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THE CHILDREN OF THE COVENANT.*

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THE Presbyterian Church has always given special attention to the spiritual interests of the children under its care. Presbyterians wherever found in the world have, as a rule, been characterized by as intelligent and profound concern for the religious welfare of the youth as any religious denomination. We claim that the Waldenses, who, it is commonly believed, were driven to their mountain fastnesses during the persecutions of the second and third centuries, and who, in that dark age of the world's history and Church's apostasy, preserved in great purity the faith of Jesus Christ to the Protestant world, were Presbyterians. We claim that all the Churches which sprang out of the Reformation are Presbyterian, the Church in Germany, the Church in Holland, the Church in Switzerland, the Church in France, the Church in Scotland, and so much of the Church in England as was truly reformed. We claim that we can prove that these Churches held doctrines and a polity substantially that which is held by the two great denominations represented here to-night.

By numerous citations we could show that those Churches regarded as one of their chief functions the fostering of religion, not only in the Church, but in the family and in the school. The catechisms put in the hands of our Presbyterian boys and girls, master-pieces of catechetical skill, these inimitable summaries of religious truth that present the most luminous of all the great doctrines of God's Word, and that guard against almost every error that has ever assailed the truth, and have attracted the admiration and compelled the praise of all intelligent people in all parts of the world; these catechisms have, for more than two hundred years, been in the hands of Presbyterian children, and they have been studied and learned, and one result is that, when the children grow up to be men and women, they become as orthodox, as sturdy and as useful defenders and propagators of the faith once delivered to the saints as the world has ever known. This fact in

the history of our Church, so general and persistent, is traceable to causes that have powerfully determined the convictions of our people and their activities in reference to this subject. I shall call your attention briefly to some of these causes. One is found in that view which the Church has ever taken of the relation, which it is the will of the Great Head of the Church, that the Church and the children should sustain to each other. We can trace every church in existence back through the centuries to its organization. In the covenant that was made with Abraham, he was received and his children were received with him, and they had as distinct a place as he himself held. We find also that in that covenant God promised not only to give to Abraham the land of Canaan and a numerous posterity, but that he should be the father of many nations, and that God would be his God, not in the sense of creator, or preserver, or redeemer, but in the sense which that promise covenanted, that is, that he would be the God of the Church to be organized in his household, the God of his children in that Church, and also in all the churches that should afterwards come into relationship with that Church into which he and his household were brought. And he gave, further, a perpetual sign of the existence of that covenant and a perpetual seal accrediting the promises in that covenant, the sacred rite of circumcision.

Thus the Church was organized and continued down to the beginning of the new dispensation, and children continued to be in it. When the new dispensation began we have no evidence that a new covenant was made, or that a new organization was formed. On the contrary, in the first sermon that was preached on the Day of Pentecost, Peter announced to the people that the promise was unto them and unto their children. We find that the Apostle Paul afterwards entered into argument to prove that the covenant was still in force, and from that fact undertook to demonstrate the call of the Gentiles, declaring that if they would respond to the call, they would thus become children of Abraham, and heirs of the promises made to him. There is a great cluster of facts that show that this covenant was still in force. I can mention only one or two. One is in the fact that God had made great promises to Abraham. He had promised to make him a father of many nations, but when the new dispensation began this was not fulfilled, and consequently the covenant was still in force, and the Church, to which the covenant was given, in existence. But God in that covenant made promises to the Church that the Gentiles should come into it as doves to their windows, sons should be brought in, kings should be nursing fathers and queens nursing mothers.

That promise was not fulfilled when the new dispensation began, and the Church was consequently still in existence. Where is there evidence that when the new dispensation began the children were put out of the Church, or denied the privileges and blessings of the Church? We are sometimes called on to quote a passage of Scripture to show that the children were put into the Church of the new dispensation. Such a passage is not necessary, because the children were already in the Church. It would be a much more pertinent question to ask for a single sentence from divine authority that teaches us that, while under this new dispensation, God has greatly enhanced our privileges and blessings as parents, he has at the same time not only not enhanced the privileges and blessings of our children, but has taken away every privilege and blessing that up to that moment they were enjoying. It is incredible that such radical change should take place, and not a line be written about it in God's Word. If the Jews at the beginning of the new dispensation had been informed that their children were not any longer to be in the Church would they not have asked many questions about it? The Jews would naturally have raised objections to such teaching, but no such objection appears. The lack of controversy on the subject showed that the children remained in the Church as they had always been.

Another reason for our care of our children is found in the fact that the Scriptures distinctly teach that full provision is made for their salvation while they are still children. If I could impress this single truth on your minds at this time my efforts would not be in vain. One passage in God's Word teaches this truth. You remember that the people brought their children to the Saviour that He might bless them, and that He said to the disciples who objected to their approach, "Suffer little children to come unto Me and forbid them not; for of such is the kingdom of God." He then took them up in His arms, put His hands upon them, and blessed them. They were so small He took them from the arms of their parents. In one of the accounts the reading is that He greatly blessed them. He did not merely place His hand on them and pronounce a blessing, by expressing a wish that they might be blessed, but He actually blessed them. Nor was it a mere prayer for a blessing, although that would have availed for "Him the Father heareth always." This action cannot be explained except by saying that He there bestowed on the children the saving influences of the Holy Spirit.

This incident teaches us that though our children may be too young to go to Christ we may go in their place and our faith may be accepted for them. If we exercise in Him faith in

behalf of our children we will inevitably obtain from Him the blessings parents of old obtained for their children.

Another reason why we believe in special interest in the children, and why parents should be characterized by fidelity in this respect, is found in the great advantages parents have enjoyed for securing the blessing through the training of their offspring in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Parents stand at the fountain head and have opportunity to give shape and character and direction to the earliest thoughts and activities. Just as soon as children begin to exercise intelligence, truth should be put into their minds; just as soon as they begin to fasten on hopes, He, who is chiefest of ten thousand and altogether lovely, should be recommended to them; just as soon as they begin to make judgments, they ought to be enlisted on the side of truth and right and God; just as soon as they begin to exercise fear, the doom and the woes of the friendless unpenitent should be presented. Watchful care should be taken to keep them in these channels until they are fixed and confirmed in moral and religious habits. The earliest impressions are the deepest and most lasting. If we were to go into one of our great museums we might see on stone slabs the imprint of raindrops, which geologists tell us fell on them long before man had an existence; footprints of birds that walked over them while time was still young. The explanation is that those slabs were then in a formative state—merely soft sediment, on which light objects could make the impressions which we now see. Afterwards those slabs hardened into solid rock, and so the impressions became as lasting as the rock itself. So with the human spirit. In childhood the soul is in a plastic condition with great susceptibility of impression from any source, good or bad. As the years pass on under the influences that are brought to bear on the soul, the impressions are indurated and become as enduring as the immortal spirit. If those impressions are for evil, it will require the Almighty power of the grace of God to efface them, and if good, it will require the same grace to preserve them. Parents have therefore in youth the opportunity of making lasting impressions that no other agency can produce in behalf of right, and duty, and God.

Another reason for our interest in children is our belief that the Scriptures teach the duty of consecrating them to God in a covenant well ordered and sure. As we consecrate our time, and possessions, and ourselves to God, so should we consecrate our children. God never asks for the consecration of anything that He will not accept. As God accepts parents He accepts their children, and as He accepts the parents promising to be their God and Saviour, so He

accepts the children as their God and Saviour. He is obliged to do so, unless we assume that God requires a consecration and then refuses to receive it. The seal of the covenant guarantees that the consecrated shall be accepted, as the rainbow that stretched across the heavens guaranteed that the world should not again be destroyed by water. So the sprinkling of the water of baptism assures parents that their consecration of their children shall not be in vain. By means like these the Presbyterian Church in every age of the world has shown its interest in its youth, and the result has been that Presbyterian children growing to manhood and womanhood have, as a rule, been characterized by clearer, stronger, and more settled views of truth than the children of any other people in the history of the world, and have been as useful, as earnest and as persevering propagators of the truth of God's Word as the world has ever seen.