GOD OF MY YOUTH:
INFANT FAITH, INFANT SALVATION, AND COVENANT NURTURE
IN THE PSALTER AND PSYCHOLOGY

Introduction: Focusing the Questions

Historical Background

Our children are a gift from God, which means parenting is a form of stewardship. As John Calvin emphasized, every child is a special blessing from God and every birth is a divine visitation. Parents are given a tremendous task: they are to take these little bundles of blessing and help them grow to Christian maturity. But while virtually all Christian parents share a common goal for their children (Christ-like character), not all agree on the starting point or how to arrive at the desired destination. The Spiritual nurture and formation of our children are weighty, difficult issues. One key question revolves around the nature of the child's relationship with God even from womb. More specifically, this is the question of *fides infantum*, or infant faith.

The question of whether or not infants belonging to believing parents can have faith has been a troubling one in the history of the church. On the one hand, if we deny that they can have faith, we must either say that these children are lost if they die in infancy or that their salvation is an exception to the great Reformation principle of *sola fide.* (A further option is tendered by some Anabaptists who simply deny original sin. Infants are not yet sinners so they cannot be condemned. Of course, one wonders why they are subject to the curse of death at all if they are innocent!) On the other hand, if we affirm the possibility of

infant faith, we have the difficult task of explaining how persons who lack intellectual and verbal abilities can enter into personal, trusting relationships with others. Is infant faith theologically credible and psychologically plausible?

Some have adamantly denied the possibility of infant faith. Certainly this has been true of the Anabaptist and Baptistic traditions, but it has also been the case with many Reformed theologians as well. Others have vigorously affirmed infant faith, pointing to infants as the best illustrations of gospel grace. Apart from intellectual and rational abilities, the Spirit is able to regenerate and sanctify infants so that they have a kind of "baby faith." This view was advocated by Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, and Zacharias Ursinus among others.[1]

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[1] This is not an historical essay, so a couple of examples of this claim will have to suffice. Many are surprised to find that Zwingli held to a very robust theology of covenant children. He insisted that children of believers be regarded as elect and as believers themselves. Addressing the question of infants who die in infancy, he writes,

> All of those infants who are within the elect, who die, are elect. And this is my reason, because when I find no unfaith in any one I have no reason to condemn him; contrariwise, since I have the indubitable word of promise: They shall come and sit down with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, I shall be impious if I eject them from the company of the people of God…
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> What then of Esau if he had died as an infant? Would your judgment place him among the elect? Yes. Then does election remain sure? It does. And rejection remains also. But listen. If Esau had died an infant he would doubtless have been elect. For if he had died there would have been the seal of election, for the Lord would not have rejected him eternally. But since he lived and was of the non-elect, he so lived that we see in the fruit of his unfaith that he was rejected by the Lord.

Quoted in Peter Lillback, *The Binding of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2001), 105. Zwingli reacted with great hostility to the Anabaptists because he believed they were denying their children salvation by depriving them of baptism.

Ursinus' commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism takes up the Anabaptist objection to paedobaptism: infants should not be baptized because they do not yet have faith. Ursinus provides a threefold answer (which I summarize here in

They all connected infant faith with infant baptism. They insisted that faith was necessary to a right reception of the sacrament and that infants were capable (by grace) of such a right reception. Many early Reformers viewed infant faith as having a kind of normativity with regard to those infants born in the context of the church.

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my own words): [1] The same objection would apply to circumcision. In fact, it is impossible to baptize strictly on the basis of the presence of faith even in the case of adults (e.g., Simon Magus was a hypocrite). If Anabaptists reply that a *profession* of faith is all that is necessary, then infants may substitute their birth into the church and God's covenant promise for a verbal profession. [2] Faith is necessary to baptism, but infants have (at the very least) an inclination to faith. Infants have the faith of their parents in this way. [3] Infants believe "after their manner, or according to the condition of their age" as the examples of Jeremiah (Jer. 1:5) and John the Baptist (Lk. 1:5) reveal. Because covenant infants have the Holy Spirit who works in them "regeneration, good inclinations, new desires, and such other things as are necessary for their salvation," they have everything required as a condition of receiving baptism. See *Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. by G. W. Williard (no publication data, 1851), 369-370.

Lutherans and Anglicans have done the most to preserve the early Protestant teaching on infant faith. For example, Lutheran Charles P. Krauth offers a helpful and comprehensive defense of receptive faith in infants in *The Conservative Reformation and its Problems* (Philadelphia: The United Lutheran Publication House, 1913), 578-584. See also Anglican Colin Buchanan's excellent *A Case for Infant Baptism* (Bramcote, Nottingham: Grove Books, 1990) and Buchanan's dialogue with David Pawson in *Infant Baptism under Cross Examination* (Bramcote, Nottingham: Grove Books, 1974 and 1976). Buchanan shows the Baptist case fails because it is impossible to set up a minimum age for true belief within the Christian family. There is no good reason to regard the children of believers as unbelievers.

This is not to say that Reformed and Presbyterian theologians have totally neglected the theme of infant faith. For example, the British Presbyterian missionary Lesslie Newbigin argued that the church's practice of infant baptism serves as a "reminder" that "the work of God the Holy Spirit in recreating us as children of God begins before we have any conscious understanding of it." Although "we can never fully understand how this regenerating work is done," it remains "our task to seek more and more to understand it, to yield ourselves consciously to Him, and so to allow Him to bring to full stature the new nature which He has given us." Quoted in Geoffrey Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin: A Theological Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 286.

To further complicate the subject, however, some later theologians, such as scholastic Francis Turretin, tried to take a middle way, insisting that covenant infants have a seed of faith, a kind of potential faith, but denying that this is actual or active faith. Many fine nuances were made in order to create a distinction between the faith of infants and adults since adult faith includes a propositional confession (e.g., Rom. 10:9-10, 13). The net result, at least in some instances, was to make infant baptism latent until the child had a conversion experience.[2]

The questions we are left with are these: Is infant faith taught in the Scriptures, and if so, what version of infant faith? Is such faith active or passive? How much continuity does it possess with full grown faith? Is there any psychological evidence for infant faith, and if so how does it relate to Bible's teaching on the subject? How does infant faith relate to the life of the church community, including the administration of the sacraments?

The Issues at Hand

How we answer this question about infant faith has sweeping implications for covenant children who are snatched from this life in their youth, as well as those who live to older years. For those who die in infancy, pastors and parents must grapple with

[2] Calvin used the language of "seed faith" to describe the mysterious "knowledge" covenant infants have of God (*Institutes* 4.16.19). later Reformed scholastics used the same language to describe the fact that covenant infants were latently or potentially Christians. This was at least a slight move away from Calvin's position. While Calvin did not develop a doctrine of infant faith to the extent that Martin Luther did, he insisted that covenant infants be regarded as already possessing the promises in full. Again, later Reformed theologians began to hedge on this point, until eventually revivalism pushed children out of the life of the church altogether.

ominous questions surrounding the fate of the child. Again, Christian positions have varied here, running along a spectrum from saying that all such children are saved to denying that any are saved. As a pastor, I know that providing an honest way to comfort grieving parents is of great significance. And so the question is: What do the Scriptures actually teach about infants dying in infancy? Is there any biblically grounded solace we can offer? Can we regard them as saved with certainty?

For children who live normal lives and come of age, the question of infant faith is right at the heart of the debate over how we should raise our children. For instance: Do we seek to nurture them in a covenant relationship they already own? Or do we treat them as outsiders, hoping to convert them once they reach years of discretion? Do our children belong to Christ or to the world? Fundamentally, we can put the issue this way: Is a Christian parent's first task to disciple his child or to evangelize his child? Is his child inside or outside the kingdom? Does the child need initial salvation or ongoing perseverance?

Further, what are the psychological implications of choosing to treat our covenant children as Christians? What are the psychological implications of treating them as non-Christians? How do we best inculcate in our children an understanding of the free and undeserved grace of the gospel so they develop a "psychology of grace"?

Last but least, the question of infant faith is related to sacramental participation and sacramental efficacy. If our children have faith, how does this bear upon their reception of the sacraments? If we see biblical evidence that they have faith, can we justly withhold the Lord's Supper from them? And if we deny that they have faith can we justify baptizing them anyway? Must we take into account the maturity level of their faith when

contemplating their access to the Eucharist? Or is faith alone–of any quality–sufficient?

This essay cannot deal comprehensively with any of these questions, though we will touch on all of them in various ways. In particular, we want to look at one slice of the biblical canon as it bears upon the question of infant faith, namely, the book of Psalms. We will find that the Psalter provides a rich and practical theology of covenant children. Then we will deal very briefly with issues related to the salvation of children dying in infancy and the debate over covenant nurture in the Christian home. Because there is so much current interest in child psychology, we will pay a quick nod to this discipline as a way of further understanding and unpacking the biblical teaching.

My overall argument will be that in the book of Psalms we see strong testimony of infant faith, and this provides great comfort and encouragement for Christian parents, whether their children die in youth or live to reach old age. We will find that Psalter-based parenting and piety stand in marked contrast to the patterns of American, revivalistic, individualistic Christianity. We will also see that both paedobaptism and paedocommunion are necessary corollaries of *sola fide* and the Bible's covenant promises.

Infant Faith in the Psalter

Psalm 22

In Psalm 22:9-10, David asserts that he had faith as an infant. His strongest statement is in verse 9b: "You made me trust while on my mother's breast." In other words, David had a God-ward orientation from his earliest days. In recounting his formative

experiences, David never points to a dramatic "conversion experience," but traces back the origin of his Spiritual life to the very beginnings of his physical life. As far as David knows, a relationship with God was always already there. He was a believer from the beginning.

This was certainly *not* because David believed infants somehow escaped the pollution of original sin or possessed an innate moral goodness. David was not a naïve sentimentalist or a proto-Pelagian. In fact, David confesses elsewhere that he was conceived in iniquity (Ps. 51:5). He knew he was programmed by nature for evil. But he *also* reckoned that because of the covenant promise, God must have been working to counteract that innate desire for wickedness from his life's origin. Thus, grace was already battling sin in his heart from the beginning. Apparently for David, sin and faith were no more mutually exclusive in infants than in adults. Man is born a sinner from the moment of conception; and yet for those infants who are also participants in the covenant promises, God's grace is already operative as well.

How did David *know* that he had faith as an infant? Certainly not through conscious remembrance.[3] Obviously, none of us can remember that far back in our experience. But it seems that this observation only strengthens the case for infant faith as a general, covenant-wide phenomenon. David must derive the fact that he had faith as an infant from broader covenant principles–that is, from the covenant promises as such (e.g., Gen. 17:1, 8). God's declaration that he is a God to our children must include giving them his Spirit (Isa. 59:21), who enables them to

[3] This should be compared with other great saints who have claimed to have served Christ from infancy, e.g., the martyr Polycarp, who claimed before his execution to have served Christ for 86 years, most likely dating back to his birth (or his paedobaptism).

have a trusting relationship with their Heavenly Father, even apart from ordinary means. Infant faith is a normative covenant reality.

There is another reason why David cannot be presenting his infant faith as a unique case. After all, his description of faith, even from the womb, was part of Israel's public hymnbook, used in corporate worship. This is not a private prayer journal, but part of a covenantal liturgy. In public praise, every Israelite would have made the words of David his own, and would have been expected to be able to identify with them in some form or fashion. Thus, infant faith is paradigmatic.[4] It is the normal course of events, part of a typical covenant child's pattern of development. In much the same way that hymns like John Newton's "Amazing Grace" have made adult conversion the norm (Newton recalls a period of blindness and "the hour I first believed . . .") in many revivalistic churches, so David's psalm made infant faith and covenant nurture the norm in ancient Israel. Certainly, God is free to work when, how, and where he pleases, but God's *ordinary* way of dealing with covenant infants includes giving them the gift of faith in the womb.[5] The revivalistic paradigm turns David's experience inside out and effectively eliminates the possibility of growing up Christian.

What is the nature of this faith that David exercised even as an infant? Clearly it was not a matter of cognitive reflection.

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[4] Paedobaptist Christians should be willing to regard infant faith as normative as paedobaptism. If all covenant infants (that is, all infants belonging to Christian parents) should be baptized, all covenant infants should be viewed as believers, for both infant baptism and infant faith are grounded in the same divine promise. Infant faith is bound up in the biblical warrant for paedobaptism and vice versa. Indeed a doctrine of infant faith makes the case for infant baptism water-tight!

[5] See Geoffrey Bromiley *Children of the Promise: The Case For Baptizing Infants* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 71-2.

Instead, it seems to be a matter of relational disposition. For example, David perceives the care of God through his mother's breast. Her milk becomes a means of grace to him. His mother stands *in loco Dei.* Even though he knows no more propositions about his mother than he knows about Jesus, he still has a dependent, trusting stance towards her. Really, this relational posture is the essence of faith.

Faith is, as James Fowler has said, a particular way of "leaning into life." Faith is an inescapable aspect of human life and development, though apart from grace, faith is always misdirected (e.g., Jer. 17:5-6). Given that there is no religious neutrality, even for infants, we might even say that infant faith (and human faith in general) is *universal* since every person at every stage of development has some particular "approach" to life. The only question, then, is, "Towards whom is this faith directed? The living God? Or an idol?" David's claim is that he was "leaning into life" in God's way even from his earliest days. He had a relational inclination and desire for God from infancy. As his sense of self-identity and view of the world developed, they were profoundly directed towards and integrated by his faith-relationship with Israel's Lord. His life leaned towards God, rather than away from him, from the outset.[6] Obviously, this was not a natural disposition, but a gift of covenanted grace.

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[6] See the helpful discussion in Mark Searle, "Infant Baptism Reconsidered," in *Alternative Futures for Worship, vol. 2: Baptism and Confirmation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1987), 40ff. Understanding the relationality of faith helps answer a critical objection raised against the possibility of infant faith, or even the faith of a small child. Suppose someone says, "Forget about infant faith. How do we even know that the profession of a seven year old is sincere and meaningful? She might say she loves Jesus in one breath and claim she's going to be Cinderella when she grows up in the next." But the claim to love Jesus is not like the claim to be pursuing a career as a fictional Disney character. Her profession of love towards Jesus is more like a profession of love towards her parents. The fact that she might have an immature understanding of who Jesus is

Of course, Psalm 22 is not the only reference to infant faith in the Psalter. We find something similar in Psalm 71:5-6. Here, the psalmist once again describes himself as having a trusting, personal relationship with God from his earliest days. The beginning of Spiritual life is, for the child of the covenant, coordinated with the beginning of physical life. When a sperm and egg unite in a covenant womb, the embryo already has a promise from God and an inescapable relationship with God.[7] Just as covenant marriages belong to God, so the fruit of those marriages is claimed by God as well (cf. Mal 2:15). This is *not* because infant faith is some kind of natural inheritance from the parents. Rather, it is because the child has a relationship with God, created by Christ through the Spirit, in accord with the covenant promises. Parents do not save their children by their genetics or bloodlines any more than by their works (cf. Jn. 1:12-13); but the divine promise of salvation provides a *basis* for parents to serve as means of grace to their children, building

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(as well as other facets of life) in no way undermines the significance of her relationship to him. After all, Jesus is a real person; Cinderella is not. Jesus can act in her life through his Spirit in ways that Cinderella cannot. Jesus can condition her desires and convictions through the operation of his Spirit and the means of grace.

[7] Obviously, non-covenantal infants have a relationship with God from their earliest days as well, but it is a broken relationship. There is no hard biblical evidence that they have the same favorable God-ward orientation that covenant children have. In fact, there is a great deal of evidence to the contrary. They are related to God as covenant breakers unless and until they repent. God may be mysteriously merciful to them if they die in infancy, but Scripture is basically silent on this point, so there is not much we can say. Our discussion here is focused on covenant children, obviously.

upon a work God has already begun. Because God is at work in the child, the parents can be effective in parental nurture.

Specifically in 71:5, the psalmist speaks of having hope in God from his earliest days. There was apparently never a time in his life when he lived without this hope. In verse 6, he speaks of God's special care for him from birth. God brought him out of the womb safely, and it is this past track record of divine faithfulness that serves to bolster the psalmist's mature confidence that God will now deliver him from the wicked men who seek his harm and ruin (71:4). Because God has sheltered him with favor and care from his earliest days, he will continue to do so on into old age (71:9). From cradle to death bed, the Lord will be faithful to the covenant. Infant faith is simply a manifestation of God's own covenant fidelity. The covenant provides cradle to grave security for believers.

If we take the framework of the psalmist seriously, the covenant child would never need to pose the question, "What must I do to be saved?" in the way an outsider must ask that question. Indeed, that question would never even occur to the child if he is made to understand the covenant relationship that has been given to him. Salvation has belonged to him from the beginning because of God's covenant promise (71:6; Acts 2:39, 16:31). He does not need a "conversion experience" when he reaches a mythical "age of accountability."[8] Instead he simply needs to continue maturing and growing in the trust of his youth (71:5). Indeed, the psalmist pledges himself to just this kind of faith-filled, grace-enabled perseverance later on in his prayer (e.g., 71:14-16).

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[8] For a full analysis, see my *Paedofaith: A Primer on the Mystery of Infant Salvation and a Handbook for Covenant Parents* (Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2005), 134-5.

Certainly this paradigm of covenant nurture in the Psalter does not preclude the possibility of passing through various "crisis points" as the child matures. It does not mean the child's growth will be a straight upward climb. In fact, even in Psalm 71 we find David facing challenges to his faith. As God brings him through the trial, he will enter a new phase of maturity. His faith will be strengthened and confirmed, and he will confess that faith publicly in a new way. A fresh chapter will have been added to his testimony of God's care and provision. Thus, infant faith does not negate the need for the child's Spiritual growth; rather, it gives us a basis for expecting our diligent instruction, discipline, and nurture to be effective in the life of the child, as he grows towards maturity.

If covenant parents grasp the reality of who their children are, they will be in a better position to shepherd them through life's vicissitudes and quietudes. David had a covenantal framework for dealing with his trials and struggles. He knew he could bank on God's ongoing covenant care because his eyes had been trained to see God at work all through the course of his life. In the same, way we must provide a covenantal platform for our children so that they can rightly interpret the pattern of God's covenant faithfulness at work in their life-stories, discerning his love and provision even from their earliest days. By teaching our children that they were already embraced in God's care from infancy, we bolster their confidence in God for the future. This nurture does not guarantee their perseverance in faith, of course, but it does press them in the right direction.[9]

Psalm 139

[9] On the possibility of apostasy, see *Paedofaith*, 61-63.

Another important Psalm is 139. Psalm 139:14-15 have been pressed into generic usage because of contemporary debates over abortion, but these verses have a very specific, covenantal focus. Jack Collins, professor of Old Testament at Covenant Theological Seminary, suggests the following as the best translation of 139:14: "I praise you for the fact that I have been awesomely distinguished [as a member of your covenant people]; your works are wonderful, and my soul knows it well." Without repeating Collins' fine linguistic work on the passage, we should note the nuance of the verb "to be distinguished" in this context. Collins points out that each time this verb is used in the OT (e.g., Ex. 9:4; 11:7; 33:16; Ps. 4:4) "the distinction is one in which the covenant member is set apart for God's gracious attention." Thus, in Psalm 139:14, the psalmist is expressing awe not simply over God's creative work in forming him in his mother's womb (as many translations imply); rather, he is praising God for having set him apart as a participant in his covenant of salvation. "In context this is praise that one's experience of God's covenantal blessings extends back to the very beginning of one's existence," as Collins puts it. This is not a generic declaration, applicable to all *in utero* children; it is a special proclamation of God's care and favor for those children who belong to his covenant. These children are "awesomely distinguished" from children conceived outside the pale of the covenant community (cf. 1 Cor. 7:14).

Collins echoes my earlier point about Psalm 22:9-10: it will not do to say that this is an experience unique to David. It has normative force, and so we are warranted in applying it to covenant children as a class. All such children are conceived and grow up within the sphere of covenanted mercies. They are

awesomely distinguished as believing members of the covenant community even from infancy.

> Is this simply a record of the personal experience of the author? No: whatever its origin, it is now in the Psalter, which means that its primary function is to provide fitting words for God's covenant people to use in their public corporate worship. The redemptive-historical setting of this psalm is an era in which virtually all the pious members of the covenant people were raised in what we would call believing covenant homes; and this psalm is equipping them to trace their experience of God's intimate love and care right back to the time they were embryos . . .
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> [T]he people sing that their relationship with God dates from their time in the womb. Indeed God's care for the children of his covenant people is inherent in the covenant itself (Gen. 17:7; 18:19; Ex. 34:7, "who keeps loving-kindness for thousands [of generations]"), so it is hardly surprising that it would figure in the worship of the covenant people.[10]

Psalm 139:14 does not contain an explicit reference to the psalmist's infant faith the way Psalm 22 and Psalm 71 do. However, it is not at all difficult to see the connection between the way David describes his pre-birth experience of grace here with the way it is described elsewhere. Even in the womb, the relationship between David and his God is so intimate, it must have been one of mutual faithfulness. It is not simply that God knew (loved) David, but that David knew (loved) God. Surely such knowing and loving on David's part included faith. The

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[10] C. John Collins, "Psalm 139:14: 'Fearfully and Wonderfully Made'?" *Presbyterion: Covenant Seminary Review*, 25/2 (Fall 1999), 115-120.

covenant distinction that set David apart even in the womb strongly suggests the presence of embryonic trust, consistent with what we find elsewhere.

Psalm 139:15 is also interesting in regard to the question of infant faith. The psalmist speaks of God having "woven" him together in his mother's womb. The verb used here does more than merely indicate that each new conception and gestation is a work of God, through created means and processes. This verb is used elsewhere in the OT to describe the making of the veils and curtains that hung in the tabernacle (e.g., Ex. 26:36). The covenant infant is woven together, like fine fabric, for holy purposes. The child is already a sacred person (cf. 1 Cor. 7:14), a kind of mini-temple in which God dwells by his Spirit (cf. 1 Cor. 6:19). Obviously the child will enter a greater degree of holiness at circumcision (or baptism in the new covenant), and will need to grow up into his covenantal status by professing faith and walking in obedience in the years to come. His infant faith must grow into mature, more fully actualized adult faith. But the covenant child's starting point should be clear: he belongs to the Lord; he is God's special workmanship; he is a member of the believing covenant people.

Other Psalms

Finally, we should make brief mention of a few other passages in the Psalter which bear upon the question at hand. Psalm 8:2 speaks of infants as true worshippers of God. Babbling covenant children are actually chanting God's praises. As Calvin says in commenting on this text, God does not wait until men reach mature years in order to make his glory shine through them; rather, "even from the very dawn of infancy [his glory] shines

forth so brightly as is sufficient to confute all the ungodly . . . [God] has no need of rhetoricians, nor even of distinct and formed language, because the tongues of infants, although they do not yet speak, are ready and eloquent enough to celebrate it." Calvin rejects the allegorical interpretation of this verse which makes infancy a metaphor for new Christians and insists the Psalm is describing actual infants as "witnesses and preachers of God's glory" and "invincible champions of God."[11] It is hard to escape the conclusion that if infants are all these things, they must also be believers in some sense. Infant faith is presupposed rather than stated, but it cannot be denied.

Psalm 78 calls upon covenant parents to train their children in the story of God's gracious dealings with Israel. Children love stories, of course, and certain narratives become fundamental to their personal and corporate identities.[12] In verses 1-8, Asaph calls upon fathers in Israel to inculcate a sense of covenant "belongingness" in their children, so that they will understand themselves in light of Israel's history. By knowing their past, they are also inspired with hope for the future, for the story reveals the triumph of God's mercy over and over again (78:9ff). Giving our children the redemptive story in such a way that it becomes *their story* is a way of forming their character and strengthening their faith. Again, there no overt mention of faith on the part of the children, but it is easy to see how their faith is a presupposition of the text. Covenant nurture in the covenant narrative makes sense because the children are regarded as full covenant members.

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[11] John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms, vol. 1* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993 reprint), 95-6.

[12] Flannery O'Connor put it well: "[In] the long run, a people is known, not by its statements or statistics, but by the stories it tells." Quoted from *Mysteries and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux: 1969), 104.

Psalms 127 and 128 are useful in drawing out the Psalter's theology of children. The Psalmist says children are a heritage and reward from the Lord (127:3), meaning they are distributed to us not by chance but in accord with God's counsel and pleasure for our benefit. We should rejoice when God gives us offspring (Psalm 128:1, 3).

But we know that many children grow up to cause their parents grief and sorrow. How can the Psalter speak of children as such blessings? It is because God promises to give us children who are like arrows in the hands of a mighty warrior (127:4). If parents sharpen and straighten these arrows through faithful nurture, their children will be equipped to fight the wicked in the city gate (e.g., in public and cultural life).

Psalm 128:3 reinforces this point. Our children are like olive plants. Provided that we water and fertilize them, prune and protect them, we can be assured they will grow into fruitfulness. Olive plants elsewhere are symbolic of covenant membership (e.g., Rom. 11) and holiness (Zech. 4). Our homes and churches are to be like greenhouses in which we seek to optimize growing conditions for these covenant seedlings. Through our stories and songs, our festivals and fasts, our public and familial worship, our teaching and discipline, and our example and prayer, we control the lighting, humidity and temperature levels in the greenhouse, enabling our little olive plants to flourish.

While neither of these psalms speak directly of infant faith per se, it is easy to see how compatible these images and metaphors are with the Psalter's more literal description of covenant children elsewhere. These images mesh well with David's profession to have been a paedo-believer. No conversion experience is demanded in order for our children to be regarded as arrows or olives; instead this is simply who they are from

their infancy, by virtue of God's covenant. We are called upon to receive and raise them accordingly.[13]

Psalm 58:3 is important to our discussion, even if only by way of contrast. We are told the wicked are alienated from God from birth. Indeed, they are actively, not just potentially, wicked. As soon they are born, they speak lies. Obviously, this forms a sharp contrast with the babies of the righteous who speak truth and praise God even in their youth (cf. Ps. 8:2). But if the sons of the wicked are *practicing* idolatry even from infancy, it only makes sense (in terms of the text's implied contrast) that the children of the righteous are in some way *practicing* righteousness. Their faith is not just latent; it is every bit as concrete and "actual" as the wickedness of covenant breaking children. Of course, both sin and faith will be *more fully* actualized later on life, but the Bible does not draw a hard and fast line between infants and adults in their exercise of the will

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[13] In other words, if the glorious vision of family life described in these two Psalms of Ascent is not realized, something is abnormal. The Psalter is describing the expected, paradigmatic pattern of life for covenant families. Calvin explains:

> It is also to be added, that unless men regard their children as the gift of God, they are careless and reluctant in providing for their support, just as on the other hand this knowledge contributes in a very eminent degree to encourage them in bringing up their offspring. Farther, he who thus reflects upon the goodness of God in giving him children, will readily and with a settled mind look for the continuance of God's grace [through the whole lives of his children]…
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> If the earthly felicity described in this Psalm may not always be the lot of the godly, but it should sometimes happen that…their children are dissolute and vagabonds, and even bring disgrace upon their father's house, let them know that their being deprived of God's blessing is owing to their having repulsed it by their own fault.

See Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms, vol. 2* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993 reprint), 111, 117.

for or against God.[14] There is no religious neutrality, even in the womb.

At this point we should add a qualification. None of these Psalms surveyed indicate that faith among covenant infants is *absolutely* universal. The covenant often has fuzzy boundaries. For example, it is hard to imagine Psalm 22:9-10 applying with the same force during times of declension and idolatry in Israel as it did in David's time, given that he was raised in the godly home of Jesse. In our day, many infants are baptized in a context of apostasy because the family or church (or both institutions) have rejected the orthodox faith and only carry on an outward shell of the sacrament of baptism. In these cases, where a child is baptized unlawfully or where there can be no realistic expectation that baptism will be followed up by parental discipleship and nurture, the probability of infant faith is uncertain.

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[14] This is not a denial of original sin in our children. Again, covenant children are born sinners, as David elsewhere testifies (Ps. 51:5). But our doctrine of original sin also needs to take into account the reality of the covenant of grace and the promises God makes about the children of his people. The children of unbelievers are condemned even before committing any actual sin because they are united to Adam in his primal rebellion (Rom. 5:12ff). We even find that unbelieving children can be judged on account of their parents' sin (e.g., the children living in the Promised Land at the time of Joshua's conquest; the Amalekite children in the time of Saul; etc.). Of course, it is possible God somehow mysteriously saves the infants of the wicked who die in infancy, through uncovenanted mercy, but there is no hard biblical evidence such is the case; at most, we can speculate in hope. Certainly, we cannot question God's justice if he chooses to damn the children of unbelievers dying in infancy. By contrast, God has clearly revealed that the children of believers are included in the promise of salvation. To be sure, they have an inclination to sin because of their natural connection to Adam. But even in the womb, the covenant promises already have some applicability to the child. The Holy Spirit has already begun his work in them to counteract their native depravity. In a sense they are just like newly converted adults—in need of nurture and discipleship so they can grow into the skills, practices, and virtues that constitute the Christian life.

But in more normal circumstances, such as those addressed by the Psalter, where the faith of the parents and the covenant community is in tact, there is no good reason to doubt the presence of faith in the heart of the child. In a faithful situation, the children have faith as well as their parents. The children share their parents' posture of trust and God-ward orientation. They have a favorable relationship with the Lord.[15]

If we ask why there aren't even more references to infant faith in the Psalter (and elsewhere in Scripture), we should note that this is one of those relatively "invisible" doctrines. That is to say, it is everywhere assumed but rarely talked about explicitly. However, there are all kinds of corroborating evidences.

For example, we do not see the patriarchs in Genesis seeking to *convert* their children out of unbelief and into faith when they reach a certain age point. Jesus does not say that little covenant children need to be converted so they can enter the kingdom of God, but says they *already* belong to the kingdom. Paul does not

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[15] Thus, we may speak of Christian families as families of faith. Faith is not just an individual reality, but a communal reality. The importance of corporate faith (and unbelief) is seen throughout Scripture. The daughter of the Gentile woman was healed because of her mother's faith (Mt. 15:21-28). The paralytic was healed because others exercised faith on his behalf, bringing him to Jesus (Mk. 2:1-12). The children in Israelite homes were spared as the Angel of Death passed through Egypt because their parents faithfully put blood on the doorposts (Ex. 12). A child would be cut off from God and the covenant if his parents failed to circumcise him on the eighth day (Gen. 17:13). Note the child himself is charged with covenant breaking, even though he could not have been expected to perform or even ask for his circumcision. He is dependent on the faith of his parents to keep covenant himself. While individual faith is of supreme significance, we can never divorce our personal faith from the corporate faith we share in common with the covenant community. Our children are linked into this corporate faith by virtue of the covenant promises; they participate in the faith of the community by the grace of God. This is why the absence of faith in an apostate community is so disastrous for children. No one comes to faith in isolation, apart from the covenant community. But within an apostate community, individual living faith is extremely difficult to maintain. No man (or child) can function as an island.

tell Ephesian children to believe the gospel, but to obey their parents in the Lord. In other words, he deals with them as saints and disciples, not as unbelievers in need of conversion. In the same way, Paul does not instruct Ephesian fathers to seek the conversion of their children, but instead tells them to provide a comprehensive pattern of training for their children *in the Lord*. For Christians, the whole parent-child relationship is contextualized "in the Lord." And so on.

Everywhere along the way, it assumed that the children of God's people belong to God from their youth, and this assumption is grounded in God's covenant promise. The picture drawn in the Psalter is consistent with what we find in the rest of Scripture.

What Infant Faith Is *Not*: The Role of Baptism and the Psychological Pressure of Communal Expectations

Infant Baptism and Infant Faith

Thus far, we have seen that there is strong biblical warrant for believing that our children are believers. However, we need to clear away a couple of important misconceptions before unpacking the practical implications of this teaching.

First, this doctrine of infant faith means, simply put, that Christian parents give birth to Christian children. After all, what could be more sensible? If anything is evident from providence (not to mention the Bible), God has ordained an intimate life-bond and organic connection between parents and children. Muslims give birth to Muslim children. Jews give birth to Jewish children. Chinese parents give birth to Chinese children. Roman Catholic parents give birth to Roman Catholic children.

Presbyterians give birth to Presbyterian children. Baptists give birth to . . . well, never mind! But the point should be clear. Children inescapably share in the cultural and religious life of their parents.[16]

However, the point is also easily misunderstood because, when it comes to Christian children, there is a complicating factor. Scripture makes it plain that because of our fallenness, everyone is by nature out of fellowship with the living God (e.g., Eph. 2:1ff). Left to themselves, the children of even the holiest parents would be conceived as God-haters and unbelievers. Our children are not innocent or even neutral; they are without God and without hope on their own. Grace is a not a natural possession that can be passed on from one generation to the next the way other traits are. Faith in the Triune God is not a natural inheritance but a gift of divine mercy.

This is precisely why the covenant is so important. The covenant promises reveal that God does *not* leave our children to themselves–even for a moment. He takes initiative to claim the children of his people and make them his own. He does not wait for either parents or the children to make the first move. His grace runs ahead of us, and prepares the way for us. His Spirit is always already there in the life of the covenant child. God's people do not give birth to children of trouble but for blessing (Isa. 65:23; cf. 59:21).

It is sheer mercy, not some natural necessity that makes the next generation partakers of the covenant relationship. Covenant

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[16] The trans-generational nature of the covenant in built into the fabric of creation and rooted in the Trinity. Just as the life of the Father includes the Son, so human sons are included in the lives of their fathers. There is a mystical, trans-generational bond that goes beyond the mere physical, genetic relationship. This is also the reason subsequent generations can share in the blessings of curses that fall upon their ancestors (cf. Rom. 5:12-21; Dt. 5:9-10; 7:9).

membership becomes part of the "givenness" of the child's life situation, not because of his own virtue or his parents' virtue, but because of God's free favor. Covenant children share their parents' relationship with God because God graciously wills it to be so, and binds them to himself. In this way, grace intersects and transforms nature. Grace interrupts the "natural" transmission of the Adamic curse, restoring the creation (specifically the family) in and through Christ and the Spirit.

The only question, then, is this: At what *point* in the life of the covenant child can we expect the grace of God to begin taking effect? At what age in the life of the child do the promises become operational? Does God put his blessing on hold, and wait until the child reaches a certain age to become the God of that child? Or does he act earlier in the child's life, even in the womb? At what age can parents begin to claim and apply God's promises to their children?

The answer of the Psalter is clear. The promises are effective from the moment of conception forward. God is the God of believers; if he is the God of our children, that must mean our children have faith. This does not exempt our children from participating (organically and legally) in the corruption and guilt of original sin. But it means that God is already at work counteracting the native depravity and culpability of our children from the beginning of their lives. There is never a time during which they exist outside the bounds of the covenant of grace. In fact, to affirm original sin, and simultaneously deny that God can and does perform a counterwork in the children of his people is, as Charles Krauth suggested, to make nature more potent than grace since it places a portion of "nature" (infants) in the grasp of sin but beyond the reach of mercy.

Of course, the answer of the Psalter makes perfect sense in light of the promises God makes in his covenant. God does not say, "I will be a God to you and to your teenagers." Nor is it even, "I will be a God to you and to your toddlers." No, it is "I will be a God to you and to your children." The promise covers our children *as soon as they exist*. But note that it is the covenant promises, not some natural faculty, that ensures our children's standing before God. It is the trans-generational covenant of grace, not a biological connection, that makes our children heirs of life together with us. The tie binds parents and children together in the Lord is not shared bloodlines or DNA, but the promised grace of the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies what would otherwise be unclean (cf. 1 Cor. 7:14).[17]

Thus, the sacrament of initiation into the covenant (circumcision in the old covenant, baptism in the new) plays a critical role. The practice of infant baptism *proves* that our children are fallen and that the resources of father and mother cannot restore them. The parents are impotent to pass along saving grace to their children.[18] When parents bring their child

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[17] It has been said that "God has no grandchildren." This is exactly correct. Or is it? After all, God says he provides righteousness (covenant faithfulness) to his children's children (Ps. 103:17). So which is it? Is the covenant truly passed along from one generation to the next? Or does God start over with each new generation? Biblically, it is both, but in a nuanced way. Our children are not included in the covenant by some natural connection (Jn. 1:12-13). After all, we are fallen in Adam, and flesh can only give birth to flesh. Jesus made it clear that natural birth had to be distinguished from the rebirth of water and Spirit (Jn. 3:1-21). On the other hand, God's promises to and about our children overcome the weakness of the flesh, restoring the fallen family bonds through the work of the Spirit via word and sacrament. Covenantal grace grabs hold of the next generation and includes them in God's family with their parents.

[18] The natural impotence of man's reproductive powers to transmit grace is seen in heightened form in the Bible's "seed" theme, beginning in Genesis 3:15. Abraham got tired of waiting for God's promise to come through, and took matters into his own hands by trying to produce the promised seed child in his own strength with Hagar (Gen. 16). In the next chapter of the narrative, God

for baptism they are confessing that child needs a redemption and cleansing they cannot provide. They are confessing the family is fallen and has no redeeming powers within itself. But, again, this is precisely where the covenant promises step into the situation and answer to our need.

This means we must beware of so emphasizing parental nurture that we squeeze out the importance of the covenant administration in the church. Parents are not sacraments, and parental training, no matter how important or influential, cannot replace baptism. There is no substitute for the divinely appointed and ordained means of grace in the church.

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gives Abraham the mark of circumcision to serve as the covenant sign that he will keep the promise in his own time (Gen. 17). Thus, the sign of circumcision is both promise (God will do what Abraham's reproductive organ is too weak to do, namely provide the seed child; cf. Rom. 8:1-4) but also threat (if Abraham misuses circumcision by turning it into a sign of human power rather than fleshly impotence, the next cut will be full castration; cf. Gal. 5:12). Circumcision is thus a sign of man's powerlessness to bring the promised seed into the world; it was never something to boast about.

The circumcision of covenant males is matched by the barrenness of the women's wombs in the book of Genesis. The women are impotent to bear the promised child, unless the Spirit grants them fruitfulness.

This theme is further reinforced by the "flesh" theme in the Levitical law of the Old Testament, which indicates emissions from both men and women are a source of uncleanness, not holiness (Lev. 15). The flesh can only corrupt; it cannot redeem. Thus, childbirth leaves both mother and child unclean. Whatever comes from within humanity (that is, from under the skin, from our innermost being) is defiled and defiling.

Of course, the answer to all of this is the Virginal Conception of Christ (Mt. 1:18) and the gift of the Spirit (Jn. 7:38). This is also why the virgin conception/birth of Jesus is of such great theological significance. It is the ultimate anti-Pelagian doctrine. God must provide the seed. His Spirit must do what the family's powers of natural generation cannot.

Thus, we may say that the Spirit has chosen to make his *primary* conduits the means of grace (word and sacrament, in the context of the church) rather than parental nurture. However, we can also be confident the Spirit uses parental nurture in a *secondary* way, within the broader context of the life of the church to fulfill his gracious purposes.

The purpose of baptism, then, is to put a solid foundation of *grace* underneath the *work* of the parents. Through the ministry of the church, God enfolds families into his eschatological family, so they function as he originally designed (cf. Mal. 4:6). Parental nurture then builds upon the solid foundation laid down in covenantal baptism.

The fact that we baptize our infants manifests and testifies that [1] our children are not "ok" as they are, in a state of nature, but are in need of the cleansing blood of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit, which gifts are already promised to them in baptism; [2] God makes his claim on covenant children through their parents, as they are compelled by promise to bring their children for initiation into the covenant and correspondingly pledge to raise them accordingly; and [3] God acts publicly in baptism to make our children part of his family in their earliest days, loving them long before they can express love in return to him.

So what changes at the baptism of a covenant child? If our children already have faith in some sense, what does baptism effect? *Before baptism*, the covenant is already applicable to our children in some form or fashion. Psalm 22 indicates the Spirit is already at work, even in the womb. Indeed, it is the Sprit's prior work in the child that makes infant baptism reasonable and necessary. When we baptize our children, we are baptizing believers. In evangelical, faithful churches, paedobaptism is a subspecies of believer's baptism. *After baptism*, the covenant becomes the child's full possession, since he has been officially adopted into God's family and united to Christ. In baptism the child transitions into a state the Bible calls "forgiveness" (Acts 2:38) and "regeneration" (Tit. 3:5), though that in no sense precludes possession of those blessings in some way even prior

to baptism. Baptism is not merely a re-appropriation of a pre-existing relationship, but neither does it create a relationship from scratch. Instead, it is the means God uses to bring his relationship with the one baptized into a new and solemnized state. Baptism does for the child what a wedding service does for an engaged women or a coronation service for a prince-in-waiting.

If asked the question, "Do you baptize your children because they are *already* Christians or in order to *make them* Christians?" we can only reply by saying, "Both!" This is like asking a godly man, "Did you marry your wife because you love her, or do you love her because you're married to her?" The pre-baptismal relationship of mutual faith and love provides a basis for baptism; after baptism, the God-child relationship takes on a more formalized covenant structure. Thus, we can do justice to passages which speak of pre-baptismal faith and grace (e.g., Ps. 22:9-10), as well as those which describe baptism as a decisive, transitional event in a person's life (e.g., Rom. 6:1ff; Acts 22:16).[19]

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[19] Those theologians who emphasize the covenant child's positive relationship with God from the womb (e.g., R. C. Sproul Jr.) need to do justice to the Bible's strong language about baptism. They should beware the danger of making parental nurture a quasi-sacramental substitute for the genuine sacrament of baptism. Those who emphasize baptism as a definitive point of transition for the covenant child (e.g., Augustine) must make sure they do justice to what the Bible says about covenant children even in the womb. Of course, they must also be careful to insist that baptism needs to be followed up by a program of parental nurture.

One solution to the pre-/post-baptismal status question is to see "regeneration" as a kind of process, begun in the womb at conception by the Spirit and then completed in the sacrament of baptism. This would make the Spiritual "new birth" analogous to "natural birth," which certainly includes a protracted labor process. Neither the regenerate-from-the-womb position nor the regenerate-at-baptism position can be held in a "hard" sense that excludes the other side of the truth altogether. Arriving at a fully biblical formulation of theological doctrine (in this case the nature and status of the covenant infant) often requires nuance, fine tuning, and delicate balance. Things are rarely simple.

This doctrine of infant faith does not mean that our children never have a conscious point when it first dawns on them that they are believers. Infant faith does not negate the varieties of religious experience our children may undergo. It does not mean that every Christian child should be forced into the same straight jacket of experience, so that they all have identical stories to tell.

In fact, as we continually press upon our children the need to repent and believe, we expect them to experience the grace of God in a wide range of dramatic ways as they grow up. But the way this happens requires us to be willing to rethink the evangelical doctrine of conversion as it is usually understood. We have not done justice to the psychology of the Spirit's work in our children.

What is going when kids today from faithful, evangelical homes grow up and have what are often deemed "conversion" experiences? It is quite simple, actually. Parents and churches insist and expect that that their kids will have a decisive and dateable transition point, and (guess what?) they do so. However, in light of the above data, it is actually likely that such experiences are not about "conversion" per se, except in the more general sense that the whole Christian life is one of continued deeper and deeper conversion from sin and unbelief to repentance and faith (e.g., Lk. 22:32). It is more likely that they are appropriating an already existing relationship with God in a

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If we view the sacrament this way, then Christian parents can understand quite clearly their role. Their function is not to regenerate, as though they could usurp the place of the Holy Spirit or baptism, but to develop and cultivate the new life God has begun in the child.

new and more mature fashion. The confused interpretation of the experience stems from a confused paradigm.

Consider David's case again: he grew up trusting in God, but at several junctures in his life (as we know from numerous Psalms!) he is "re-converted" and renewed as he passes through crisis situations. The same dynamic happens to all of us, including our children. Thus, we shouldn't discount their new experiences of God's grace as they hit puberty, or go off to college, or start families of their own, or face illnesses. These are experiences through which God brings true change, and real spurts of Spiritual growth.

But these "awakenings" or "mini-conversions," however powerful, should not be confused with *initial* conversion, as though the child was not a believer in any sense until he went off to a summer camp in high school or got involved in a campus ministry in college or met with the church elders to state his profession of faith for the first time publicly. These experiences should be interpreted against the backdrop of texts like Psalm 22:9-10 and 71:5-6.

In light of the current evangelical conversionist paradigm, many covenant children grow up and come to despise, or at least discount, the Christian nurture they were given in their youth. They say, "Well actually, I was never a Christian until I got to college and *finally* heard the gospel." But if they grew up in an orthodox context in home and church, this is either a sign that something went drastically wrong or a sign that their experience is being badly misinterpreted.

Unfortunately, this misinterpretation of experience is not harmless. Kids who grow up under Christian nurture in some form or fashion, only to have their experience squeezed into a revivalistic mold, are taught (implicitly or explicitly) to

disregard the worth of God's work in them as children. They do not value the baptism they received in infancy and they become skeptical about the Spiritual experiences of children in general. They think, "I was not a Christian in my youth, and so no one can be." They tend to pin their assurance on an experience.

Further, because the emphasis is placed on their independent decision (often apart from the influence of family or church), they come to regard Christianity as a highly privatized, individualistic affair. They are told to explicitly break with the faith of their parents or the church community, rather than being called into a more personalized appropriation of that same faith. The conversionist paradigm treats the decision to believe in Jesus as a basically autonomous choice, which must be made apart from parental or pastoral persuasion (though explicit or implicit pressure from others is, of course, unavoidable). We have to ask: Is this approach likely to foster in our children an appreciation of the covenant community and the corporate dimensions of Christian living? Or is it going to make them think of Christianity as a privatized "me and Jesus" affair?

In addition, they may all too easily fall into a "once saved always saved" doctrine in which a one-time crisis conversion experience is thought to secure salvation even apart from a subsequent life of obedience. Parents pressure them to make a one-time decision (which is easy enough to coax out of the child), and then fail to follow-up with the much harder work of discipling them in the whole counsel of God. All this fosters an unhealthy view of the means of grace and a hankering after spectacular experiences rather than an appreciation for God's more ordinary ways of working in the sacraments and the covenant family. It puts more weight on a crisis conversion experience then the objective promises of God.

The bottom line is this: The Psalter is the Bible's comprehensive handbook of covenant life and experience, and yet (as we have seen) *there is not a shred of evidence that covenant children must pass through some distinct "conversion" experience, or make some independent decision, in order to be regarded as believers and full members of the people of God.* In the covenantal paradigm, we continually call upon our children to express and live out their faith, but we do not ever treat them as unbelievers (unless and until they grow up and apostatize.) Nor do we call upon them to make an independent, autonomous decision in favor of Christ, since such a decision is impossible anyway.[20]

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[20] No one comes to faith autonomously or independently, whether child or adult. It is impossible to become a Christian apart from the instrumentality of the church. Even a man on a deserted island who comes across a Bible and believes what he reads in it is still dependent on the church, for the church has preserved, transmitted, translated, and printed the Bible. God has worked in such a way that Christian faith is embedded in human history and community. No one comes to faith because they got hit with a bolt of grace from the wild blue yonder. We always come to faith in a relational, communal context. The Spirit's work is embedded in the church body. The church is not an adjunct to the gospel, but the embodied community through which the gospel is preserved and passed along. Lesslie Newbigin explains in his *Truth and Authority in the Modernity* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity International Press, 1996), 30-1:

> There would only seem to be two possibilities. One would be that God should make his authority known directly to every individual conscience without intervention of any other human agency. But this suggestion is absurd, for no human being develops either reason or conscience except through participating in the intercourse of a human community, family, society, culture. Because no human experience is totally private, divine revelation could not be totally private. The other possibility is that divine revelation should be a matter of public history . . .It is therefore hard to imagine how there could be any other divine revelation authoritative for the whole of human history except one that embraced the three elements we have noted above: a living community, a tradition of teaching, and the continuing work of the divine Spirit illuminating the tradition in each new generation and each new situation, so that it becomes the living speech of God for that time, place, and culture.

The church is not a loose collection of individuals, held together by nothing more than a series of private, personal decisions for Christ. Rather, the church is

Colin Buchanan provides some helpful thoughts on how infant faith functions as the child matures psychologically and Spiritually. There is no legitimate psychological argument against infant faith and to deny its possibility creates insuperable practical problems:

> To put this another way – it is not that one day a child comes face to face with the Savior and makes a conscious decision. It is that, growing up in a home where the Savior is known, only slowly does it dawn upon the child that there are odd people (at school and elsewhere) who are trying to live life on their own. One could go further into the psychology of this. Is it, for instance, probable that the parents stand *in loco Dei* from the earliest moments, and the transfer of devotion to God himself by the child is a gradual and unselfconscious process which he or she cannot possibly be expected to report accurately? If so, we are surely best trying to treat the child as a believer in the true God, rather than try to catch the child at the point of the watershed, and baptize him or her then. It is not, after all, that the child is passing from heresy to faith – it is that God himself has chosen to reveal himself to the child in this way, and the faith in a parent who is *in loco Dei* is to be accepted as faith in God. Consciousness, we say, *dawns*. But who can say when dawn begins? Many psychologists would say this dawn begins before birth.[21]

God's new family, formed by organic bonds of the Spirit. The church is the Mother of all believers, giving birth and nurturing her children through the means of grace.

[21] *A Case for Infant Baptism*, 27. A big part of the reason so many of our children cannot relate directly to David's words in Psalm 22 is because we have *trained them* (that is, *conditioned them*) to seek after and interpret their experiences of God's grace through a different (conversionist) paradigm. Once again, Buchanan (*A Case for Infant Baptism*, 27) provides some helpful insight:

> Whilst we are well aware that some Christians can confidently assert that they were 'converted' at the ages of five, six, and seven, we wonder whether they were in a position to report this clearly at the time. Certainly where children have been treated as Christians, we would not expect there to be such a conscious crisis as the ability to report a conversion would presuppose. And if they are not to be treated as Christians then the pressures upon them to profess faith, in terms they have been taught, must surely be such that parents are likely to be skeptical as to whether profession *does* imply true faith. As noted above, we deprecate this latter approach as unbiblical and unhelpful.
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> But the Baptist position more often seems to be that we are not justified in treating repentance and faith as genuine until much older

The fundamental problem with the conversionist paradigm is not that the children lack faith, but that their parents do! They refuse to take the covenant promises about their children seriously. Again, I am not necessarily saying the conversion experiences of evangelical kids are "trumped up" by parental and ecclesial expectations, but I do think those expectations bear a lot of weight in shaping their Spiritual experiences. The wrong framework is controlling how they interpret the data of their own experience.[22] If we applied the Davidic paradigm to our children (reckoning them as believers and treating them accordingly from infancy onwards), we might be surprised at how differently their experiences of God's grace would look and feel and sound. No doubt, they would be considerably more in line with the testimony given in Psalm 22:9-10.

Montagu Barker has also examined several factors that shape the way we experience God's grace (or at least the way we interpret our experience of God's grace). Our personality

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years. So we press the question again – are young children not allowed by Church discipline to be true believers? Is this 'age of discretion' scriptural?

In other words, infant faith is not really any more problematic than the faith of a five year old since they are on a continuum. And if the child's earliest profession of love for Jesus is to be accepted at (say) age two, why not simply treat the child as a believer from the beginning? The whole process of seeking to determine the "genuineness" of a child's profession is incredibly artificial. It is simply impossible to expect children to make a totally life changing decision at such an age–*if indeed the decision for faith at that age is life changing*. But if God has *already* put faith in our children's hearts from infancy, nothing is more "natural" than for them to begin to express this faith in open profession as they grow up under our training. This profession does not mark the beginning of faith, but the beginning of their ability to *articulate* faith. And we need not question its authenticity. Instead we should seek ways to strengthen and encourage it for the long haul ahead, so that the child matures in faithfulness as he grows.

[22] If I may risk an analogy: Covenantal theologians reinterpret the experience of children raised up and "converted" in revivalist contexts the same way cessationist theologians reinterpret the experiences of their charismatic brethren.

tendencies play a critical role in the way we process experiences and the expectations we create for ourselves and others.[23] Even more relevant for our purposes is Barker's demonstration that our religious experiences and practices are radically shaped by the family and church context in which we grow up. Barker's fascinating study explains how various branches of evangelicalism have emphasized their own particular understandings of conversion, with unsurprising results:

> [T]here are still churches where a certain kind of conversion experience is expected, and even demanded, and by a process of suggestion and exclusion the pattern tends to be repeated. The more suggestible the individual the more readily will the experience be reproduced. The less suggestible the individual, the greater may be the difficulty in reproducing the expected experience and consequently the greater the distress for that individual. This was particularly noteworthy in the Kentucky Camp Meetings of the nineteenth century in the United States. Whole families with adolescent children were marched off to these yearly meetings, and then in response to a week's preaching all the children returned soundly converted every year. That was the way it was done. This is still seen in some denominations in Europe, where sudden conversion experiences are particularly valued.

Statistics bear out Barker's thesis with remarkable consistency:

> There was a questionnaire on conversion given to some theological students some years ago. Among the students of a particular Baptist college, ninety seven per cent of the students had had a conversion experience. The majority of them had had a sudden conversion

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[23] See Barker's essay "Psychological Aspects of Inner Healing" in *Pulpit and People: Essays in Honor of William Still on His 75th Birthday* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House Books, 1986), 86-102. Barker's examples of the diverse pieties of John Wesley, George Whitefield, Martin Luther, and John Calvin on pages 92-3 bear this out wonderfully. He also shows that various Christian groups that regard a particular form of experience as normative or especially desirable (e.g., tongues, the baptism of the Spirit, a type of conversion experience, etc.) end up having those stereotyped experiences reproduced in their members. Unfortunately, as Barker shows by looking at the dispute between 17th century German pietists and the Moravians, these distinctive experiences have all too often been made into tests of salvation or orthodoxy and have been used to divide the people of God. It is all too easy for us to pigeon hole others, while being oblivious to our own biases. The frameworks we use to interpret and describe our experiences are of tremendous importance; indeed, they are inseparable from the experiences themselves in some cases.

> experience. Within the evangelical Anglican College studied, ninety three per cent of the students had had a conversion experience, but only fifty per cent of the students had had a sudden experience. Within an Anglo-Catholic College fifty per cent of the students had had a conversion experience but none of them had had a sudden conversion experience. Even among evangelicals with the same theology of regeneration the frequency of the actual type of conversion experience may be very different according to church background.[24]

In other words, when it comes to covenant children, we basically get what we expect (because our expectations are inescapably tied to our faith in God's covenant and shape the way we carry out the parenting project). Our children are extremely malleable, and we have incredible influence over their sense of identity and their interpretation of experience. Given these facts, why not expect (by faith) the best case scenario? Why not impress upon our children a Christian self-concept from the beginning? Why not expect our children to grow up as believers (especially since the surest way to lead them to unbelief is to treat them as unbelievers)? Why not reinforce their covenantal identity from their earliest days so that we do not lose precious time that can be used positively in character formation? Why not expect every covenant child to share David's testimony? In short, why not expect God to keep his promises from the very beginning of our children's lives?

Infant Faith in Light of Science and Psychology

[24] Barker, 94. Of course, Barker admits that none of our paradigms can ultimately squelch the work of the Spirit. He works in and through our various ecclesiastical traditions and paradigms. God's grace cannot be stifled by our distorted uses of his appointed means. However, that is not to say that all these approaches have equal biblical validity. A more biblically-shaped model is more likely to receive God's blessing and "go with the grain" of the Spirit's pattern of working. Defective, sub-biblical ways of dealing with covenant children may still bear fruit, but can have adverse effects downstream.

Our case for covenantal infant faith rests exclusively on a biblical basis. It is the teaching of Scripture that drives us to believe that our children are already believers. But within the framework of a biblical world view, there is room for bringing in extra-biblical evidence, provided we evaluate it in light of Scripture and do not allow it usurp Scripture's authority.[25] We have already gestured towards this point in various ways above, as we have touched on extra-biblical corroborations for the infant faith paradigm, but now we will explore that evidence more fully.

A recent lead article in *Newsweek* magazine examined the latest discoveries in baby brain research. We now have more insight than ever into how even preverbal babies think and feel. Obviously, all data of this nature is tentative and open to revision,[26] but it is still interesting to examine, especially since it seems to reinforce to the biblical teaching we've already seen in the Psalter.

Pat Wingert and Martha Brant's research explains the even the youngest infants have rich and complex relational capacities. They have near "superpowers" of observation and are sophisticated social learners well before their first birthdays:

> The helpless, seemingly clueless infant staring up at you from his crib, limbs flailing, drool oozing, has a lot more going on inside his head than you ever imagined. A wealth of new research is leading pediatricians and child psychologists to rethink their long-held beliefs about the emotional and intellectual abilities of even very young babies. In 1890, psychologist William James famously described an

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[25] On the use of extra-biblical evidence within a biblical worldview, and its relation to Scriptural truth, see John Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1994), 22ff.

[26] It has been wisely said, "She who marries the science of today will be a widow tomorrow." But we should not assume something is false just because a scientist said it! Science, kept in proper bounds, is a helpful tool for understanding our world, and in those cases when we find it meshing with biblical truth, we should not be afraid to make secondary use of it.

> infant's view of the world as "one great blooming, buzzing confusion." It was a notion that held for nearly a century: infants were simple-minded creatures who merely mimicked those around them and grasped only the most basic emotions—happy, sad, angry. Science is now giving us a much different picture of what goes on inside their hearts and heads. Long before they form their first words or attempt the feat of sitting up, they are already mastering complex emotions—jealousy, empathy, frustration—that were once thought to be learned much later in toddlerhood.
>
> They are also far more sophisticated intellectually than we once believed. Babies as young as 4 months have advanced powers of deduction and an ability to decipher intricate patterns. They have a strikingly nuanced visual palette, which enables them to notice small differences, especially in faces, that adults and older children lose the ability to see. Until a baby is 3 months old, he can recognize a scrambled photograph of his mother just as quickly as a photo in which everything is in the right place. And big brothers and sisters beware: your sib has a long memory—and she can hold a grudge.

Research suggests that relational skills like emotional sensitivity and language aptitude are actually better indicators of future competency in adulthood than are motor skills. There is also ample evidence to suggest what we saw above in our survey of the Psalter, namely, that infants are capable of relational interaction. They are "hard-wired" for empathy and other inter-personal emotions. But they only empathize with other *living* babies crying in their presence, not with tape recordings of babies crying. They can detect the presence of others and interact with them at some level.

Infants have highly refined personal and relational skills. They are skilled at discerning the emotional states of others from facial expressions. They pick up on language skills from other humans, but not from recordings of human speech. In other words, they learn in the context of relationship, where there is some emotional attachment to another person. One researcher concludes, "[P]eople – at least babies – need people to learn." Again, this fits well with Psalm 22—David learned of God through his mother. In her womb and at her breast, she became

the means through which God reached him and created a relationship of trust.

Wingert and Brant summarize their research as it pertains to infant relationships:

> Children crave—and thrive on—interaction, one-on-one time and lots of eye contact. That doesn't mean filling the baby's room with "educational" toys and posters. A child's social, emotional and academic life begins with the earliest conversations between parent and child: the first time the baby locks eyes with you; the quiet smile you give your infant and the smile she gives you back. Your child is speaking to you all the time. It's just a matter of knowing how to listen.[27]

If infants are capable of relational engagement and bonding with other humans–indeed, if they are specially suited for just this kind of interaction–what should hinder them from interacting relationally with the ever present God in whose image we are all made? What should prevent God from using the most basic forms of parental care and nurture (e.g., breastfeeding; cf. Ps. 22:10) to create a bond with the child from life's earliest days? Infant faith is entirely plausible in light of our best understanding of infant psychology. Current scientific data on infants (for what's it worth) is entirely consistent with the Scriptural picture. It would be absurd to say that parents can have a relationship of trust with their child *before* God can. It would be incongruous to say that parents are in a better position to cultivate a mutual relationship of love *before* the child's Creator and Lord can do so. At the very least, the child's relational connection to his parents should be understood to coincide with his relational connection with God. As soon as parents can have a relationship with the child, God can as well.

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[27] Quotations and data in this section taken from Pat Wengert and Martha Brant, "Reading Your Babies Mind," *Newsweek* (August15, 2005), available at http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/8852928/site/newsweek/.

There are other studies of note. For example, Melanie Catania's short article "What Do Babies Think before They Start Talking?" in *Exploration: The Online Research Journal of Vanderbilt University*[28] suggests babies have ways of categorizing things before speech develops. They can think before they can speak. This would obviously bear upon those pastors and parents who want to emphasize a *verbal profession* as the only way to ascertain faith in the heart of a child. Faith (relational trust) can pre-exist speech.

The books by Alison Gopnik, Andrew Meltzoff, and Patricia Kuhl, *How Babies Think: The Science of Childhood* (London: Orion, 2001) and *The Scientist in the Crib: What Early Learning Tells Us About the Mind* (New York: William and Morrow, 1999), while not deriving from anything like biblical presuppositions, contain a lot of interesting information about infant abilities and development. Much here can be "pirated" for use by covenant theologians and set within a biblical frame of reference. Given that John the Baptist was able to respond to Mary and Jesus while still in the womb (Lk. 1:41, 44) , we should not underestimate the abilities of *in utero* children. John the Baptist was able to respond to Mary's voice; why shouldn't other covenant children be able to respond to adult speech as well? John the Baptist was able to receive blessing in the womb (Lk. 1:42); why shouldn't other covenant children receive blessing in the same way? There is no biblical or scientific basis for excluding covenant children from responsive relationships of trust and love.

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[28] Available at http://www.vanderbilt.edu/exploration/print/pdfs/news/news_baby.pdf.

Carol Sorgen's essay "Bonding with Baby Before Birth"[29] argues that "making a connection with your unborn child can strengthen the bond you share, make you feel closer, and enrich you and your baby's lives." The article provides evidence that parenting actually begins before birth. Babies can bond and respond in the womb. They can actually begin to exercise trust in the context of relationships from very early in life: "When there's a healthy attachment between baby and parent…the baby comes to believe that the world is a safe place. This is the beginning of the establishment of trust." The article recommends practices such as talking to the baby in the womb, playing music, and even playing "games," because the baby is already a responsive person. Other studies have shown that failure to bond with caregivers in infancy can have life-long disastrous effects on relational, emotional, and even physical development. The early period of a child's life is extremely formative.[30]

Finally, we should note that many of the things being learned about infancy correspond to what is being learned about elderly senility. For example, Lynn Bolt Rosendale's article "Alzheimer's and Faith,"[31] suggests that while older Christians who develop Alzheimer's may no longer be able to follow a sermon or a Bible reading plan, they can be blessed by participation in the sacramental meal in the context of other believers:

> "It's amazing the awakening of memory that taking communion can have," he said. "It offers an upholding sense of community. It also takes on a new meaning—this is the presence of Christ for you. It

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[29] Available at http://www.webmd.com/content/article/57/66217.htm

[30] See, e.g., the news article "Neglect 'leaves a physical mark'" (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/4456082.stm).

[31] Available at http://www.calvin.edu/publications/spark/2003/summer/alzheimers.htm.

> makes it real and concrete in a manner that those suffering with Alzheimer's are capable of experiencing."
>
> Weaver suggests that the church might consider the importance that sacramental worship has for effective pastoral care. "In fact," he wrote, "the episodes of greatest spiritual assurance for Alzheimer's patients seem to arise in regular opportunities to relive very familiar practices that witness to the spiritual meaning of a person's life. I like to think of these experiences as patients' participation in the rhythms of God's grace."

Both the very young and the very old are capable of relating to God and receiving from God apart from fully operational mental faculties. Only sheer ageism (often masked under rationalism, which privileges those with strong, clear minds) prevents us from seeing these truths.

Having built a case for covenantal infant faith *primarily* from the Psalter and *secondarily* from science, we now to turn to the practical and pastoral import of this teaching.

Infants Dying in Infancy

If the doctrine of infant faith sketched above is true to Scripture, then the question about the fate of covenant infants dying in infancy is all but answered. If salvation is received through faith, and our infants have faith, they have salvation. For those infants whose covenant membership is secure (e.g., those not in liberal or apostate churches), there is no reason to doubt their salvation. In the fuzzier cases, we may have considerably less certainty, but we can remain hopeful. Perhaps their early death was a great mercy.

Now, to be sure, we could still ask if *all* our covenant infants actually have *saving* faith in the strongest sense of that term. After all, many infants who have faith and grow to years of discretion stumble and fall away from the faith (cf. Mt. 18:6), showing they never possessed *saving* faith in the full,

persevering sense.[32] Infant faith is a reality, but the possibility of apostasy is as well.

This is quite possibly what we find in the case of Esau (though not all exegetes believe he was a reprobate).[33] Esau received the covenant promises in his circumcision, just like Jacob, but later rejected his inheritance, in accord with God's decretal rejection of him (cf. Gen. 25:12-34; Rom. 9:10-13). But even those covenant children who turn out to be Esaus are given an *initial* covenantal inheritance, though (sadly and tragically) they eventually forsake it. They have the same starting point, covenantally speaking, as covenant children who will persevere in faith. Unless God gives parents specific revelation that he has reprobated one of their children, as he did to Isaac and Rebekah, Christian parents should regard their children as full covenant members, with a conditional promise of covenantal inheritance. If a Christian parent asks, "How do I know if my child is an Esau or a Jacob?" we must remind him that he has to be governed by what God has revealed (Dt. 29:29). God has revealed covenant promises that are applicable to every covenant child, head-for-

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[32] A related question is: Are all covenant children regenerated? This depends on what is meant by "regeneration," of course. If regeneration is used in the strong, decretal sense of the Westminster Confession and popular Calvinism, the answer is "no." Not all covenant children grow up and persevere to the end. Not all covenant children will experience eschatological salvation. Some will grow up and break covenant. In that sense, not all covenant children are elect or regenerate.

In another sense, though, we can affirm all covenant children are ordinarily regenerate. All covenant children enter into "the regeneration," which is the kingdom and new creation of Christ (cf. Mt. 19:14, 28). All covenant children experience union with Christ and the indwelling of the Spirit in some sense. They receive a new identity and enter into a new set of relationships with God and the covenant community. In this sense, they share in a new form of life, justly termed "regeneration." But this covenantal, ecclesial regeneration is no automatic guarantee of eternal life.

[33] See James B. Jordan, *Primeval Saints: Studies in the Patriarchs of Genesis* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2001), ch. 8.

head. He has not told us that our children are reprobates. We should raise our children in terms of the covenant promises and trust God for the rest. Our parenting methods should not be controlled by the fearful reality that our child might not be elect. Instead, we should walk by faith, even in our child-rearing.[34]

The case of Esau certainly reminds us of the mixed nature of infant faith. But there is *no reason* to assume that any of our children, taken from us in their earliest days, have apostatized. In other words, we can have the same confidence about their salvation we would have in the case of *any* mature, faithful adult who dies in the context of the covenant community. (We could always ask, "If Joe had lived longer, would he have eventually apostatized?" but what would be the point?)

Covenant infants who die in infancy have saving faith and no one can prove otherwise. Grieving parents should be made to feel the full weight of this, availing themselves of *all* the comfort God's covenant has to offer. Losing a child is still painful, but at least the child is safely in the arms of God, enjoying the glory of heaven and awaiting the final resurrection. We can share the confidence of David in this matter (cf. 2 Sam. 12:22-23).[35]

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[34] Esau really possessed the inheritance and really transferred it to Jacob. We do not do justice to the text of Genesis if we pretend that Esau had no covenant birthright or blessing prior to his rash act of apostasy. Maintenance of covenantal blessings is always conditioned on persevering in faith, which Esau apparently failed to do, according to the common reading of the story. But we must note that Esau's fall from grace was not apart from means (including failed parental nurture and his own disregard of his parents' wishes).

[35] David's deceased child died as a "sacrifice" for the sins of his father, who committed murder and adultery. He took the death penalty David deserved. A new child (Solomon) was raised up in his place. Interestingly, David's first son perished on the seventh day (2 Sam. 12:18), which means he died uncircumcised, if the days are counted from birth (rather than the onset of illness). This would indicate the sacrament is not *absolutely* necessary for salvation. The promise alone is sufficient in such cases.

Infant Faith, Pastoral Practice, and Covenant Nurture

This doctrine of infant faith also has important implications for parental nurture. How we care for our children reveals our deepest religious commitments. Parenting bridges the gap between theology and practice; as we nurture our children, our theology flows out our fingertips and mouths into public view. Our operating instructions, as parents, are found in the Bible's teaching on the covenant. Far, far too many of our parenting discussions (e.g., the nature vs. nurture debate) leave out the vital role of God's covenant. We fail to believe God's promises and parent accordingly. We wrongly either presume (note that presumption is quite different from faith!) upon God and grow lax, or we cut our children off from God for all practical purposes and become hardened legalists.

Full treatment of this deep and controversial topic would require something more like a book. To put things briefly, we should note that parents must have a grasp of the nature of the child they are called to raise. The Psalter's doctrine of infant faith stands against all forms of conversion*ism*, which put certain models or types of conversion experience at the center of the Christian life. *Conscious* experience of both conviction of sin and of God's redemptive grace must take place in due time in the covenant child. But however important those experiences are, they cannot be absolutized into the sole barometer of a child's Spiritual state. After all, our experience often deceives us; in the end we must rely upon the sure and firm Word of God. Moreover, we must interpret our experience in light of God's revealed covenant, rather than looking at the covenant in the light of our experience. The covenant is not the product of our experience, but the ground of it.

Faith in its mature form includes manifest and multifaceted conscious experiences of God's grace. We expect and anticipate these things in our children, as they come to own the covenant more and more fully for themselves. However, the Davidic paradigm in the Psalter shows that growing up in the covenant does not *require* a dramatic conversion experience in which a child can name the time and place of his salvation; indeed, such an experience might be a sign something has gone terribly wrong somewhere along the way.[36] Likewise, in the new covenant, the words of Jesus (Mt. 18:1-14; 19:13-15) and the experience of Timothy (2 Tim. 3:14-15) show that covenant nurture-unto-perseverance is still the norm for children of believers in the new age. The "normal" covenant child is one who (like David!) grows up never remembering a day when he did not trust the Lord and know him as Father.

So, to answer our earlier question, we seek to *disciple* our children, rather than *evangelize* them. They are not merely "likely converts" or "prospective Christians" or "potential disciples;" they are *already* members of the kingdom of Christ because of God's covenant promise (cf. Mt. 19:14). This should not be misunderstood, however. *We still give our children the gospel*. But

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[36] The Psalter is so helpful at precisely this point because it holds together the objective and subjective sides of the covenant. On the one hand, David views his infancy, and indeed the rest of his life, through the lens of the objective covenant promises. The Psalms can serve to train our emotions in the way God desires by showing what we should feel and how we should express it. On the other hand, the Psalter records numerous "renewal" experiences in David's life. His experience of grace is dynamic, not static. Those who emphasize the objectivity of the covenant (that is, what is true even apart from our experience) should be careful to not overly downplay or minimize experiences (even dramatic and mystical experiences) of God's grace. The covenant, of course, provides the context and backdrop against which these experiences should be interpreted. Just as a husband and wife can have their ups and downs, all the while remaining objectively united in covenant, so it is in our "marriage" to God.

we do not offer it to them as though they were outsiders to it. Instead we give it to them in such a way that they will *know* the gospel is already their treasured possession.[37] They are part of the people of God, the community of faith. As such, the gospel story is *their story*, and they are to increasingly internalize it and frame their lives according to it.[38] They are to be brought up from within the circle of God's favor, rather than being told they need to *do something* to enter into that favor. They *began* in grace; we train them to *continue* in that same grace.

Again, certainly, we expect our children to have a wide array of experiences of God's grace as they grow up under his covenant care and nurture at home and in the church. The covenant promises do not turn us into cookie-cutter parents. Every covenant child is unique and the program of covenantal child-rearing must be tailored for the special needs, strengths, and weaknesses of each covenant child. The covenant has a subjective side, and for the blessings of the covenant to be realized, they must be received by a living, vibrant, growing faith. As the child's faith moves toward maturity, the child will experience his faith in the gospel at work overcoming trials,

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[37] Or, to put this another way, we remember that God's promises about our children are intrinsic to the gospel. The gospel itself is trans-generational in scope. It is not merely for individuals, but for families and cultures.

[38] Saying that we should give the gospel to our children is not controversial. But there are two ways we can give them the gospel. I am suggesting here that we should give it to them as a possession already bestowed upon them, not merely as an offer that stands outside them and awaits their mature, intellectual response.

In other words, we do not simply teach our children, "Jesus died on the cross for sinners and we hope some day you will trust him." Instead, we teach, "Jesus died for *you.* He has given you his Spirit to help you live a life of gratitude and faith. You are part of his people, so act like it." There is quite a difference between these two forms of applying the gospel to our children, of course, but the latter is much more like the method of instruction given to parents in Deuteronomy 6 and Psalm 78.

resisting temptation, seeking the Lord's guidance through prayer, and so forth. At times, the child may be overwhelmed with the reality of God's grace and at other times the child may experience a period of aloofness.[39] There may be crisis points, through which God's grace is experienced in unique and fresh ways. But the child should not be trained to seek after or expect a dramatic *conversion* experience from unbelief into faith as the absolutely necessary mark of true religion.[40] This experientialism has been the bane of much American evangelicalism, going back to some of the more extreme Puritans, and especially the revivalists of the Second Great Awakening. It has affected every sector of the American church. More often than is bearable, its pessimism regarding covenant children has led to self-fulfilling prophecies of children who walk away from the church, oftenm for good.[41]

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[39] See Westminster Confession of Faith 18.3. Once again, the analogy of marriage is obviously helpful here. A couple may have all kinds of wonderful experiences over the course of a lifetime together. But none of those experiences usurp the place of the wedding day, the objective event that brought them together as husband and wife. In fact, that objective transition in status is the basis for all subsequent experiences. The objectivity of the covenant does not cancel out Christian experience, but gives it solid footing. Those covenant children raised in believing homes who are taught to think of a certain experience in later years as their conversion (e.g., when they got involved in a college ministry) are like a couple that confuses their second honeymoon with their wedding day.

[40] And, yes, this means you may need to prepare your children for what they will face if you send them off to an evangelical summer camp, or if they get involved in certain kinds of youth groups or campus ministries in high school and college. American evangelicalism has fostered all kind of ministries that have absolutely no consciousness of the covenant and no appreciation for parental nurture in Christian homes. The only form of Christianity they know is centered around individual decisions and experiences.

[41] I briefly documented the rise of revivalism in *Paedofaith*, 90ff. Another very helpful historical account is found in Tom Trouwborst's essay "From Covenant to Chaos: The Reformers and Their Heirs on Covenant Succession," 59-103, in *To You and Your Children: Examining the Biblical Doctrine of Covenant Succession* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2005), edited by Benjamin K. Wikner.

Covenant-based parenting provides an alternative to the revivalist, conversionist model. Thus, covenant nurture in the home should help parents guard against both anxiety ("Will my child ever become a believer?") and presumption ("My child is already a covenant member, so my work is done"). Or, translated into more practical terms, a proper notion of the covenant helps parents steer clear between the shoals of both legalism and permissiveness.

The covenant contextualizes rules that parents make by situating those standards in an environment of grace. The covenant also provides a secure basis for mutual forgiveness and fellowship in day-to-day life within the home. Apart from this understanding of the covenant (including faith's origins in infancy), children would have to be regarded as alien (pagan) invaders into a Christian home. Parents would have no reasonable basis for expecting their children to be able to measure up to Christian norms of conduct. If they are non-Christians, how can we impose a Christian morality on them?[42] If our children do not possess the grace of God, what can we do to

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Trouwborst's essay is especially insightful in tracing out the paradigmatic shift from "covenant" to "conversion" in some segments of British/American Puritanism and Dutch pietism, as well as the partial return to a "covenant" model in some nineteenth century Reformed theologians. He also demonstrates the pressing need to recover the biblical faith in covenant succession, lest our efforts at combating contemporary liberalism, humanism, modernism, and postmodernism go wasted.

[42] This problem is greatly exacerbated by those theologians and pastors who do not think that children can manifest faith until the teenage years. If we cannot expect any covenant fruit in our children before then, we are practically conceding that their most formative years of life belong to the world. But ironically, the world knows that our children are in some sense Christian (even if we refuse to regard them as such!) and view rebellion on the part of our children as yet another reason to reject the gospel. To wait until our children reach some hypothetical age of reason or accountability to begin Spiritually forming them is to leave too much to chance.

motivate them or enforce a Christian pattern of life upon them? All we have are rules, rules, and more rules – usually focused only on externals and applied with an ever shortening fuse. This is a recipe for disaster.[43]

The covenant means that parents should be controlled by faith rather than fear as they undertake one of the greatest tasks on earth. Parents should trust in God's covenant promises, not their own ability to build hedges around the home that will keep the world from reaching into their kids' lives. Parents should trust in God's covenant rather than their ability to manipulate their kids into obedience through setting a near-perfect example, or disciplining in just the right way every time it's needed, or whatnot. Parents should trust God, not their own efforts. But having put their faith in God, they should *make every effort*. Faith *works*, after all. The works of faith may often be outwardly indistinguishable from the works of the flesh, but the difference is absolute. Faithful, promise-driven parenting is calm, confident, and consistent. Fleshly parenting is full of anxiety and fear. Because of the comfort found in the promises, parents should be diligent, but they should not put undue pressure on themselves. Any assurance they have that their children will walk with the Lord should spring from the gracious promises and work of God, not their masterful parenting skills. When they fail (as all parents do every day), they should call on God's grace to overcome their weaknesses and fill in their gaps. They should

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[43] God motivates his children with grace, such as in the preface to the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:1-2). When they have sinned, he reminds them that they have sinned not merely against the law but against his grace (e.g., Jdg. 6:7-10). Covenant parents are to follow the same pattern (e.g., Dt. 6:20-25). God is the model Parent. But, of course, the analogy only holds up if our children share in the covenant relationship.

ask forgiveness from their children if they have sinned against them and look to the cross for consolation.

Parents do not need to worry about the status of their covenant children. God has made a promise about their children that can be trusted. They may be assured that God is at work in their children's lives and will continue that good work. They should begin with the end already in view. Their aim is to produce mature disciples of Christ. Like farmers, they are called upon to cultivate the seed of faith that has already been planted. They tend it and fertilize it through faithful application of the means of grace, by administering loving and prayerful discipline, and by creating an ethos of humility, charity, and hilarity in the home. God will take care of the growth.

When parents raise their children accordingly, they are going *with the grain* of God's prior and ongoing work in the lives of their children. They are strengthening and reinforcing their children's faith so they can live their whole lives according to the good beginning made in infancy, aligned with the covenant promises and the work of the Spirit even in the womb.

Knowing that their children are already inclined to faith also encourages parents to deal with heart and attitude issues rather than merely outward behaviors. God's promises provide parents with a basis for *expecting* and *requiring* the child to practice Christian virtues of love, joy, and respect. We assume our kids will struggle with sin as they grow up (as all Christians do), but we also trust that God has provided them with resources necessary to deal with sin and grow in holiness. The covenant promises should not make parents naively optimistic about their children. We must remain utterly realistic about the force of indwelling sin in Christians, especially those who are the most foolish and unlearned. We must remember that our children are

"baby Christians," with a long road to travel before they reach maturity. Our calling is to help them get there.[44] We should also always keep in mind that we are merely parents, not gods. We cannot control how our children respond to the grace God gives them, or to our nurturing efforts, or to situations they encounter in the world. While our parental diligence is highly influential in their character formation, it is not the only factor. We should resist the temptation to get cheap and easy results through manipulation or a focus on mere externals.

Parents should view their children through the lens of God's covenant promises. At the same time, parents should not take the covenant blessings for granted. There is nothing mechanical or automatic about the covenant promises. Parents must bank on God's promises with a diligent, working faith, but faith is not the same as presumption. They must teach their children to rely on those promises as well, and warn them against simply counting on their Christian heritage as a guarantee of salvation (cf. Mt. 3:9). Our children must be trained to never treat their covenant membership as an inalienable right or a deserved privilege. Instead it is a precious family treasure to be guarded and preserved at all costs.

If the child grows up and refuses to embrace the promises on his own, or grows up to live in flagrant rebellion against the covenant, he will need to be called to repentance. Eventually, he may even need to be disciplined formally by the church if he proves totally recalcitrant. (One of the most helpful by-products

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[44] In other words, we are continually exhorting our children to repent and believe, to turn from sin and seek God's forgiveness. Of course, as their saved-but-still-sinful parents, we should be continually modeling this pattern of life for them in the home. We teach them to repent from sin, believe the gospel in ever greater measure, and fight against the world, the flesh, and the devil in the power of the Spirit. We train them to imitate us as we follow Christ in faith.

of taking our children's covenant membership seriously is that it gives us leverage to use against them if they ever do rebel. We have traction to do church discipline with them. But disciplinary action should always be shot through with love, humility,, patience, and readiness to forgive. Anger and self-righteousness make a travesty of the disciplinary process.)

Focusing on covenant faithfulness means we will be rather counter-cultural in our parenting principles and methods. Whereas most American parents simply want their children to be comfortable and happy, and thus cave in to wanton consumerism and hedonism in parental practices, we will be far more focused on producing children who are humble, holy, and disciplined. We teach our children that God is more concerned with their conformity to Christ than their personal comfort, and more concerned with their holiness than their happiness.

Covenant consciousness also reminds us we have a stake in more than just the Spiritual health of our own children. Thus, we will not be focused only on our own children in a narrow minded (and narrow hearted) way, but will also take concern for other children in the covenant community since we know our children's lives are so intertwined with their lives. Thus, we will want to be a part of creating a church culture in which children can thrive as they wrestle with the call to embody the gospel's radically alternative lifestyle of cruciform service. We will not demand uniformity from other families but will strive for like-mindedness as much as possible, while allowing for legitimate, methodological differences in the application of biblical truth.

We will not coddle our children with the ethic of instant gratification, we will not make excuses for their sins and failures, we will not be so obsessed with their self-esteem that we are unable to correct and rebuke them when called for, and we will

not tempt them with too much free time or discretionary money before they are ready.[45] We will also refuse to make our children serve our own adult interests, using their success to prop up our own sense of achievement or trying to re-live our youth vicariously through them. All in all, whatever burdens we find in raising our children (e.g., sacrifice in luxuries or career advancement or recreational time), we will insist that our children are worth the cost because they are (after all) priceless gifts of God.

In all these ways, the covenant structures our approach to parenting from beginning to end. Of course, this directly impacts the way our children come to understand themselves as well. This doctrine keeps our children from the twin dangers of anxiety ("Does God love me?") and antinomianism ("I have Christian parents, so I'm saved no matter how I live"). The child learns of God's favor and care from his earliest days. Just as he can never remember being introduced to his earthly father, so it is with his Heavenly Father. He is given a foundation on which to build a life of faith and gratitude. However, at the same time, he learns that all the blessings bestowed upon him are a matter of sheer grace, and can be taken away if he refuses to abide by the terms of the covenant (faith and repentance). He learns to value his Christian background, rather than take it for granted. He learns he is a branch on the vine of Christ, but he must bear

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[45] Interestingly, Thomas Hine's *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager* (New York: Perennial, 1999) suggests the main factors in the formation of an independent teen subculture (besides the creation of public high schools) have always been an excess of spending money and a substantial amount of free time. In other words, when kids are poor and busy, there is generally no generation gap between youth and their parents. When kids do have unstructured time and money to burn, a youth subculture is almost inevitable.

fruit. He learns both grace and obligation in terms of the covenant.

Infant Faith and the Sacraments

Finally, we come to the main question at hand. How does this theology of covenant children bear upon our children's participation in the life of the church, especially in the sacramental dimension of the church's ministry? Obviously, this doctrine of infant faith means our children have every right to the sacraments. If they are actually believers, promised the benefits of the covenant of grace, then nothing hinders them from being baptized. Indeed, they *must* be baptized. The major Baptist objection to infant baptism is cut away since our infants consent (after a fashion) to baptism through their relational trust in the Lord. They are not strangers and aliens to God; indeed, we know that he desires to have them enrolled into his family in the initiatory waters of baptism. We trust that our children fit the Davidic mold. We treat them as Jacobs until and unless they prove to be Esaus.

Likewise, the table belongs to covenant children. They can receive the body and blood of the Lord through the elements of bread and wine as soon as they are able to eat. To hold them back from the table is to demand something *in addition to faith*, which in principle denies *sola fide* and tends towards works-righteousness. If Christ is received by faith alone, and our children have faith, then the case for paedocommunion is closed. To demand that their faith must have a certain quality (e.g., a certain level of intellectual maturity or discernment) is to suggest

that faith *alone* is not enough after all.[46] There is only one entry requirement to the table, and our children meet it.

In other words, paedocommunion is simply a corollary of *sola fide*. The table is a gift to us and to our children; it is a matter of pure, unearned, unalloyed, uncompromised, unmixed *grace*. Our children belong to God and he desires to feed them with his free food. This is his highest and best form of "youth ministry" the church can provide! When God's children ask for bread (even if it's an inarticulate cry!), he is happy to oblige. The denial of paedocommunion is an implicit (albeit unintentional) threat to the great Reformation principle that God's gifts are received by the instrumentality of faith *alone*. It is a threat to the Reformational teaching that Christ (even in the bread and wine of the Eucharist) is received by a simple faith, and nothing but faith. There are no other hoops to jump through – no special experiences, no minimum score on a theology exam, no minimum number of Bible verses memorized, no set quantity of good works.

To withhold our children from the table because they cannot yet perform some work like answering catechism questions, narrating a testimony, or having a protracted and dramatic crisis conversion experience, is to risk psychologically damaging the child's ability to understand and live by grace. We take from him the very thing God intends to give him in baptism and at the table, namely, a sense of covenantal identity and belonging.[47] A

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[46] 1 Corinthians 11:21-34 is misused by anti-paedocommunionists on this point. See elsewhere in this volume for detailed exegesis.

[47] How would you as a parent like it if I pulled your kid aside from time to time to tell him that you (his parents) really don't love him? How would you like it if I tried to subvert his confidence in your love and plant seeds of doubt regarding promises you have made to him as your child? No doubt, every parent would be rightfully angered at a third party undermining the parent/child relationship in that way. And yet this exactly what we do to God the Father

child may not know much systematic theology, but he does know what it is like to be included or excluded, especially when food is involved. He may not have a deep grasp of doctrine, but he intuitively senses the importance of ritualized, symbolic actions. He may not be able to articulate his feelings, but he knows when he is being asked to perform some work in order achieve a reward, as opposed to being given a free and unearned gift. Paedocommunion is important because of the way it shapes our children's psychology of grace.[48]

I consider the exegetical case for paedocommunion to be firmly established (as the rest of this book shows). But there is more at stake in the paedocommunion debate than simply exegeting a few key texts. Our whole understanding of the covenant promises, the way God would have us regard and rear

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when we do not treat his children, whom he has entrusted to us as stewards and caregivers, according to their covenant status. God wants his children – including the youngest of them – to know that he loves them.

[48] See my paper, "For the Children's Sake" for further thoughts on covenant nurture and paedocommunion. The essay is available at http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/for_the_childrens_sake_paedocommunion.htm. There are many helpful ways of getting at the paedocommunion issue. Too many of our discussions focus on overly narrow theological issues and ignore other perspectives. A refreshing exception is Urban T. Holmes' work *Young Children and the Eucharist* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1972). Holmes provides some very useful thoughts on paedocommunion from a psychological and social angle. See especially pages 59ff, where Holmes makes a five-fold argument for the inclusion of children: [1] Reflective reason is not necessary for meaningful participation in symbolic ritual. Theology may be for adults but religion is for everyone. [2] There are no junior members of the church since baptism admits one to full membership in the church. We must not divide the body into haves and have-nots. [3] Psychologically, children are receptive of symbolic experience. They are capable of experiencing the meaning of the Eucharist. [4] Existentially, children need to participate because at no time in a person's life does the family meal carry such important symbolic significance. Children may not understand everything the Eucharist means theologically, but they certainly know what it means to be excluded from a group meal. [5] Socially, participation in the Eucharist helps the child unify his experience of church and family life. It provides a critical sense of belonging.

our (really, his) children, the relationship of the sacraments to faith and the covenant community, and more, are bound up in the paedocommunion debate. Many Christian parents are faithful in the work of covenant nuture in many respects, but they do not practice paedocommunion. They treat their children like Christians, on the whole, reminding them of God's grace, inculcating in them the skills and virtues that constitute a life of discipleship, and they assure their children that God loves them. They teach them to pray "Our Father" and sing "Jesus loves me." They do everything but the most central thing, namely, include their children at the table. This is a sad inconsistency. A fully covenantal and consistent approach to our children requires the whole package, combining parental faith in the promises, the application of the sacraments to our children, and continual parental nurture through teaching, discipline, and prayer.

Conclusion: Taking David's Testimony Seriously

Infant faith is biblically plausible, pastorally practical, and psychologically credible. By taking seriously David's claims to infant faith, we can construct a doctrine that embraces both the free grace of the covenant as well as its stipulated condition of faithfulness. However mysterious, our children have a relationship with God based on faith and grounded in grace. We are called to raise our children accordingly, so their testimonies will match David's: "From my mother's womb, You have been My God." Hopefully this essay demonstrates the way paedofaith, paedobaptism, paedocommunion, and parental

nurture all converge together in God's beautiful design for church and family.[49]

[49] For a full account of the biblical doctrine of infant faith, and its connections with baptism, communion, and parenting, see my book *Paedofaith: A Primer on the Mystery of Infant Salvation and a Handbook for Covenant Parents* (Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2005).