

How To View Our Covenant Children

How should we view and treat the children the Lord has given to us? What view should we have of the spiritual state of our children? This is a question, the answer to which has the most far-reaching consequences. It greatly influences the training and treatment of our children. It affects our understanding of God and His dealings with us. It is a most important matter for the faith and life of Christians, especially Christian parents, and of the health and growth of the church generally.

There are two common views, neither of which we believe are correct biblically and confessionally, on how to view our children. Both views have a presumption to them.

There are those who presume regeneration. Children of believers are treated as if they are saved and there is no sense of the need to personally seek faith and repentance in and of the Lord and to find life in Christ Jesus.

Then there are those who tend to presume their children are unregenerate. Children are treated as unbelievers. The children therefore are often alienated from the life and teaching of the Christ Jesus' church.

We cannot agree, in the light of God's Word and our historic faith, with either view expressed above. How then should we view our children?

Presumption that the children of believers are all truly regenerate or born again is contrary to God's Word. For example, Romans 9:6-15 makes this clear. In verse 6 we read, "Not all Israel, are of Israel." Not all who belong to the outward visible community of God's covenant people are inwardly His covenant people. This passage also tells us of two boys of true believers, Jacob and Esau. Both received the sign of outward membership of the covenant community. Both were loved and brought up in a covenant home. Yet one was an elect child and the other a reprobate. So it is written, "Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated." There are also other examples, such as Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Saul and David, Judas and the other Apostles Etc. The King and Head of His true Church and people also said that in His covenant dealings with men, there are the wheat as well as the tares and the two types of fish in the net. (Matthew 13). We cannot presume then that all the children of believers are regenerate.

On the other hand, we believe it is also contrary to God's Word to presume that our children are unregenerate. The Scriptures clearly speak of some being regenerate from the womb or early childhood. Though they may not intellectually understand, yet they may be born again because regeneration is an immediate work of the Spirit of God upon the soul of a person and not mediate. That is, regeneration is not first an intellectual or other act of man, such as hearing and understanding the Bible and belief. Regeneration is first an operation of the sovereign Spirit of God directly on the depths of our being. He causes that which is spiritually dead in our souls to be first made alive so we are capable of hearing and believing. That is why such as Samuel, David, Josiah, Jeremiah, John the Baptist and Timothy etc. could be born again as infants without intellectual understanding.

In Psalm 71:5-6 & 17 we read of David saying that, "Thou art my hope, O Lord God from my youth. By Thee Have I been holden up from the womb: O God, Thou hast taught me from my youth." Or we can read in Luke 1:31ff of Mary, with the Son of God assuming human nature in her womb, meeting and greeting her cousin Elizabeth when she too had the unborn John the Baptist in her womb. The Holy Spirit said that when John met Jesus (both in the womb), that John 'leaped in her womb' And Elizabeth testified that when the mother of her Lord came and greeted her, 'as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy.' John was regenerate from the womb. See also the Lord calling of the little boy Samuel to be His, (1 Samuel 3); of the boy Josiah being right with the Lord, (2 Kings 22:1-2); of the Lord telling Jeremiah He was His own while still in the womb (Jeremiah 1:5) and that Timothy had known salvation from his youth, (2 Timothy 3:15). We therefore cannot presume children of unbelievers are unregenerate.

The Lord in Numbers 15:30 reminds us that we are not to presume in the area of God's exclusive work. In Deuteronomy 29:29 we read, 'The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children.' The knowledge of who are the regenerate and elect among our infants and children is the secret of the Lord. It is the work of God, the Holy Spirit, to know His work in them and what is their spiritual state. We must not, because we have not the ability, to presume anything of the state of the souls and hearts and minds of little covenant children. We have no Biblical right presuming where there is no ability to give a credible profession of faith. We can only judge by outward words and actions. To presume either regeneration or unregeneration is thus to pry into the realm of the decrees of God and His secret counsel and work.

If we do not presume either regeneration or unregeneration, how then should we, as sincere followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, view our children?

We view our children as members God's covenant community not as unbelievers or little heathen. The Lord in many places of His Word teaches us that He views children of believers, even infants, as members of His covenant community, and in bond with Him. See for example Genesis 17:7; Psalm 103:17-18; Joel 2:15-16; Mark 10:13-16; Acts 2:38-39 etc. We thus call them, 'covenant children'.

There is a distinction we also need to remember. A distinction is made between those who are in the covenant and those who are of the covenant. There are the elect and the reprobate as Romans 9:6-13 makes clear. As with the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ, there is an organized, visible aspect to God's covenant with men, and a spiritual, invisible aspect. All children born of believers are head for head members of the visible, earthly, historical covenant community of God. In this sense they are all Christians - as our Directory of Baptism teaches us. But only the elect are truly members adopted into the spiritual, eternal aspect of God's covenant of grace.

We are saved by electing grace alone - not by our blood line. (See Ephesians 2:8-9) Yet truly, God's covenant relationship with His people in Christ Jesus is that he will continue to call out some of His elect from the succeeding generations of believers. (See Genesis 17:7)

Covenant children are to be seen as special. They are called holy - separate from the world in 1 Corinthians 7:14. God calls them 'My children' in Ezekiel 16:21. To covenant children are given a special ministry and very high and holy privileges. They are near to the Lord, having the revelation of God as their heritage, (Ephesians 2:12-13). What is said of God's covenant people of ancient Israel can be said of them: 'To whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises' (Romans 9:4-5).

When we see our covenant children this way parents should have this upon their hearts, in their minds and in their prayers. The child given to them is from God and is in a unique relationship to God with unique privileges and responsibilities. The parent has also a unique calling from the Lord to train them up in the way they should go. (Proverbs 22:6) Thus parents, the moment they know a child is given them and all the days they are given that child by God, are to earnestly, practically and prayerfully live and work with them in following the Lord and in living with them in the way of Christian faith, hope and love.

With the above understanding of our children, as they are capable, we are to teach them by word and example, by formal instruction and informally as we daily live our lives together, all the great truths of our covenant God in Christ. (Deuteronomy 6:4-9) We do this so that from the womb they may hear us in daily prayer, in reading of the Word and in singing the Psalms. From the day of their natural birth, they are with us as we worship and follow the Lord in our home. When we appear before the Lord in public worship, we do so with our little ones. We teach them to say 'amen'. Their earliest consciousness is tied to our faith in love to, and a daily walk with, in all aspects of our earthly life, our great and faithful covenant God. By our lifestyle, we show them a Christian view and practice of family life, of work and recreation and of living in the world. We provide for them an integrated Christian general education.

Our privilege and calling to our children from conception is, as we are able, to be mentors and examples of Christian living and belief to them, to pray with and for them, and to worship and serve the Lord together in all departments of our life. (Psalm 78:4-6)

We are then to view our covenant children as 'federally holy', as of the camp of the Lord and of the party of the covenant people of God and Christ Jesus' church in the world. We view them as possessing inestimable privileges and worthy responsibilities. We set before our children the promises and blessings as well as the warnings of the covenant. We seek to apply to their hearts the vital necessity and blessed encouragements of the need of faith in the Saviour. While there may be the elect and the reprobate among our children, yet both will receive the same teaching, the same word, the same environment of Christian faith, hope and love, the same privileges and answerability to the Lord. Then, as He alone can do, the Lord applies these things to those of our children according to His sovereign purposes. If they are regenerate/elect these things will be blessed to them. If they are unregenerate/reprobate these things will leave them at the last day without excuse. (See 2 Corinthians 2:15-17) We are to be faithful in the use of the means and the consequences belong to the Lord. (1 Corinthians 3:6)

Both those who are already spiritually alive, or one day will be, and those who remain in the darkness of death in their souls, may be among our children. Yet we treat them both the same, because we cannot tell them apart. (See Matthew 13:24-30) Both are admonished to strive against the world, the flesh and the devil, to hate sin and fight against it. Both are exhorted to be born again and to repent and seek in our wondrous Saviour our justification and righteousness, and to rest alone upon the Person and Work of Christ Jesus for their peace and life. Both are to be regularly admonished and lovingly trained and disciplined to live in the way of Christ and sanctification. This is the one word and way for the whole body of the church, including our children. The Lord then works when and how it sovereignly is right for Him in his perfect wise, holy and good way to do so with the regeneration of our children.

If our covenant children are regenerate from the womb, when faithfully taught the whole counsel of God for what to believe and how to live, they will thrive spiritually under these means. They will come, when capable, to an intellectual and emotional consciousness of faith and repentance and the call to live a godly life. They will wish to make a public

profession of their faith. There will generally be no sudden or remarkable change or radical conversion experience in their life. For them there has been no time when consciously they have not been in truth and deed born again believers.

This too - if they are the elect sheep of the Lord, but not yet gathered in regeneration by the Great and Good Shepherd, the words and instruction of godly parents will be used of Him in their later gathering or conversion, which may or may not be outwardly remarkable or startling.

The one thing needful for believing parents and the brethren of the covenant community, in viewing and treating their children, is to be faithful in our calling to love our children in the way of training by word and deed in all departments of life, to understand and live as true followers of Christ Jesus and of His covenant. (See Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Proverbs 22:6 & Ephesians 6:4 etc). We are not called to presumption of any kind with regard to the regeneration of our children. We are called to faithful, thoughtful, understanding, prayerful training of our children.

How wonderful that God is a faithful covenant God, and has promised to call His children out of our children. (Genesis 17:7 & Acts 2:39). We can labour in the training and building of Christian and covenant homes, knowing it is never in vain in the Lord, and a blessed fruit awaits us in our children in our descending generations. (Psalms 127 & 128).

Chris Coleborn,
Launceston 2007