

THE COVENANT OF GOD AND THE CHILDREN OF BELIEVERS

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Introduction

The covenant of God is not a relatively minor and secondary aspect of God's truth, much less a passing theological fad. Rather, it is one of the most prominent, most important doctrines of Holy Scripture, if not that grand reality which is the very heart of the whole biblical revelation.

This is how Reformed theologians have always viewed the truth of the covenant. The German theologian of the 19th century, Heinrich Hepppe, who summarized the Reformed tradition from Calvin to his day, wrote, "The doctrine of God 's covenant with man is thus the inmost heart and soul of the whole of revealed truth" (*Reformed Dogmatics*, London, 1950, p. 281). He quotes the 17th century Reformed theologian, J. H. Heidegger: "... the marrow and as it were the sort of center of the whole of Holy Scripture is the... covenant of God, to which... everything in Scripture must be referred" (p.281).

Herman Bavinck agreed:

The doctrine of the covenant is of the greatest significance both for dogmatics and for the practice of the Christian life. The Reformed church and theology has understood this, more than the Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches and theologies. On the basis of Holy Scripture, the Reformed have conceived the true religion of the Old and New Testaments always as a covenant between God and man (*Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, Vol. III, Kampen, 1918, p. 220).

And in his work on the place of children in the covenant, Herman Hoeksema has written:

The Jachin and Boaz in the temple of the truth of God (the reference is to the two pillars in Solomon's temple mentioned in [1 Kings 7:21](#) (DJE) are the truth of God's sovereign grace and the truth of God's covenant... This doctrine (of the covenant DJE) is really more characteristically Reformed than the doctrine of election (**Believers and Their Seed**, Grand Rapids, 1971, pp. 9, 11).

Scripture itself points out the centrality of the covenant. The history of Israel in the Old Testament is a history of God's covenant with Abraham and Abraham's seed. The goal of that history is Jesus the Christ ([Luke 1:72,73](#)). Jesus appears as Mediator of the new covenant ([Heb. 8:6](#); 12:24). The work of Christ, therefore, is the establishment, realization, and perfection of the new covenant ([Heb. 13:20](#)).

For this reason, the Bible itself has the names that it does: its two main divisions are called "Old Testament" and "New Testament." Since "testament" is really "covenant," we rightly refer to the Bible as the book about the old and new covenant.

I readily acknowledge at the outset that the covenant doctrine that I present here is that which has been developed by the Protestant Reformed Churches and that is confessed by the PRC. It is important that the reader know this. In some Reformed circles there is ignorance of, and confusion about, the truth of the covenant. This is one of the reasons why members can defect to Baptist churches (whether "Calvinistic" or free willist makes no difference), which deny the covenant in one of its essential elements, namely, the inclusion of children in the covenant. In view of the importance of the doctrine of the covenant both in Scripture and in the Reformed tradition, this is intolerable. The PRC have a definite conception of the

covenant. We know what we believe about the covenant. If anyone is ignorant or confused, we ask that he give us a hearing.

Besides, there is difference, even sharp difference, among Reformed churches regarding the understanding of the biblical and creedal teaching on the covenant. In view of the importance of the covenant, these differences are not insignificant. Because the truth of the covenant lies at the center of all the teachings of Scripture, error in the doctrine of the covenant will certainly affect other biblical teachings as well, specifically the doctrine of sovereign grace, or "the five points of Calvinism." If some hold a different view than that presented here, we ask only that they give us a good hearing, attempting to learn what the PRC believe, and why, in order then, of course, to compare our view not only with their own but also with Scripture, the only rule of faith.

I must also make clear that my emphasis falls on the place of children in the covenant and on the conversion of the covenant children. This is the area in which some of the sharpest disagreement surfaces. Not only is this the area in which the Reformed part company with all Baptists, but it is also the arena of division within the Reformed community.

Because my emphasis is the place of children in the covenant, I will be very brief in setting forth what the covenant itself is, according to the revelation of the covenant in Scripture. Yet the nature of the covenant must be pointed out, both because this is basic to a consideration of the place of children in the covenant and because there is widespread ignorance, confusion, and error among Reformed people as to what the covenant essentially is.

God's Covenant of Grace

What is the covenant of God?

What is that covenant that was established with Abraham and his seed; that has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ; that now is made with believers and their children; and that will be perfected with the church gathered out of all nations from the beginning to the end of the world at the coming of our Lord?

The covenant is the relationship of friendship between the triune God and His chosen people in Jesus Christ.

That the covenant must be conceived by us as a relationship, as a bond of communion, between God and His people is proved from the following biblical teachings. First, when God establishes His covenant with father Abraham in [Genesis 17:7](#), God Himself describes the covenant this way: "to be a God unto thee..." The covenant is this: Jehovah's being Abraham's God and Abraham's being Jehovah's man. It is the relationship the special, close, loving relationship between them. This description of the covenant is repeated, again and again, in the Old Testament (Covenant) when the covenant is made or confirmed with Israel. It appears in the significant prophecy of the new covenant in [Jeremiah 31:3](#)lff.: "I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah," Jehovah says; and then He adds, in virtual definition of the covenant, "and will be their God and they shall be My people."

Second, the fundamental earthly analogies to, or symbols of, the covenant are relationships -- relationships of the most intimate friendships known to humans. If a person had any doubt whether the covenant is a relationship, these biblical analogies should settle the matter. The Bible requires us to think of the covenant as a marriage and as a father-child relationship. In [Ezekiel 16](#), the prophet describes the Lord's covenant with Jerusalem as a marriage: "Now when I passed by thee, and looked upon thee, behold, thy time was

the time of love: and I spread My skirt over thee, and covered thy nakedness: yea, I swear unto thee, and entered into a covenant with thee, saith the LORD God, and thou becamest Mine" (v.8). Judah is Jehovah's wife in the covenant.

At the very beginning of Israel's history as a nation, God made plain that the covenant between Himself and Israel, on account of which He would redeem them from the slavery of Egypt, was nothing other than a Father-child relationship. For Moses must say to Pharaoh, "Thus saith Jehovah, Israel is My son, even My firstborn" ([Ex. 4:22](#)).

Marriage and the parent-child connection are relationships of love and communion. They are simply special forms of friendship. And the covenant is the real marriage and the real Parent-child relationship.

Third, there is the figurative explanation of the covenant as God's tabernacling with His people. In [Revelation 21](#) the vision of the new world and of the perfected church is immediately explained by a great voice that says, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them..." (v. 3a). The reference is to that building at the center of Israel in the Old Testament (Covenant): the tabernacle. That holy building was the place where God lived with Israel and Israel lived with God in sweet communion. Heaven will be the real, and gigantic, tabernacle inasmuch as the bliss of heaven will be the life of the covenant: dwelling with God. John immediately applies to this tabernacle-life in the coming world the words that we have seen to be descriptive of the nature of the covenant: "...and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be with them, and be their God" (v. 3b).

In this light the church must view the greatest, and central, wonder of salvation, namely, the incarnation of the eternal Son of God. The meaning of it, John gives in [John 1:14](#): "And the Word was made flesh, and tabernacled (such is the literal translation; the KJV has 'dwelt') among us..." In Jesus, the triune God comes close to us for friendship, so close that He becomes one of us. When the Spirit of the crucified and risen Son of God unites us to Jesus Christ by faith, we come close to God, so close that we are God's bride and God's children.

The covenant is not a contract consisting of the mutual obligation-- of God and the believer. Although earthly marriage includes the mutual duties of husband and wife, these duties do not define the marriage. Marriage is not the duties, but the one-flesh union. The covenant is not a treaty (much less a treaty modeled after the profane Canaanite treaties), any more than the relation between a believing father and his children is a treaty. Nor is the covenant a promise, although God establishes the covenant with His people by promise. [Ezekiel 16:8](#) clearly distinguishes between the promise by which the covenant is made and sealed and the covenant into which God enters by way of the promise: "yea, I swear unto thee, and entered into a covenant with thee, saith the Lord God, and thou becamest Mine." Although the bridegroom takes his bride by means of a vow -- a solemn oath and promise-- this vow is not the marriage. The marriage is the life together of the two.

This understanding of the covenant makes clear what the true covenant members ought to expect from God and what we are required to give to God. We expect, and ought to enjoy, God's wondrous love, God's delightful friendship, and God's comforting assurance, "I am your God, and you are My dear friends." With this, of course, we expect His care and blessing as regards both this life and the life to come: salvation! Think of the husband's nourishing and cherishing of his wife and of the parents' nurture and protection of their children.

In the covenant, God calls us to give Him our love, our friendship, and our exclusive, wholehearted service: thankfulness! Think of the devoted help that the husband desires from his wife and of the honor that parents look for from their children.

Since the friendship of God is enjoyed only through His Word, the covenant people will be marked by reverence for Scripture, for the preaching of the gospel, and for sound teaching. Since we express our friendship in prayer and in obedience to the law, the covenant people will be characterized by prayer and obedience.

At their very heart, Christian experience and Christian life are friendship with God in Jesus Christ. "Henceforth I call you not servants... but I have called you friends..." ([John 15:15](#)). This is the Reformed answer to the view of the Christian life as a "personal relationship with God." This guards the Reformed Christian against the dread error of conceiving the life of the Christian as a cold, formal, outward observance of prescribed rules and accepted customs. And this determines the lives of Reformed Christians with each other: Marriage is friendship; family life is friendship; life in the congregation is friendship.

Two vital truths about the covenant must be noted before we go on to the matter of the place of children in the covenant. First, the covenant is God's. Deliberately, we frame our subject as we do: "The Covenant of God..." The covenant is God's because He conceives it, He promises it, He establishes it, He maintains it, and He perfects it. He alone does all this. He does this without the help of Abraham, of Israel, or of the church. Again and again, God says, "I will establish My covenant." When Jerusalem has broken the covenant with her abominable idolatries so that no other judgment can be expected than that God solemnly declares the covenant null and void, God amazingly says, "Nevertheless I will remember My covenant with thee . . . and I will establish unto thee an everlasting covenant" ([Ezek. 16:60](#)). Never does God say, "Let you and Me make our covenant." Never does Scripture teach that the covenant depends for its fulfillment upon sinful man.

The covenant is a covenant of grace. Never is this more clearly evident than in the incarnation of the Son of God. In sheer mercy and awesome power, God did the impossible thing: He established the new covenant. We had nothing to do with it, except that our dreadful guilt, total depravity, and utter helplessness and misery made the incarnation and death of the Son of God necessary for the establishing of the covenant.

To err here is no minor matter, for all of salvation flows from the covenant. If the covenant depends upon man, so also does salvation depend upon man. A doctrine of the covenant that denies the graciousness of the covenant necessarily undermines also the "five points of Calvinism."

But the covenant is God's in a yet deeper sense. It is the revelation to us and the sharing with us of God's own, inner, Trinitarian life. God's own life is friendship. The life of God is *family* friendship. The Father loves the Son Whom He has begotten and the Son loves the Father Whose image He is; and They are friends in the Holy Spirit Who proceeds from Them both and in Whom They embrace.

A mystery? Granted, if you mean that there are depths here that surpass our understanding. Nevertheless, this is revealed. The life of God is covenant life -- life of the nature of Father-Son. And this life, God "lets us in on," in Christ, so that the relationship between us and God is Father-son or Father-daughter. How are we to pray? "Our Father!"

This leads to the second truth about the covenant that is vital. The covenant of God with us is all-embracing and all-dominating: The entire life of the believer -- body and soul, physical and spiritual, temporal and eternal, God-ward and man-ward -- is taken up into this covenant and is controlled, arranged, and structured by the covenant. As a believer, my whole life is covenant life. God is my God, not alone on the Sabbath, but also through the week; not alone in my worship, but also in my work; not alone in my devotions, but also in my marriage and family; not alone as regards my church life, but also as regards my behavior to the State, to my employer, and to my neighbor. The friendship of God lays claim to everything, controls all, and shows itself everywhere. It makes a radical difference in the believer's experience and behavior. On the one hand, he now possesses joy, contentment, and hope. On the other hand, he walks in holiness.

This all-embracing character of the covenant is implied in the biblical figures of marriage and of the parent-child relationship. The whole life of the young woman is affected by marriage and is claimed by her husband. The relationship in which my three year old daughter stands to her mother and me controls her entire life. She behaves as she does, she speaks as she does, she thinks as she does, she is who she is, because she is our daughter. The relationship with her parents molds her (a thought that makes God-fearing parents tremble, and should).

One important aspect of lives that are embraced by the covenant is the family of believers. For the children of believers are included in the covenant.

The Inclusion of the Children of Believers in the Covenant

The children of believers are included in the covenant as *children*, that is, already at conception and birth. They receive forgiveness of sins through the blood of Jesus, the Holy Spirit of sanctification, and church membership -- as children. They are called to love, fear, and obey God -- as children. For they have God as their God, and are His people -- as children. Therefore, they have full right to baptism. Parents must present them for baptism. And the church that would maintain the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ must see to it.

This is an important feature of the central doctrine of the covenant. It is important to the children. Are they God's children or the devil's? It is important to the parents. We love our children and regard our rearing of our children as one of the most important tasks in our lives. May we regard them as children of God? Or are we compelled to regard them as Satan's "little vipers," as must all those who deny that children are included in the covenant and as did certain Calvinistic theologians, e.g., Jonathan Edwards. Inclusion of the children in the covenant is important to the church. The church asks, "Are they members of the church or do they stand outside?" Does the church have a calling to them too, to feed and protect them as lambs of the flock of Christ, or are they nothing but heathens, *little* heathens to be sure, but heathens nevertheless, like all other ungodly people, whom the church at the most should evangelize?

But above all, the place of the children in the covenant is important to God. He said at the beginning of the history of the covenant with Abraham, "I will establish My covenant between Me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations... to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee" ([Gen. 17:7](#)). He inspired the apostle, on the very day that the covenant became new, to proclaim as gospel, "the promise is unto you, and to your children... even as many as the Lord our God shall call" ([Acts 2:39](#)). Rebuking His unfaithful wife, Judah, in [Ezekiel 16:20, 21](#), God exclaims, like an aggrieved Husband and Father, "Is this of thy whoredoms a small matter, that thou hast slain My children...?" In [Malachi 2:15](#), God condemns the

divorcing that was prevalent in Judah, because divorce jeopardizes the "godly seed." (And still today the unchangeable God hates divorce in the covenant community because it is destructive of the children who, as covenant children, are His children.)

How important our children's inclusion in the covenant is to God is shown in the New Testament (Covenant) by Christ's command, "Suffer little children (infants) to come unto Me... for of such (infants of believers) is the kingdom of God (made up)" ([Luke 18:15ff.](#)). It is shown also by the careful provision God makes for the children, as members of the congregation, in [Ephesians 6:1](#) ff.: "Children, obey your parents in the Lord ... and, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord."

Here the Reformed faith - Calvinism - parts company with all Baptists. Every Baptist seriously errs regarding a vital truth of the central covenant-doctrine in Scripture. Every Baptist holds that the children of believers are lost heathens outside the church, no different from the children of unbelievers. The advertisement that a local Baptist church placed in the paper concerning the superior holiness of the children in their congregation - their obedience to authority and their freedom from drunkenness and fornication, etc. was deceptive advertising. There are no children in that church. Every Baptist church denies membership to all children. Only sheep belong to the Baptist fold, no lambs. Entrance into the church is restricted to those who are grown up and are able to make confession of their faith. Whatever youth do join the Baptist church do so not as children of believers but as mature individuals. The Baptist church will not suffer the little children to come to Christ, but forbids them.

Among other implications of this grim teaching and practice is that there is no ground for any hope of the election and salvation of the children of believers who die in infancy or in early childhood. Indeed, there is every reason to believe that they perish. They are, according to the Baptists themselves, outside the church and covenant of God; and outside the church and covenant of God is no salvation.

In light of our confession of the inclusion of the children of believers in the covenant (about which *fact* there is no dispute among Reformed people or churches), we must now answer the question, what exactly do Scripture and the Reformed confessions mean when they say that our children are included in the covenant.

The Reformed creeds are clear and emphatic about children's being included in the covenant of God. The *Heidelberg Catechism* teaches that infants must be baptized "since they as well as the adult are included in the covenant and church of God; and since redemption from sin by the blood of Christ, and the Holy Ghost, the author of faith, is promised to them no less than to the adult..." (Q. 74).

The Reformed "*Form for the Administration of Baptism*" assures the believing parents and the congregation that "our young children... are again received unto grace in Christ..." It insists, with powerful, decisive appeal to the unity of the covenant in both old and new dispensations, that "infants are to be baptized as heirs of the kingdom of God and of His covenant." And in the prayer of thanksgiving it puts on Reformed lips the words of praise, joy, and comfort, "Thou has forgiven us, and our children, all our sins, through the blood of Thy beloved Son Jesus Christ, and received us through Thy Holy Spirit as members of Thine only begotten" In the vow at baptism, the parents confess that they believe that, "although our children are conceived and born in sin, and are therefore subject to all miseries, yea, condemnation itself; yet that they are sanctified in Christ, and therefore, as members of His church, ought to be baptized."

Our question, what this means, is occasioned by the incontestable fact that not all of the children of believers are saved. Both parents and church experience the hard, painful fact that some of our children grow up ungodly, unbelieving, and disobedient, and perish. God is not their God; and they are not His people. Scripture prepares us for this bitterest of all parental and ecclesiastical sorrows. Abraham had a grandson, Esau, who was a profane reprobate (cf. [Gen. 25:19-34](#); [Heb. 12:16,17](#); [Rom. 9:6-13](#)). [Deuteronomy 21:18ff.](#) prescribed the procedure by which Israelite parents of gluttonous, drunken, rebellious, and stubborn sons were to bring these children to the elders to be excommunicated and stoned. [Hebrews 10:29](#) speaks of the baptized son of believers in the time of the new covenant who treads under foot the Son of God, counts the blood of the covenant, with which he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and insults the Spirit of grace.

We cannot presume that all our children are regenerate and elect. To presume this is contrary to Scripture and experience. Nor may we parents be bitter about this. For it is pure mercy that any of our children is saved.

But what then does the Reformed faith mean by the inclusion of the children of believers in the covenant of God?

There are three possible explanations of the inclusion of children in the covenant. All are proposed by various Reformed churches.

The first explanation is that because of their privileged position in a Christian home and in the environment of the church these children are more likely to be converted than the children of unbelievers. In fact, the children are unsaved, and must be regarded as unsaved until such time as they give evidence of faith, but they are in a better position to be saved than other children. This was the view of some Puritans and of Jonathan Edwards. It is the view of certain Reformed churches today, including the Free Reformed Church of North America and the Netherlands Reformed Congregations of the United States and Canada.

This viewpoint must be rejected. First, it does not do justice to the language of the Bible or of the Reformed creeds. God does not merely put the children of believers in a more advantageous position, so as to make it likelier that they will be saved; but He establishes His covenant with them, so as to be their God. God gives to the children the promise of the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ. Accordingly, the church does not and may not regard them as heathens with an edge over other heathens. Rather, the Reformed church regards them, and must regard them, as those "sanctified in Christ." Second, it is not true that our children, considered now strictly from the point of view of their natural condition, are in any better position than the heathens of the world. Our children are by nature dead in sin. A dead person in a Christian home and in the sphere of the church has no advantage over a dead person outside a Christian home and the church.

The second possible explanation of the place of children in the covenant can be more persuasively argued. All the children of believers without exception are in the covenant in this sense, that God promises them all salvation and extends to them all His covenant grace in Christ. However, the actual fulfillment of the promise, the actual reception of covenant grace, and the actual realization of the covenant with them personally depend upon their believing in Christ and thus taking hold of the covenant when they grow up. The covenant consists of promise and demand, which demand is a condition that the children must fulfill. The promise from God is for all without exception. But if the child should not fulfill the demand that he believe, he forfeits the promise. This is the view of the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands ("Liberated"), of the Canadian Reformed Churches, and of the American Reformed Churches.

The appeal of this view is that it puts all our children without exception in the covenant. This is naturally pleasing to the parents (although the implication of this view is that not only some but also all of the children can fall out of the covenant, which is not so pleasing). Also, it seems to do justice to the language of Scripture and of the creeds. God said to Abraham, "...and to your seed," not, "...and to *some* of your seed." The *Heidelberg Catechism* says that the infants are included in the covenant, not *some* of the infants. In the form for baptism, we confess that our children are sanctified in Christ, not *some* of them.

Are not all the children of believers baptized? Are not all the children required to be baptized?

Nevertheless, this view conflicts with cardinal doctrines of the Word of God, doctrines which are precious to every Reformed man and woman. For one thing, the promise and covenant grace of God now depend upon the work and will of the sinful child. The covenant and its salvation are conditional, dependent upon the faith of the child. But this stands in diametrical opposition to the teaching of Scripture, with specific reference to this very matter of the salvation of the children of believers: "So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy" ([Rom. 9:16](#)). Also, the Reformed faith has creedally rejected the notion that faith is a condition unto salvation: In 1/9,10 the *Canons of Dort* deny that faith is a "prerequisite, cause or condition" upon which election and salvation depend, asserting rather that "men are chosen to faith" (cf. also I/Rejection of Errors, 3; III, IV/14; III, IV/Rejection of Errors, 6).

For another thing, this explanation of the inclusion of the children in the covenant definitely implies that Christ's death for some persons fails to secure their redemption. At baptism God promises to all the children that He will give them His covenant and its blessings *on the basis that Christ washed them all in His blood*. But the fact is that some of these children perish. Thus is denied the doctrine of limited, efficacious atonement, at least within the sphere of the covenant. As regards the children of believers, there is universal atonement.

Yet another objectionable element in this view is its teaching that the promise of God fails in many cases. God promises salvation to every baptized child of believing parents, but many of them do not receive salvation. The word and promise of God have failed in all these cases. They have failed because the children have refused to fulfill the condition of faith; but the fact remains that they have failed.

The basic objection to this covenant-view -- and it is a deadly serious objection -- is that it conflicts with the Reformed gospel of salvation by sovereign grace.

The third explanation, we believe to be that of Scripture itself. Although all our children are in the sphere of the covenant and therefore receive the sign of the covenant and are reared as covenant members, the covenant of God, the relationship of friendship in Jesus Christ, is established with the elect children only. The promise of the covenant is for the elect children only. The promise does not depend upon the faith of the child, but the promise itself works the faith by which the child receives the grace of the covenant in every child to whom God makes the promise. It is the elect children among our physical offspring who constitute our true children, even as the seed of Abraham was not all his physical descendants, but only Christ and those who are Christ's according to election (cf. [Gal. 3:7,16,29](#)).

Our grounds for this explanation of the inclusion of children in the covenant are the following. First, only this view harmonizes with the rule of faith in Scripture. God's saving, covenant mercy is particular, i.e., for the elect alone ([Rom. 9:15](#)). Predestination makes distinction not only between visible church and world but also within the visible church itself ([Rom. 9:10-13](#)). God's salvation never depends upon the will or

action of the sinner ([Rom. 9:16](#)). Christ's death is efficacious ([Rom. 5:6-11](#)). The promise of God is sure to all the seed ([Rom. 4:16](#)).

Second, Scripture itself gives exactly this explanation of the precise matter under discussion. It does this in [Romans 9:1ff](#). The concern of Paul is that so many physical children of Abraham perish in light of God's promise to Abraham to establish His covenant with Abraham's seed (vss. 1-5). The chief difficulty of the apostle is not that dear relatives perish (although he could wish himself accursed for these brothers, v.3), but that it might seem that "the word of God hath taken none effect," that is, that the promise of God has failed to establish the covenant with many to whom the promise was given (v.6). But it is not the case that the promise has proved to be a powerless failure in even one instance. Why not? Because the seed of Abraham, to whom the promise was given, never was all the physical children of Abraham. "For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel: neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children: but, "In Isaac shall thy seed be called. That is, They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed" (vss. 6b-8). There is a distinction between two kinds of children of believing Abraham: children of the flesh and children of the promise. And this distinction is determined by election and reprobation, illustrated plainly by the history of Jacob and Esau (vss. 9-23).

Paul's difficulty is exactly our problem. By promise, God includes our children in His covenant of salvation; but not all of our children are saved.

Scripture's solution of the apostle's difficulty solves our problem as well. The children of believers to whom God graciously promises membership in the covenant are not all the physical offspring of believers. They are rather the "children of God" among our offspring. And the children of God are those who are chosen in Christ. These are the ones whom God counts for the seed when he says, "I will be the God of your seed." These, and these only, are "the children of the promise." To them, and to them only, is the promise given. In every one of them is the promise effectual to work faith in Jesus Christ.

Third, this understanding of the place of children in the covenant is found in the Reformed tradition. Distilling the essence of the Reformed tradition from the outstanding Reformed theologians, Heppe quotes J. H. Heidegger as expressing the Reformed view:

As for the adults, outward baptism does not seal inward grace for all of them, but for those alone who bear in their hearts a faith the reverse of feigned and confess it in words. Nor yet for the children of believing parents one and all, but only for the elect is baptism the sign of regeneration and universal spiritual grace. Although it is right and godly in the case of individual children of the kind to have good hopes of the judgment in love, in the case of them all it is not so (**Reformed Dogmatics**, London, 1950, pp. 622, 623).

This has been a prominent view in Dutch Reformed theology since the *Afscheiding* (Secession) of 1834. In his book, **Prediking en uitverkiezing (Preaching and Election**, Kampen, 1959), Professor C. Veenhof, himself an advocate of the position that all children of believers are in the covenant by conditional promise, acknowledges that the position that referred the phrase in the baptism form, "our children. . . are sanctified in Christ," to the elect children was perhaps the dominant position in the churches of the Secession. This was the doctrine of Simon Van Velzen, the outstanding theologian in the churches of the Secession (cf. Veenhof, **Prediking**, pp. 66ff.).

Fourth, only this covenant view is in harmony with the Reformed confessions. The *Westminster Confession* holds the promise of the covenant of grace to be particular and unconditional: ". . . promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto life His Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe" (7.3). In the chapter on baptism this Presbyterian creed teaches that the grace promised in baptism is strictly controlled by God's eternal predestination:

... the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God's own will, in His appointed time (28.6)

The *Canons of Dort* restrict the promise of the gospel and the sacraments to believers (III, IV /8). Since faith is the gift of God to the elect (III, IV, 14; 1/9), the promise is for the elect. It cannot, therefore, fail (V/8).

On no other reading can the teaching of the *Heidelberg Catechism* in Q. 74 or the statements in the form of baptism, that our children are "heirs of the kingdom of God and of His covenant" and that they are "sanctified in Christ," be true. If the reference is to every one of the children of believers, not to the elect among them, it simply is not true that "redemption from sin by the blood of Christ, and the Holy Ghost, the author of faith, is promised to them" (*Heid. Cat.*) or that they are "sanctified in Christ" (baptism form).

God realizes His covenant in the line of generations. He gathers His church from age to age from the children of believers. As the Puritans were fond of saying, "God casts the line of election in the loins of godly parents." For the sake of the elect children, all are baptized.

It is the covenantal election of God that determines the viewpoint that believing parents and church take toward the children and that governs the approach in rearing them. We do not view them as unsaved heathens ("little vipers"), though there may well be vipers among them, any more than we view the congregation as a gathering of unbelievers because of the presence of unbelievers among the saints. But we view them as children of God.

This matter of the parents' and church's view of the children is of great importance practically. Jonathan Edwards' view of the children as "little vipers," coupled with a tendency to base the assurance of being children of God upon subjective, doubtful experience, may well have been one of the main causes of the covenant's running out in New England, including Edwards' own church. The children learned their lesson well from the great teacher: The little vipers grew up to be big vipers. There was a judgment of God in this. To call that common which God has cleansed is forbidden ([Acts 11:9](#)). Although, like their believing parents, they retain a viperish nature, covenant children are not vipers, that is, children of the devil, but Jehovah's children ([Ezek. 16:20,21](#)). They are not sinful flesh, spiritually like the devil; but they are holy ([1 Cor. 7:14](#)). Quite unlike the children of disobedience, who are ruled by the prince of the power of the air so that they have their conversation in the lusts of their flesh ([Eph. 2:1-3](#)), the baptized children of believers are in the Lord Jesus so that they honor their parents ([Eph. 6:lff.](#)).

The same result of the error of viewing the children of believers as unsaved heathens appears in the churches that maintain this view today. As a rule, these churches are filled with young people who cannot be assured that they are genuine believers and saved children of God. Indeed, they grow old and die without ever enjoying the comfort of the covenant with God or being able to sit down with their covenant Friend at the covenant meal, although oddly enough they are permitted to make public confession of faith

and to be members of the congregation (cf. C. Steenblock, **Rondom Verbond, Roeping en Doop**, Gouda, The Netherlands, 1979, pp. 44, 45; also, C. Hegeman, **Explanation of the Reformed Doctrine**, Stickney, SD, 1965, p.70). And the few who do arrive at the assurance of salvation derive this assurance, not from the promise of the covenant and baptism, but from some mystical experience.

Viewing their children as God's covenant children, believers must approach them as elect children in their teaching and discipline, even though there may indeed be reprobate and unregenerated children among them. Election determines the approach. All the children must receive the instruction that the regenerated must have and will profit from. By means of this rearing in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, the covenant promise will work the fruit of conversion in the elect children.

The Call to Believers' Children to be Converted

We face, finally, the question, what place does conversion have in the life of the covenant child? Does conversion have a place, or is it now unnecessary for him? If conversion has a place in the life of the child of the covenant, is this place an important place, even a necessary place, or is the place of conversion somewhat minimized?

These are important questions for the believing parent and for the Reformed church. What is their attitude towards the conversion of their children? After all, if conversion is necessary, they must be the instruments in the hand of God for such conversion. Should they earnestly pray for their children's conversion? Should they urgently call the children to conversion?

The question about conversion is vital for the covenant child herself. Ought she to look for this reality and experience in her own life? If so, how must she expect to experience it? May she consider herself a proper candidate for public confession of faith and a worthy partaker of the Lord's Supper without conversion? May she have the certainty of salvation apart from conversion, simply because she is the child of believing parents and has been baptized?

Let us admit that there is a danger that the important place of conversion in the life of the covenant child is neglected both by Reformed parents and by the Reformed church, and therefore also by the child. It is possible that this neglect is due to a misunderstanding, as though mention of conversion of the covenant child threatens either the truth that the salvation of the child is the fruit of the covenant or the truth that in the covenant it is God alone Who saves the child. In part, the hesitation of Reformed Christians to speak of, much less to emphasize, the conversion of the children of the covenant is due to their reaction against the sin against God's covenant that becomes more and more popular today in Reformed circles, namely, that covenant, baptized, Reformed young people are made the objects of an "evangelism" that treats them as unsaved sinners who must be saved by accepting Christ. If this is what is meant by the conversion of the child, Reformed parents and the Reformed church reject it in the name of the covenant of God sealed to their children in infancy.

But these misunderstandings and errors may not be decisive for the answer to the question about the conversion of the children of the covenant. Scripture alone is decisive.

First, conversion is always the work of the Holy Spirit in free, sovereign grace. This is true on the mission field, but this is also true in the covenant. Conversion is never a work of the sinner, earning or obtaining the grace of God. Our converting ourselves is not a prerequisite to entering the kingdom of heaven.

Although we are active in conversion we believe, we repent, and we turn to God -- our activity is caused by the Holy Spirit.

Second, conversion has a place in the life of the covenant children; and this place is that conversion is necessary. Christ's word in [Matthew 18:3](#) applies to the children of believers, "Except ye be converted . . . , ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." Covenant children must receive the gift of repentance. They must have faith conferred, breathed, and infused into them. They must be turned to God as to their heavenly Father in Whose will they delight.

Third, conversion is itself the fruit of the covenant: It is the effect and benefit of the covenant promise. God's promise to the elect children, signified and sealed at baptism, works conversion in them. The friendship of God, experienced by them in the Holy Spirit, causes them to turn away from sin and to God. Because God includes them in the covenant, by gracious promise, their conversion is certain.

Fourth, parents and church not only may but are also solemnly required by God to call their children to conversion. They must do this with regard to specific sins, as well as with regard to the entire life of the children. They do this, not only by saying, "Believe!" "Repent!" but also by thorough, careful instruction in the entire gospel of Scripture; by discipline; and by godly example. God works conversion by His Word. Therefore, church and parents teach the children the Bible. He works it also in answer to prayers. Therefore, church and parents are to pray for the conversion of the children.

Fifth, the children are to be taught to experience conversion, to find conversion in their lives. This is true particularly, although not exclusively, at the time of public confession of faith and celebration of the Lord's Supper. No unconverted person may come to the table of the Lord. No one who is doubtful of his conversion is able to come. However, this experience of conversion is not some mysterious, indescribable, inexplicable feeling. Rather, it is heartfelt sorrow over sin, true faith in Jesus Christ, and a sincere determination to love God and the neighbor.

Neither is the conversion of the children of the covenant as a rule a sudden, dramatic change in teenage years, or even in later life. The history of the conversion of the penitent thief and of Saul is not the norm for elect children born and reared in the covenant. Usually, they are converted from earliest childhood. This is the implication of the fifth commandment of the law. From earliest years, the children are converted to God so that they are able to honor their parents from the motive of the fear of Jehovah God Who has redeemed them from sin and death through the blood of Jesus Christ. This is also expressed in [Psalm 71](#). God is the trust of the covenant child, as the rule, from his or her youth (v.5), for God has taught him or her from youth (v. 17). The covenant relationship goes back, in fact, to conception and birth (v.6). Although there are times of struggle, doubt, and turning away from God, there is gradual development in daily, ongoing conversion deeper sorrow; firmer faith; more ardent love.

The refusal to be converted is the manifestation of the bastard -- the physical child of believers who is not a genuine, spiritual son or daughter ([Heb. 10:29](#)). He too is called to convert himself. Conversion is his duty. Refusal exposes him to severest punishment. It will be more tolerable in the day of judgment for Sodom than for him. When he manifests himself as unspiritual and unbelieving by refusing to make confession of faith, by neglecting the means of grace, by fornication by drunkenness and drug use, and by impenitence regarding this wicked course of life, he must be excommunicated from the church by discipline. As [Deuteronomy 21:1 8ff.](#) requires, the parents themselves must cooperate in this work of the church,

putting the honor of Christ's Name and the welfare of the congregation above their natural love for their child.

One of the strongest objections of the Baptists against infant baptism is that it fills the church with young people, and finally with adults, who are manifestly unspiritual, worldly, and immoral. Nor can it be denied that some Reformed churches expose the truth of the covenant to this charge by their tolerance of the ungodliness of the young people and by their refusal to discipline even the most blatant transgressors among them. All are presumed to be regenerate and saved. The result of this presumption is the death of the church as the carnal, profane seed come to dominate the church, finally driving the spiritual children out. These churches do not take election seriously. Not all the children are included in the covenant and church of God, but the elect only. The elect manifest themselves by holiness of life. Those who are unholy must be disciplined both by sharp preaching and by church censure.

This is a great grief both to parents and church. It is the full responsibility of the ingrate who crucifies to himself the Son of God afresh and puts Him to an open shame. But it is not evidence of the failure of the Word of God. For the great truth in the sphere of the covenant is this: "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy..." ([Rom. 9:15](#)). As in Israel under the old covenant, so in the church under the new covenant, "the election has obtained it, and the rest were blinded" ([Rom. 11:7](#)).

This is a doctrine of the covenant that is thoroughly biblical. It is in full accord with the Reformed confessions. It has an honorable place in the Reformed tradition. It upholds and extols the sovereign grace of God in salvation. It gives comfort to parents and children alike. To mention only one aspect of its rich comfort, only this doctrine of the covenant enables believing parents to bring the body of their infant child to the grave without doubting of the election and salvation of the child: "Since... the children of believers are holy... in virtue of the covenant of grace, in which they, together with the parents, are comprehended, godly parents have no reason to doubt of the election and salvation of their children, whom it pleaseth God to call out of this life in their infancy" (*Canons of Dordt*, 1/17).

And it is practical. To refer only to the calling of believing parents, this doctrine provides the basis for having children; indicates the positive approach to take in their rearing; lays down the content of the rearing; and gives encouragement in times of struggle and disappointment.

Therefore, I witness to this doctrine of God's covenant boldly. I do so all the more fervently because I myself have experienced the truth of it: child of believing parents; baptized in infancy; converted on my mother's lap; guided in the good way of the Lord by the Spirit of Christ from earliest childhood; knowing God as my Friend, without terror before Him, under the gospel of unconditional grace; and, however imperfectly, loving Him from childhood Who, having looked upon me in my infancy in grace, incorporated me as a baby by His Spirit into His Son, Jesus, burying me into Jesus' death and raising me with Him in newness of life.

I and the multitudes of covenant children like me cannot but testify to the covenant of God. Our testimony is the witness of irrepressible joy:

When the Lord shall count the nations,
Sons and daughters He shall see,
Born to endless life in Zion,
And their joyful song shall be,

"Blessed Zion, All our fountains are in thee,
Blessed Zion, All our fountains are in thee."

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Last modified, 16-Jul-2000