, and faithfully pray that God will bring them home (Luke 15:11–32). Defection from the covenant is a reality, not only for covenant children but also for those converted in adult life. Patience and prayer are often the only resources at our disposal in such situations. Paul experienced it with Demas, and does not hide the pain of his disappointment (2 Timothy 4:10).

Nonetheless, we must not confuse sinful behaviour in our children with an ongoing pattern of rebellion. Demas is clearly different from those who deserted Paul at his trial (2 Timothy 4:16). If that is true of adults, how much more is it true of children? We cannot expect mature fruit from olive shoots! Here the insights from developmental psychology can be most helpful. We must not expect an adult understanding of abstract concepts from children, but an understanding appropriate to their age. Growth in children

bears the marks of a spiral development,¹³ ever widening in its compass as it moves upwards. Parents play a vital role in this nurture of their children. Just as they need to recognise that infants lack the ability to consume solids at an early age, so too they need to be aware of the child's inability to handle certain concepts at an early age. Yet parents need to find age appropriate activities that will help their children express faith. The family meal coupled with family prayers is an excellent opportunity for teaching them to pray and read and understand the Bible, linking unknown concepts with known concepts. Samuel belonged to the Lord from his conception and grew up in the tabernacle as soon as he was weaned. Yet he did not understand everything about the Lord all at once, though he did grow 'both in stature and in favour with the Lord and with people' (1 Samuel 2:26; cf. Luke 2:52). By God's grace, our children can also exhibit the same spiritual and social growth.

4.2 Other Children under our Care

All that has been said above applies to the children of the covenant, children of believing parents (whether by birth or adoption). Yet what of other children, children outside the covenant of grace? While this question is broad in its application, I wish to make a few remarks for those who have temporary care of other children as teachers, whether it be in Sunday School, Christian camps or Special Religious Education (SRE).

For those involved in ministry to children, it is essential that they understand their audience, not only with respect to their stage of child development, but also with respect to their membership in God's covenant.¹⁴ For our ministry aims for Christian children

13. See J. H. Westerhoff III, *Will our Children have Faith?* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1976), especially 89–91, and F. Bridger, *Children Finding Faith* (London: Scripture Union, 1988), 9–85.

14. It no doubt rarely occurs to the teacher of children to ask who is baptised and who is not. In the early stages of the Christian church this would have been a clear-cut distinction. Unhappily, the continued practice of indiscriminate baptism of infants has made the sign of covenant membership a difficult barometer for covenant grace! More appropriately, a teacher might ask of children whose parents attend church in order to ascertain the children of the covenant.

are different from those for non-Christian children. In the case of covenant children, it is the goal of the teacher to promote growth in Christ. Persistent calls to conversion addressed to Christian children can only confuse them and undermine their own understanding of already belonging to Jesus. On the other hand, it is an imperative that we evangelise the children committed to our care who do not belong to the covenant. They are in need of a Saviour and we fall short of our calling if we fail to introduce them to Jesus as the only one who is able to save.¹⁵ While the demands of teaching SRE are different from those of the Sunday School class, the gospel is always the framework for an education of the child in the teachings of the Bible. Moreover, sensitivity to the family situation of children under our care will be necessary when presenting the claims of Christ, as any Christian instruction might be jeopardised by a counter-productive environment in the home. Yet we sow in faith, knowing that it is God who produces the harvest. There is ample testimony to situations where the conversion of children has led to the conversion of their parents.

Conclusions

The topic of this lecture has been ‘Our children – mission or nurture?’ With respect to children of believing parents, our mission is to make disciples, baptising them and teaching them the commandments of Jesus. In covenantal terms, to baptise our children is to mark them as his disciples and so claim the promises of God, that he is their God as he is ours. By virtue of his promises, our children are saints, members of Christ’s church and inheritors with us of the Kingdom of God. It is because they are God’s children that we are able to nurture them in Christ, training

15. The Bible is very clear that it is only in Christ that anyone is saved. There is no other name given under heaven whereby we may be saved (Acts 4:12). All humankind are under the wrath of God: not only adults but also children. All share in the reality of death, because all share in the reality of sin (Romans 5:1). The pervasiveness of sin, as David recognised, affects all humankind from conception (Psalms 51:5). It is only to the children of the covenant that God’s promises of salvation apply from birth (if not conception!).

them in the fear and knowledge of the Lord, assisting their growth in the obedience of faith, and delighting in the fruit of the Spirit in their lives. This is the mission of Christian parents, not the conversion of their children (the confessional model), nor the reliance upon the sacraments of the church (the sacramental model), nor the confusion of seeing education as discipleship (the catechetical model). May God give us such grace, wisdom and skill that our children grow to full maturity in Christ.

For children outside the covenant of God's grace, our mission is to teach them the gospel of Jesus. Our nurture of these little ones will have no lasting effect unless we teach them to repent and believe the gospel. Unlike children of the covenant, the wrath of God rests upon them and we fail to love them, if we fail to present to them the claims of Christ and the offer of forgiveness in his name. A saving knowledge of God may come through various channels, but unless our education of these little ones is clothed in the gospel of Christ, appropriate to their age and level of understanding, it will eventually be to no avail. May God grant us grace, wisdom and skill in our ministry to such children that they may know what it means to become children of God.

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