

Praise from the Mouths of Children

Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength because of thine enemies, that thou mightest still the enemy and the avenger. (Psalm 8:2)

One of the tenets of Presbyterian Churches that adhere to the Westminster Confession of Faith, and that ought to distinguish them from the prevailing evangelicalism of our day, is the view that they take of covenant children and their place in the covenant of grace. I say "ought to distinguish" because within Presbyterianism, the place of children in the covenant has been so neglected and distorted that many Presbyterians have been robbed of one of the most precious parts of their spiritual inheritance.

The confusion that now pervades Presbyterianism is so great that some Churches, even though they administer the sacrament of baptism to the children of believing parents, are at a loss to explain why they do so. In fact, infant baptism has become simply a ritual that takes place following the birth of a child, but which is devoid of spiritual significance.

This confusion of thought is not of recent origins. For example, Archibald Alexander, the 19th century American Presbyterian theologian and educator, who while acknowledging the possibility that covenant children may be regenerated early in life, even in the womb, nonetheless, concluded that covenant children ought to be viewed as unregenerate, until they proved otherwise. Though a Presbyterian, Alexander espoused essentially Baptist notions: The education of children should proceed on the principle that they are in an unregenerate state, until evidences of piety clearly appear, in which case, they should be sedulously cherished and nurtured. These are Christ's lambs - "little ones, who believe in him" whom none should offend or mislead upon the peril of a terrible punishment. But though the religious education of children should proceed on the ground that they are destitute of grace, it ought ever to be used as a means of grace. ... Although the grace of God may be communicated to a human soul, at any period of its existence, in this world; yet the fact manifestly is, that very few are renewed before the exercise of reason commences; and not many in early childhood. Most persons, with whom we have been acquainted, grew up without giving any decisive evidence of a change of heart.[1]

Alexander's views can be contrasted with those of Charles Hodge. Hodge, a leading 19th century American Presbyterian theologian, though a student and contemporary of Alexander, regarded his views on this subject as erroneous. Speaking of covenant children, Hodge provides this critical comment on views similar to those of Alexander: After consecrating them to God, in reliance upon his covenant, we still take it for granted that they are not His - that they are to grow up in sin, the children of the adversary, until some future and definite time, when they may be brought under conviction for sin, and led to embrace the Saviour. Hence they grow up, not looking to God as their Father, to Jesus as their Redeemer, to the Spirit of holiness as their sanctifier, and to the church as their home; but with a feeling that they are aliens, and God an enemy. In other words, we put them outside of the kingdom by our treatment, while yet we hold them to be in it according to our theory. We constantly assume that their first actions and emotions of a moral nature will be evil and only evil, instead of believing that by Divine grace, and in the faithfulness of the Most High to His own engagements, they will have true spiritual exercises from childhood. Hence, as they come to years of maturity, they stand aloof, waiting as it were, for God to enlist them - waiting to get religion, as the phrase goes, instead of feeling that they belong to God, and are to love and serve Him from the beginning.[2]

Does it matter? It does matter. This is not simply a matter of semantics. The significance of the differing approaches is highlighted by Hodge, when he writes in the context of infant baptism:

To our apprehension there is a practical error here of great perniciousness. Having given our children to God, in accordance with His appointment, we ought not to feel or to act as though it were a nullity. To our faith, the presumption should be that they are the Lord's, and that as they come to maturity they will develop a life of piety. Instead of waiting, therefore, for a period of definite conviction and conversion, we should rather look for, and endeavour to call out, from the commencement of moral action, the motions and exercises of the renewed heart. Teach them to hate sin, to think and speak of God as a father, and of Christ as a saviour. Let them be taught to say, We love the Lord, we love and trust Jesus, we love His people, we love the church with all her doctrines and ordinances, we hate sin in all its forms, and are determined, by God's help, that we will not be its slaves. And let us expect that, as they come to years of deliberate action, their life will correspond to this teaching. Is this too much to expect of our covenant God? Is this presumption? Is this less pleasing to God, than a spirit of unbelief, which nullifies His word? We think not. It may be a strong faith is required for such a course, but it is a legitimate faith, well pleasing to God, comforting to ourselves, and most blessed in its bearing upon our children. If we can but exercise it, by His help, vast numbers of our children will be sanctified from the womb, and will indeed grow up 'in the nurture and admonition of the Lord', and will stand like olive plants around our table and our dwelling.[3]

Frequently, a consideration of the view to be taken of covenant children and of their place in the covenant becomes mired in the Baptist conception that the children of believing parents, as children, except in exceptional circumstances, are not suitable receptacles of the grace of God. And even if they are, it is necessary to wait until they are able to provide clear expression of their personal faith in Jesus Christ before they can be received into the visible Church.

The fundamentally important question is, whether those views accord with Scripture. The answer is an emphatic, "No." They certainly do not accord with how Jesus Christ viewed young children. His view is expressed in Luke 18:16: "Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God." But that is not the only place in Scripture where Jesus plainly expresses His views on this subject. Another is Matthew 21:16, where Jesus rebuked the chief priests and scribes, when He said, "Have ye never read, Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings [God] has perfected praise?" There, Jesus was quoting from Psalm 8:2 and the words penned by David under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

In Psalm 8, David is reflecting upon the handiwork of God, as it is seen in the created order. The focus of the psalm is upon the glory of God, as it is manifested in the creation and specifically, in God's dealings with men. David's goal is to identify the particular work of God that best reflects the greatness of God's power and glory.

David appears somewhat overwhelmed by the task before him. After all, every work of God's hands is marvellous to behold. David reflects the enormity of the task and his sense of inadequacy, when in the opening verse of the psalm he exclaims, "O LORD our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!" This same thought is also reiterated in the concluding words of the psalm, where David again exclaims, in wonderment, "O LORD our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!" "Excellent" here means "surpassingly great, superb, or glorious." He says of God, "How surpassingly great, how glorious is your name!" Not just the name "LORD" or Jehovah, as significant as that name is. But the name of God here refers to the revelation of God, in all His goodness and perfections or attributes. How surpassingly great is the revelation of God's goodness and perfections in all the things that He has done!

The question to which David addresses himself is, which of the works of God, most perfectly reflects His glory and greatness? Understandably, David's inquiry leads him to a consideration of the vastness, the enormity and the beauty of the universe. "When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained;" (vs. 3). He contemplates the moon and the stars in the night sky; along with the vastness of the universe. And as he contemplates the universe, David cannot help but marvel.

However, though marvelling at the universe, David concludes that there is something that God has done that more completely reflects His greatness and glory. As he notes in verse 1 ("who hast set thy glory above the heavens"), God's glory exceeds even the glory of the universe. As he reflects upon this subject, David is led under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to a specific way that God has ordained for the revelation of His greatness, His grace, His love, His beauty; in other words, of His glory. And that way is the praise of God that issues from the mouths of young children. "Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength."

The way that God is pleased to show most exquisitely the greatness of His glory, the glory of His grace, to show His infinite majesty, is to take young children, children who are conceived and born in sin, and to work His grace in their hearts; to bring them to saving faith in His Son, so that they are able to confess and praise Him from the heart. Perhaps to our surprise, David identifies the praise that comes from the mouths of babes and sucklings as the greatest expression of the glory of God. So that when young children praise Him from the heart, when they pray from the heart, when they sing the psalms from the heart, when they speak of their love of Jesus Christ from the heart; those are the occasions when the glory of God shines forth in all its grandeur.

Significantly, that was not only the assessment of David, but it was also that of Jesus Christ. As mentioned above, recall how that in the last week of His earthly ministry, Jesus quoted Psalm 8:2 to the chief priests and scribes, who were being driven to distraction, as young children shouted out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David: Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord!" When they said those things, the children were referring to Jesus. They were acknowledging Him to be the Messiah; the great Son of David; the promised Saviour. They were shouting those things in the temple itself.

The children were repeating what they had heard their parents say only a day earlier, when Jesus had triumphantly

entered Jerusalem riding on a colt. However, when the chief priests and scribes heard the children shouting out those same words, they were "sore displeased." In their judgment, the things that these young children were saying were blasphemous.

Sheeting home responsibility for this outrage to Jesus, they sought to embarrass Him into taking decisive action, to bring a halt to this perceived outrage. Confronting Jesus, in their righteous indignation and unbelief, they said, "Hearest thou what these [children] say?" For them, the issue was not just what the children were saying, but it was also that it was children, as opposed to adults, who were saying these things. The thrust of what they said to Jesus was, "Do you not hear what these ignorant and uninformed children are saying?" "Why do you not silence these children?" "Why do you allow this outrage to go on unchecked in the temple?" "Do you not hear what the children are saying about you?"

Jesus' response, drawn from Psalm 8 was curt. "Yea; have ye never read, Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise?" "Yea, yes, I hear what the children are saying and I approve of what they were saying!" The children were doing the very thing that God had ordained for them to do; praising Him and so praising His Son.

Notice that Jesus' quotation of Psalm 8 in Matthew 21:16 differs slightly from the wording of the psalm as it appears in the Old Testament. In Matthew 21, Jesus says, "Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise," whereas in Psalm 8, David writes, "Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength." The words quoted by Jesus come from the Septuagint (a Greek translation of the Old Testament) and provide the sense and meaning of what David declared in Psalm 8:2.

"Strength" in Psalm 8:2 refers to "spiritual strength, spiritual understanding, spiritual conviction." So that "Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings [God has] ordained spiritual strength, spiritual understanding, spiritual conviction;" the spiritual strength and spiritual conviction of these babes and sucklings manifesting itself in praise for God; praise being the fruit of their spiritual strength and spiritual conviction. Astoundingly, it is from the mouths of "babes" and "sucklings" that this spiritual strength and conviction is revealed. "Babes" and "sucklings"; young children. Children, some of whom were still being nourished by the milk of their mothers. Therefore, the children that David has in mind are those who range from being in their mother's arms to around seven or eight years of age. Out of the mouths of these young children, God has ordained spiritual strength and spiritual conviction; He has ordained praise.

The question that immediately arises is what is the nature of this praise? Are we to understand that infant children can possess genuine spiritual strength and spiritual conviction? Is it possible for toddlers, for babes in arms, for children who are presented by their believing parents for baptism, to praise God? Bearing in mind that such children are unable to articulate their faith in any sensible way, their depth of spiritual understanding, at best, being limited. Toddlers may sing the Psalms; they may be able to offer up simple prayers; they may be able to say that they are sorry for the wrongs that they have done; they may even be able to say that they love the Lord, but are those things any indication of a work of grace in their hearts? Can God work in the hearts of babes and sucklings? Or are those things really childish imitations of what they have been taught or seen their parents and others do?

Notice that that was the understanding of the chief priests and scribes with respect to the children in the temple who cried out, "Hosanna to the Son of David." They interpreted their statements as childish utterances, devoid of understanding. These were children simply imitating their parents and the things that they had heard them say. But as is evident from the rebuke that Jesus administered to them, that analysis was greatly mistaken. The children in the temple may well have been simply repeating what they had heard their parents saying the previous day, but that did not mean that these children, in their child-like simplicity did not speak the truth; nor did it mean that what they said did not arise from hearts regenerated by the Spirit of God; and nor did it mean that the children were not instruments of praise under the hand of God.

As Jesus said to the chief priests and scribes, "Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings [God] has perfected praise." That was true of the children in the temple; it is true of covenant children today. Children are the recipients of the grace of God, often very early in life; even from the womb. Scripture testifies to that. God says of Jeremiah, Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations (Jeremiah 1:5)

The angel Gabriel declares concerning John the Baptist, For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb. (Luke 1:15)

God's covenant promise is to believers and their seed.

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. (Genesis 17:7)

True, the promise is not to every child, head for head; there are the Jacobs and the Esaus. The promise is to the spiritual seed of Abraham. But notice that the sign of the covenant was to be administered to the children of believers, as children!

This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised. And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you. And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every man child in your generations. (Genesis 17:10-12)

The infiltration of Baptist notions (such as, that children must be able to express their faith before they can become members of the Church, and that they ought not be baptized and receive the sign and seal of the covenant of grace until they reach the years of discretion) into Presbyterian and Reformed Churches needs to be strenuously opposed. Such notions rob the Church of her sons and daughters, and they influence how believing parents view and raise their covenant children. But even more significantly, those Baptist notions, albeit unintentionally, belittle the very thing that Psalm 8:2 identifies as manifesting the unsurpassed greatness and glory of God!

This is the issue with which David is concerned in Psalm 8. In what way is the greatness, the grace, the love, the beauty, the glory of God most clearly manifested? David, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, concludes that God's glory is most exquisitely manifested in the spiritual strength and praise that comes from the mouths of young children! Yet, that is the very thing that Baptists deny. They see it, they hear it, but like the chief priests and scribes in Jesus' day, they reject it and refuse to acknowledge it. The question could rightly be asked of them, "Have you never read what David declares, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, in Psalm 8:2?"

As Jesus Christ declares, "Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings, [God] has perfected praise." He has equipped, fitted, prepared the mouths of young children for praise. Out of the mouths of children, God has provided the perfection of praise. How does God do that? He regenerates babes and sucklings by His Spirit, just as He does every adult who comes to faith in Jesus Christ. As Jesus says, in Luke 18:17, "Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein." Clearly implied is that little children do receive the kingdom of God and enter into it. But just as importantly, ask yourself, how do little children receive the kingdom of God? It is not through any activity on their part. They have no capacity to reason and to discern. It is not on account of their declared faith in Jesus Christ. The marvellous truth is that little children, babes in arms, are passive as regards their entrance into the kingdom. But in that, they are no different to every mature Christian who enters into the kingdom of God. Consider, how did you enter into the kingdom? Was it by virtue of your knowledge and understanding? Was it on account of the faith that you had cultivated? No, it was by grace! It was purely of grace. Little children enter the kingdom in exactly the same way, as do adults. They enter the kingdom by the grace of God worked in their hearts. So, too, does every mature saint. There is no other way to enter into the kingdom.

But having said all that, more still needs to be said. We need to ask and answer one further question: What causes David to identify praise from the mouths of babes and sucklings, as the most exquisite way in which God's glory is manifested? Or to put it another way, how is it that the praise of young children, even exceeds the glory of God manifested in the vastness and magnificence of the universe?

It is true that young children have limited cognitive ability, or at least limited ability to express themselves. They do not possess great reasoning and intellectual powers. They do not possess great theological understanding. There is a simplicity about children. As such, they might rightly be viewed as weak and unlikely instruments of praise. Certainly, that was how the chief priests and scribes viewed them in Matthew 21. They considered the children to be lacking in spiritual discernment and as such they were unfit vessels for the praise of God.

Yet, the reality was that God was praised by the children in the temple. By a wonder of His grace, God made those weak and most unlikely vessels, to be instruments of praise. Young children are instruments of praise to God. That in itself is a testimony of the greatness and glory of God's grace. He takes sinful fallen creatures, creatures with limited or perhaps no understanding, and makes them to be trophies of His grace. He gives them the capacity to do what myriads of adults throughout history, despite being endowed with intellectual gifts, have failed and refused to do; to praise Him from the

heart. God's work of grace in enabling young children to genuinely and sincerely praise Him is something that, in the most exquisite way, heralds the glory of God. When babes and sucklings praise God, we see a display of the majesty, power and glory of God that surpasses the glory of the universe, indeed, of every other work in the creation!

Closely linked with that truth is the fact that, as David reveals, God has ordained that He should be praised "out of the mouth of babes and sucklings" for a specific purpose. Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength because of thine enemies, that thou mightest still the enemy and the avenger.

God has enemies. Indeed, He has many enemies. There are many who oppose Him and who seek to bring down the cause of Jesus Christ. The world is full of those who deny God, who reject His Word, who ridicule and mock His person and the person of His Son; who seek to destroy the Church; who belittle or even attempt to silence the gospel of Jesus Christ; who challenge His laws; who refuse to have Him rule over them; who deny His power.

All these enemies have their origin in the one great enemy and foe of God, namely, Satan. He is the father of all the enemies of God. Satan is "the enemy" and he is "the avenger" of God. His design is to deny God's rightful claims, to deny His power, to pull Him down, to destroy His work of salvation, to usurp His position and to rob Him of His glory. He wants the praise that belongs to God for himself. He seeks revenge upon God. He considers that God has robbed him of the glory that belongs to him. He despises God for having cast him out of heaven and sentenced him to everlasting damnation.

Therefore, he seeks to stop God being praised. He employs all manner of devices to achieve his ends, temptation, threat, persecution, deception, seduction, false doctrine, false teachers, and the list goes on. He uses such devices in a vain attempt to deprive God of His rightful praise and glory.

How does God expose the futility of Satan, and the millions of men who have joined Satan in seeking to rob Him of His honour and glory? He "still[s] the enemy and the avenger." He silences them. He does so by making young children to praise Him! God takes that which men consider the weakest, and makes them to be the instruments of His praise. In the face of all of Satan's endeavours to stop Him, God makes babes and sucklings to be His own. He makes them to praise Him and to show spiritual strength. In doing so, God displays His might, His power, His grace and His glory. In so doing, He silences His enemies because they are powerless to stop this wonder of God's grace. God's Spirit works where and when and how He pleases, so that babes and sucklings, genuinely and sincerely praise God from the heart.

As indicated at the outset, the fact that God works His grace in the hearts of young children informs the responsibilities of Christian parents. It does that in this way. How does God bring young children to praise Him? How does He bring them to a knowledge of Himself? Yes, it is first and foremost by His Spirit, but God also uses means. The means that God primarily uses involves every Christian parent. Teach your children; read to them the Word of God; teach them the truths concerning God; speak to them about spiritual things; that they are sinners in need of a Saviour; tell them of the salvation that is to be found in Jesus Christ. Teach them to pray. Help them to pray for themselves. Encourage them to sing the psalms. Provide for them a soundly-based Reformed Christian education. Set a godly example before them. Bring them under the preaching of the Word of God.

Do these things early in life. God has ordained praise out of the mouths of young children, indeed very young children. Spiritual things are not just for our children who have cognitive ability. Keep your toddlers in the worship services. Encourage them to participate in the worship of God. Do not send them off into another room, to draw pictures or colour in. Ensure that the early years of your children's lives are not spiritual wastelands. God works in the hearts of young children. Imprint this truth upon your mind,

Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings God has ordained strength.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Archibald Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1978), pp. 13, 14.

2. Charles Hodge, *The Mode and Subjects of Baptism With a Practical View of Infant Baptism* (The Evangelical Bookshop, Belfast, 1966), p. 41.
3. Hodge, *The Mode*, pp. 42, 43