

# Editorial: Covenant Children

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A Review of *The Covenant of God and the Children of Believers*

David J. Engelsma

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*But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people ... (Jer. 31:33).*

**Introduction:** It is the practice of Reformed churches to baptize adults on profession of their faith—and their children. We see this illustrated in the New Testament in Acts 16 in the case of both Lydia and the Philippian Jailer. When a man or woman comes to the faith one obviously does not leave one's house in heathendom! This pattern was set in Genesis 7:1, 7: "And the LORD said unto Noah, Come thou and all thy house into the ark; for thee have I seen righteous before me in this generation ... And Noah went in, and his sons, and his wife, and his sons' wives with him, into the ark, because of the waters of the flood" (cf. I Peter 3:20-21). It is repeated in the covenant promise to Abraham in Genesis 17:7, 10: "And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee ... Every man child among you shall be circumcised." And these promises to the church are continued in the New Testament in Acts 2:38-39: "Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins ... For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, *even* as many as the Lord our God shall call." These issues have been discussed exhaustively in earlier issues of the *BRJ*, and as far as we can ascertain from history the practice continued almost without question until the rise of the Anabaptists in the sixteenth century.

But in what light are we to consider these baptized infants or young? Are they members of the church to be brought “up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4) or are they “little vipers” who need to be evangelized? Regrettably more than four centuries down the line there is no agreement! For a number of years I have used and circulated a pamphlet by the author with the same title. Now he has given us a full length book drawing on this and material which has earlier appeared in the *Standard Bearer*. The volume is split into six parts and 21 chapters and covers covenant doctrine and the latest heresy, the Federal Vision.

Part I is entitled “The Reformed Doctrine of Children in the Covenant,” and chapter 1 takes up “The Covenant as Bond.” It is to the credit of Reformed thinkers that they more than Anglican, Lutheran or Roman have understood and expounded this great subject. Engelsma offers the following definition: “The covenant is the relationship of friendship between the triune God and his chosen people in Jesus Christ.” Two vital truths are involved. It is God’s covenant, unilaterally established and maintained, and it does not depend on man—all is of grace.

Chapter 2, “‘Little Vipers’ or Children of God?” affirms that God includes believers’ children in the covenant. “I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations ...” and we include them by giving the New Testament covenant sign of baptism. But experience shows that not all of the children are saved—some go lost. So what does it mean that our children are in the covenant? Three possible explanations have been given:

1. Children are regarded as unsaved but because of a privileged position in a Christian home and church are more likely to be converted.
2. God promises all covenant children salvation, but this depends upon their believing in Christ as they grow up.
3. On the basis of the promise, we rear all our children as covenant members, recognizing that it is the elect children who constitute our true seed.

Arguments from Scripture and the Reformed creeds are brought against the first two positions, and it is the third that is accepted and developed in the next two chapters: “Covenantal Rearing” and “‘No Reason to Doubt,’” which essentially belong together. In the former there is a necessary and

useful discussion of “The Conversion of Covenantal Children,” quoting Christ’s word, “Except ye be converted ... ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven,” and *Heidelberg Catechism*, Questions and Answers 88-90. “No Reason to Doubt” is a quotation from the *Canons of Dordt* 1:17: “godly parents have *no reason to doubt* of the election and salvation of their children whom it pleaseth God to call out of life in their infancy.”

Part II, “The Baptist Objection,” has just a single chapter, “The Detestable Error of the (Ana)baptists.” It begins with a somewhat inaccurate and intemperate comment against Engelsma by a Baptist minister, William Oosterman, complaining about the historical persecution of Anabaptists and Engelsma’s remark that “Every Baptist church denies membership to all children.” It is surely obvious that whatever the historical facts, we Reformed, whose spiritual ancestor was John Calvin who waged war with the word and with the pen, are not and historically cannot be responsible. And since Baptists by definition do not baptize the children of believing parents there are no children in membership. (In fact, in my experience even when young people are baptized on profession of faith, they are still not necessarily members!) In fairness, I must add that their practice is better than their principles: they are exemplary in church attendance bringing them both morning and evening, Sunday school, conducting family worship, saying grace before meals, praying for and with them, and teaching them to read their Bibles. They do feed their lambs, even though they presumably consider them unregenerate heathens!

It is perhaps worth adding that the issue of re-baptism goes wider than we think. Just as you can only circumcise a person once, you can only baptize them once! The argument always goes that the previous baptism was invalid. Baptists say it was done too young or with not enough water! Some Presbyterians reject Rome’s baptism and rebaptize; and, of course, those who fall away to that delusion find they must be rebaptized. Ye’re all Anabaptists!

Part III deals with “The Netherlands Reformed Objection.” Chapter 6, “Sanctified Infants,” responds to Dr. Joel R. Beeke and Elder James W. Beeke who object that their position lay better in the third category than in the first (though essentially the children of believers are viewed as unregenerate until they show the fruits of regeneration). In effect this determines the approach that church, parents and teachers take to them; but it flies in the face of both creeds and, more importantly, Scripture.

In chapter 7, “Distressing Christ’s Lambs,” this view and the confusion it produces is further considered, before the Protestant Reformed position is set forth in Chapter 8, “Promised (Not ‘Presupposed’) Regeneration.” Presumptive regeneration was the idea of Abraham Kuyper but the PRC sharply reject it. As Engelsma remarks, the “man who presumes will end up with egg on his face.” The PRC recognizes that “they are not all Israel, which are of Israel.” The visible church of Christ is viewed and addressed as beloved and elect, though we recognize that hypocrites are present with believers and so we bring up our young “in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.” “Feed my lambs,” Christ commanded. The promise is with God.

Part IV, “The Canadian Reformed (‘Liberated’) Objection,” begins with chapter 9, “Attack on an ‘Election Theology’ of Covenant.” In considering and refuting an opinion, it is important that the view opposed be fairly represented! Nothing is more unfair in discussion than misrepresentation. Here Engelsma is entirely fair in printing seven pages of the Canadian Reformed theologian Dr. Jack De Jong’s objection. In essence, Dr. De Jong objects to an “election” theology: “And Engelsma is only perpetuating the same kind of ‘election’ theology which refuses to entertain the scriptural teaching of faith as the way or condition to salvation.” After a fairly extensive discussion of the issue and to prevent misunderstanding, Engelsma concludes, “In the covenant, God calls the elect, regenerated child to believe. By believing, the child receives the blessings of the covenant in his consciousness. And the faith God demands is itself the gift of God to the child.” Chapters 10 (“Pressing the Charge against the Denial of an ‘Election Theology’”) and 11 (“Defense of an ‘Election Theology’”) continue the discussion.

Discussion of the covenant rather naturally leads on to what is perhaps the most dangerous issue now facing Reformed churches, the Federal Vision and the denial of justification by faith alone! If that goes, where stands any of us “miserable sinners” on judgment day? The latter part of the book contains Part V, “The Unconditional Covenant in Contemporary Debate” (chapters 12-18), and Part VI, “Covenantal Universalism” (chapters 19-21), and the volume closes with reprints of four relevant book reviews. But as the debate is very much ongoing, I refer our readers to the audio of Engelsma’s lecture at <http://www.prca.org/current/index.htm> and leave further consideration to another time.

**Discussion:** To some extent the discussion may be seen as pretty theoretical in the British scene. The historic Reformed churches—Anglican in England, Ireland and Wales, and Presbyterian in Scotland and Wales—are largely apostate, though one gladly recognizes the contribution of a number of faithful smaller denominations. Clearly the situation in North America is quite different, for example, the Netherlands Reformed Churches has ninety churches, eighty ministers, and thirty thousand members, etc.

But there are some important points from which we can learn. Regular catechetical instruction and church schools are a case in point.

Engelsma’s line is surely correct. When the Philippian jailor uttered his much quoted question, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” the response was “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, *and thy house.*” We know nothing of his after history. But he had a promise about his house, and acted accordingly. Abraham had a similar promise: “And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee ... Every man child among you shall be circumcised.” But two generations later, we find reprobate, profane Esau! Why? “(For *the children* being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth;) It was said unto her, the elder shall serve the younger. As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated” (Rom. 9:11-13). We operate on the basis of the promise, but we must recognize that an “election theology” overrides all!

An examination of Reformed liturgies make it clear this is the basis. In the Dutch “Form for the Administration of Baptism” we have the following “Thanksgiving:” “Almighty God and merciful Father, we thank and praise thee that thou hast forgiven us and our children all our sins through the blood of thy beloved Son Jesus Christ, and received us through thy Holy Spirit as members of thine only begotten Son, and adopted us to be thy children, and sealed and confirmed the same unto us by holy baptism ...”—clearly speaking of the elect, spiritual seed.

The “Westminster Directory for Worship” reminds us: “That [baptism] is a seal of the covenant of grace, of our ingrafting into Christ, and of our union with him, of remission of sins, regeneration, adoption, and life eternal ...” The whole service needs to be read to get its full force.

And the Anglican Church in a much abused but basically misunderstood thanksgiving reads: “We yield thee hearty thanks most merciful Father, that it hath pleased thee to regenerate *this infant* with thy holy Spirit, to receive *him* for thine own *child* by adoption, and to incorporate *him* into thy holy Church.”

This is an important book. The future of all our churches depends on a supply of converted young people coming into them, and usually most come from the previous generation. Understandably baptists treat their young as unregenerate but the tragedy is that most Reformed do the same. They bring their young to baptism—and thus into church membership—but behave like Baptists! This book addresses this anomaly, which through misunderstanding can become a tragedy! I hope it is widely read and discussed. It satisfies me. But has Engelsma said the last word? Well, theology, like every science, is a progressive affair. More may yet need to be said. But Engelsma may take comfort that he stands in good company dating back at least to Calvin and the Reformed confessions and liturgies.

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*Herman Witsius* (1636-1708): “There can hardly be any doubt that the statement regarding the regeneration of the children before baptism, according to the judgment of love, is the accepted view of the Dutch Church. In [the Reformed Form for the Administration of Baptism], this question is put to parents who offer their children in baptism: ‘Do you acknowledge that they are sanctified in Christ, and should be baptized as members of His congregation?’ Now this strengthens the views of those who place the initial regeneration of elect covenant children before baptism ... God is not only free to impart the grace of regeneration to the elect children before they receive baptism. It should be believed that He, as a rule, also does this” (*The Efficacy of Baptism in Infants*).