

## A Children's Book about God's *Hesed*: T. D. Witherspoon's *Children of the Covenant*

By C. N. Willborn

Thomas D. Witherspoon was educated at the Universities of Alabama and Mississippi. He graduated from the latter in 1856 at the age of 20, achieving what we would call Valedictorian ranking among his peers. In the same year he moved to Columbia, South Carolina to pursue theological studies at the Presbyterian Seminary (later to be named Columbia Theological Seminary). His seminary education was at the hands of the master theologian, James Henley Thornwell. Except for Providence, Witherspoon would have become Thornwell's son-in-law by marrying his daughter, Nancy. She died short of their wedding date and lies under a large magnolia united to Christ at her father's side in Elmwood Cemetery in Columbia.

Witherspoon would go on to have a faithful and fruitful ministry as a gospel minister, first in the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America and, after 1861, in the Presbyterian Church United States (PCUS). He first served the church of his college alma mater—Presbyterian Church of Oxford, Mississippi, from his ordination in 1860 until the onset of the War Between the States in 1861. Serving initially as an infantryman, he was soon persuaded to take up the chaplaincy for his band of Mississippi soldiers. After the War he served some of the most influential churches in the PCUS, from Second Church, Memphis, to Tabb Street in Petersburg, Virginia, and finally First Church, Louisville, Kentucky. His service to the PCUS was manifold, including acting as Moderator of the General Assembly in 1884 and in co-founding Louisville Presbyterian Seminary in 1893. In the latter institution he served faithfully and influentially as a faculty member until his death in 1898. Interestingly, this year witnessed the deaths of two other Southern giants, R. L. Dabney and John L. Girardeau.

In the fine article prior to this,<sup>1</sup> the reader will have noted that Witherspoon was a child of the covenant. He was born into a Presbyterian family that professed

faith in Jesus Christ as their God and Savior and served faithfully in the visible bride of Christ in Greensboro, Alabama. We raise this point again to bring attention to the topic before us—covenant children. T. D. Witherspoon was a covenant child and product of a godly upbringing in home and in the church. He seems to have never lost sight of the importance of this weighty blessing. Indeed, of his many publications there is one book that seems to garner the most attention when mention is made of Witherspoon's contributions, and that is *Children of the Covenant*. This little book briskly went through two editions in 1873 and 1874. It was handsomely bound in brown cloth with beveled edges and gold embossing. The external qualities of the book are only surpassed by the internal contents, which are of eternal value, presented in a style typical of Witherspoon's sermons, *simple elegance*.

The book is about a family. It is about a family who served a covenant faithful God and Savior. It is about, however, a family who suffered much in this fallen world. Through all the suffering, the steadfast love (*hesed*) of their God was sufficient to sustain them and bring them through the valley of the shadow of death, even the deaths of three precious covenant children.

Witherspoon was pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church in Memphis from 1865–70. Those were hard years. Reconstruction was in full force. The Southern States were struggling to get back on their feet after a cruel and crippling war. But for regions like Memphis

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1. See "Thomas Dwight Witherspoon (1836–1898)" beginning on page 3.

there were additional enemies, like malaria and cholera, which always threatened. Present day readers must remember that as recent as the nineteenth century little was known of the cause, and even less was known of cures for such dreaded foes.

Ministering just a few miles north of Memphis during these harsh years was Andrew Hart Kerr. He had moved to the rural area in 1854 at age forty-two and founded Delta Presbyterian Church in 1857. Kerr spent twenty-nine of his forty-four years of ministry there, before dying in 1883. His contributions to the surrounding population were publicly recognized when his community was formally named in 1873 with the moniker, *Kerrville*.

Witherspoon and Kerr became dear friends and it was out of this friendship that Witherspoon gathered the source material for his classic little book, *Children of the Covenant*. Three children born to A. H. Kerr and Mary Indiana C. Kerr would die in the bud of life—Andrew Hart, Jr., Sarah Ward, and Mary Clarissa. Witherspoon devoted one chapter to the life of each of these three children of the covenant. These chapters, full of their life stories, are followed by “An Appeal to the Baptized Children of the Church,” “A Word to Christian Parents,” and finally an “Appendix,” which contains letters of condolence with responses from Kerr, Sr.

### THREE CHILDREN OF THE COVENANT

In the very first chapter we note a few of the highlights Witherspoon drew on from the life of young Andrew Hart Kerr, Jr., who died at the age of thirteen in 1866. The youngster’s life began with a question mark, for soon after his birth he ceased breathing. The attending doctor warned the excited couple of his grave condition. Prayer ensued throughout the house and his life was spared. The parents expressed their belief “that it was in immediate and gracious answer to their prayers that the life so full of promise and hope was given to them.”<sup>2</sup>

Witherspoon includes in his early paragraphs the account of the youngster’s baptism into the visible body of Christ. One of those in attendance said, “then I felt that the Master was there present ratifying and approving the dedication, and often since have I said that if I had no other and higher testimony in proof of the ‘doctrines of the covenant’ in regard to infant baptism, what I saw and felt upon that occasion would be enough” (14). Such was the strong faith of the parents and church and their

recognition of God’s covenant faithfulness, signified in the covenantal sign and seal of baptism. Young Andrew grew in wisdom, stature, and favor with God and man from that early reception into Christ’s church.

In addition to the youngster’s handsome and manly features described by Witherspoon, his love of life is paraded before us on the pages. He was a great favorite with his young companions. “They loved to visit him,” Witherspoon explained, “to spend hours in his company, and to listen to his conversations upon all the various topics that awakened their inquiry. He never seemed to have much relish for the ordinary sports of children, or any preference for their companionship.” However, “when thrown into their company, as he frequently was, and especially when they visited him at his father’s house, he entered with all the earnestness of his nature into the pastimes which they engaged. His books, marbles, toys were always at their disposal, but in their games he generally preferred to sit as the umpire, to whom all matters of difference were referred; and while he seemed to enjoy himself, and be as happy as the happiest, contributing in his own unselfish way to the enjoyment of all the rest—the central figure in the group, admired and beloved by everyone, he always seemed glad when the time came for the little circle to break, that he might return again to the society and companionship of persons of mature age” (16, 17).

We are told that he was a precocious lad and mature beyond his age and this seems to be true from those earliest years of his short life. He loved to read and was nurtured in this regard by his mother and father. He had a keen interest in history. He could be seen reading the newspapers voraciously throughout the War. This was such that at the end of that horrific epoch he could talk on all the major battles with comprehensive details, based upon the published records. Witherspoon says, however, that while he could converse on a vast range of topics, this was true “especially upon the great subject of the doctrines, principles and obligations of religion” (18). This topic particularly drove him into a relationship with his father, “rarely found between a parent and child” (19). Hart, as he was called, loved nothing more than to listen to the theological discussions his father would have with other adults. Often he was allowed to sit up at night when guests were present so that he could overhear their conversations.

As would be expected, Witherspoon offers sample stories as heard and recounted by family and friends. In one such account Hart was engaged by a gentleman on a steamboat bound for St. Louis. The conversation ranged from the mode and meaning of baptism

2. T. D. Witherspoon, *Children of the Covenant* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1873), 12–13. Further references will simply give the page reference in parentheses in the text.

to election and its design. The climax of the latter came when Hart asked the man when God had determined to save the man. He asked “whether this design of God to convert his soul was from eternity, or was formed at the time when the conversion actually took place.’ His [adult] friend refused to answer, and Hart then said: ‘If it was in time that God determined to convert you, He then knew something that He never knew before; and to admit that, is to admit that He is not God.’ His friend did not attempt to meet his argument, but simply expressed his opposition to the doctrine of eternal Election, when Hart asked him again: ‘When God converted your soul, did he not do a good thing?’ ‘Oh yes,’ answered his friend. ‘Well then,’ said Hart, ‘are the good things of God made bad by having age upon them?’” (23). This bit of history is introduced to show that the young Kerr had a love for learning the truths of God, but also even at this young age a desire to speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15).

That this was not a simple academic pursuit of Hart or the case of a genius-child with an inordinate amount of “head-knowledge,” Witherspoon illustrates by the affect the doctrine had upon the moral fiber of the youngster. Let us remember that the Kerrs lived in a genteel society, where training in proper decorum was of the essence of living in a godly society. Moral turpitude was not tolerated, especially among the children of a household of rank. Corporal punishment was a key component in maintaining decency and honor. With this historical reminder listen to the account from Witherspoon: “His moral nature was singularly exempt from the vices of childhood and early youth. He was never known to tell a deliberate falsehood, or to utter an oath of any kind whatever. So far from his parents’ finding it necessary to inflict any corporeal punishment upon him, they do not remember ever to have administered even a severe rebuke” (24).

These characteristics no doubt flowed from living in a covenant household where Scripture, prayer, and catechism were daily, not weekly menu items. From his induction into the visible body of Christ through the baptismal waters, Hart received a steady dose of instruction in the truths of the Bible and was engaged in prayer from the time he could string words together for sentences. These daily exercises flowed from his family’s devotion to the heavenly day or market day of the soul,<sup>3</sup> as it has been called—the Lord’s Day.

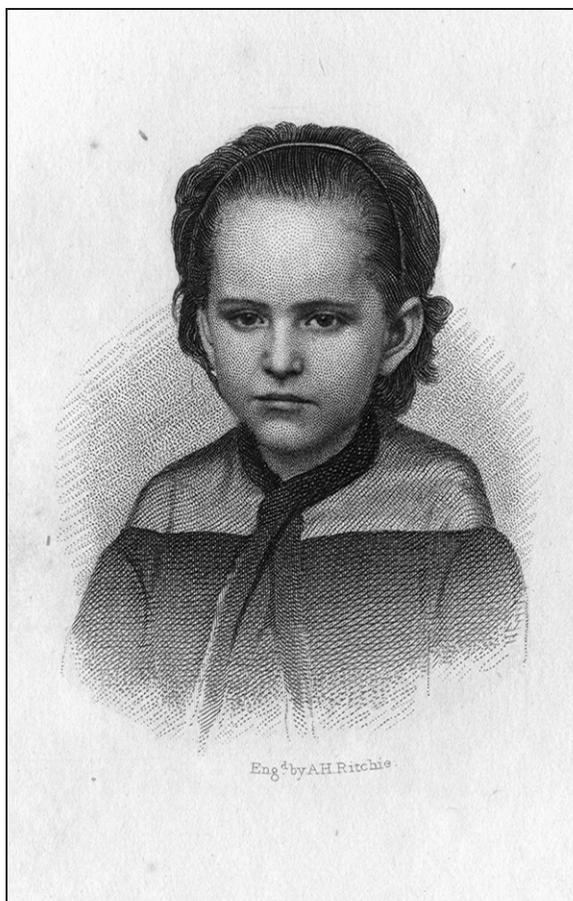
With all this said about Hart, it will not surprise the readers to know that, when taken suddenly by the crippling death-hold of cholera in November 1866, he gave a remarkable testimony of the Savior and His saving



grace in which he rested. Indeed, in giving testimony to John B. Adger and Joseph Ruggles Wilson, he said that he “now felt that he would rather go and stay with Christ and with the angels, than stay in a world of sin and sorrow” (37).<sup>4</sup> He then requested, just a few hours

3. As English Sabbatarianism came to be articulated in Elizabethan Puritanism, defenders of the doctrine that would later find a prominent place in the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms, such as Greenham, Bownd, Andrewes and others, were fond of calling the Lord’s Day the market day of the soul because on that divinely appointed day the means of grace were abundantly available. Cf. Nicholas Bownd, *Sabbatum Veteris et Novi Testamenti: or The True Doctrine of the Sabbath* (Naphtali Press and Reformation Heritage Books, 2015), xxxv, 346–347.

4. Adger and Wilson were leading figures in the Presbyterian Church, with the latter being most famous for his son, Woodrow Wilson. These men were present in the home on this occasion because of the meeting of the General Assembly in Memphis, just south of Kerrville.



Sarah Ward Kerr. The portraits of the three Kerr children are taken from T. D. Witherspoon, *Children of the Covenant* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1873). Provided by C. N. Willborn.

before his death, “that the hymn, ‘Rock of Ages,’ should be sung” (38). Witnesses say he sang with all the gusto he could muster. He then turned to those gathered around him, including many who had been in Memphis for the General Assembly of the PCUS, and urged all “not to weep for him, but rather rejoice in the goodness and glory of God, who was going to take him from a world of sin and trouble up to Himself, where he would very soon be singing with angels, and where he would take his seat in the General Assembly and church of the first-born which are written in heaven” (38). Again, he requested they sing and this time, “Come Humble Sinner” was his choice. His last words were to his family, “I love my father and my mother, and my sisters very much, but I love Jesus more, and would rather go to Him than stay here” (39). And so, at ten o’clock on Wednesday morning, November 28, 1866, this child of the covenant was taken into Emmanuel’s land.

Had Hart been the only child to be taken from Andrew and Mary Kerr, it would still be a sobering story and reminder of man’s frailty and finitude and God’s *hesed*. He was not, however. They would lose more children in the very tender years of life. In fact, Hart was preceded in death by Sarah who would precede all her siblings and live but four short years.

After Hart came another named Sarah who would live but eight years. Born in Shelby County, Tennessee on June 13, 1859, Sallie, as she was called, was named for both of her grandmothers and her deceased sister. Witherspoon says this of Sallie:

Childhood is in all its great essential characteristics the same everywhere. He who has read the life of one child may in a certain sense be said to have read the life of all children. The innocence, the sportiveness, the exuberance of joyous life, the freedom from anxiety and care, the spirit of confiding trust, and simple-hearted, tender love—these, which make the joy of one household, are found to a certain extent in all. The habits of childhood, its pursuits, amusements, and companionships, its infirmities, trials and crosses, are much the same everywhere (44, 45).

Like her brother, she too was an insatiable reader of all sorts of literature, including her Bible. And, so, it will not surprise the students of her life to learn that “She was especially remarkable for the veneration she always had for her parents, and the unquestioning obedience she rendered to them in all their commands” (51).

Still, Witherspoon reminds us of and illustrates her fallenness and need for a Savior. He therefore, leaves us without question as to his objectivity. It bears mentioning also that Witherspoon has “young readers” within his cross-hairs throughout this delightful little book. For instance, he said, “We have told our young readers that little Sallie was not perfect, that she had her strong temptations and her moments of weakness just as all other children have.” This quality makes this piece of literature remarkable and imitable.

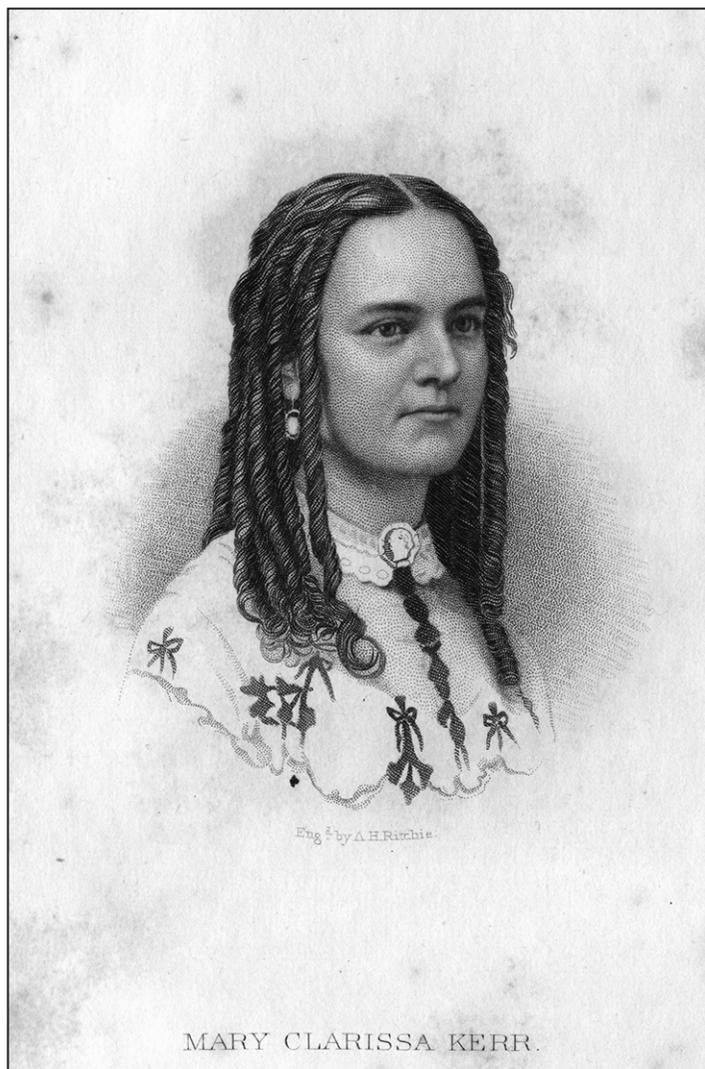
Sallie’s conversion testimony was derived within the context of one of her sinful episodes—a temper tantrum. Having witnessed the outburst, her father took her aside to talk with her and she began to cry due to her sin against another child, a playmate. Her father advised his little one to go to a private place and pray to the Lord Jesus about her sin(s). She did and “After a while, though, she came back to her father with a subdued, peaceful, and even happy face, and when he asked her if she had gone to God with her trouble, she replied: “Yes,

sir, I told Him all—I told Him I had spoken hastily with my lips, and had sinned and I asked Him for Jesus' sake to forgive me and not let me do so any more." Kerr asked his precious little one why she felt the need to ask the Father forgiveness "for Jesus' sake." Her reply evidences her training in righteousness and her understanding of the depths of sin. She said, "If I had asked Him forever to forgive me for my own sake, he [i.e., God] could not have done it. I am nothing, but Jesus is everything with Him." As if this wasn't enough to warm the heart of any believer, her wise father asked why she thought the Father in heaven forgave her. She replied: "Because He has said, 'Ask and it shall be given you,' and whatever He has said, He will do; and besides, I have the feeling in my heart that He has forgiven me" (54). Both the testimony of the Scriptures and that of the Holy Spirit seem evidently to have been her comfort.

Witherspoon reminds his readers that Christians like young Sallie find much growth through the Scriptures by the work of the Spirit. There is also much aid for living and dying supplied by the daily trials of life. Sallie witnessed the death of her dear teacher and the serious, life-threatening illness of her own father. Both provided her with examples of Christian suffering and dying which would be used very soon in her own transition from life to death.

As with her older brother's case, Witherspoon provides us with eyewitness details of Sallie's last days on earth. Stricken with "the croup," and high fevers, she declared her love to all those around her. She urged all to trust Jesus and pray regularly. She gave her "last will and testament," in the form of a dictated profession of faith. She wanted Psalm 23 and 103 read and, at the end, she whispered these words, the last words of her earthly existence:

Behold, what condescending love  
Jesus on earth displays,  
To babes and sucklings He extends  
The riches of His grace.



These words were obviously etched upon her heart and mind. She had, no doubt, sung them many times in family and corporate worship. They are the first stanza of an eighteenth-century hymn by Philip Doddridge. No doubt a favorite of hers and used at the end by the Spirit of God. At the tender age of eight, Sarah Ward Kerr's soul entered into the presence of her Savior. Her body was buried, united to Christ, near her home in Kerrville, Tennessee.

The third chapter portrays for us Mary Clarissa Kerr. Witherspoon opens this account of the third Kerr daughter with these words: "In the two preceding sketches we have seen how wonderfully the grace of God was manifested in bringing two of the dear children of the church to Jesus, and giving them in childhood the victory over death and the grave. We are now to see this same grace illustrated in one who was permitted to live

through the period of youth, which is most fraught with temptation, and to exhibit a life of pure and holy consecration to God in the midst of the allurements and vanities of the world” (81).

Mary Clarissa was born in Davidson County, Tennessee near the Hermitage on December 20, 1847. She was baptized into solemn membership of the visible church of the living Savior in Nashville’s First Presbyterian Church. At age thirteen, during “the exercises of family prayer,” her heart was warmed to the Savior and she declared her fealty to the loving Savior of sinners. Here are words as recorded by her mother: “Oh, Pa! Pa! Pa! I have found Jesus. Oh, Ma, Ma, I have found the Saviour; then, turning to her brother Hart, who was then only six years of age, she said ‘O, my dear brother, I have found a precious Saviour; give Him your little heart. I know He loves little children. My heart is full of His love’” (89).

While this book might be considered a sketch of three young lives that were short-lived on this earth, it is far more than that. It is the testimony of the covenant faithfulness, the *hesed*, of our great triune God. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in Witherspoon’s inclusion of the following words by Andrew Kerr as he announced the reception of Mary and several other into the full communion of the visible church of Christ during a special worship service with communion on September 29, 1860.

In common with those who are of my own kindred here, I trace my lineage through successive generations to two brothers who have lived and died in Scotland many years ago. They were men eminent for their piety and for their devotion to the Presbyterian Church. They were men who revered and honoured God’s covenant, to whom the seal of that covenant in baptism was a precious, priceless ordinance, and who were accustomed to train their children, as those who had been dedicated to God from their childhood, and by covenant right were His. When I recall to mind my venerable grandfather, who, if he were now living would be nearly an hundred and fifty years of age; when I revert to the memory of my sainted father, whom I revere most of all because he was a faithful and successful minister of Jesus Christ; when I reflect upon the fact that while I am of God’s great grace permitted to stand here today as a minister of the gospel of Christ, my only surviving brothers are Ruling Elders in the house of God; that those of my brothers and sisters who have gone down to the grave, have fallen asleep in Jesus, and that my only surviving sister is safely within the visible fold

of the Great Shepherd, how can I ever sufficiently extol God’s great mercy in His faithfulness to His covenants with my fathers.

And then when I look around me on this scene at the communion table to-day, and remember that four of the dear children who sit down at the Lord’s table for the first time are the grandchildren of my father; that at this same board sits, as a member of this church, one of his great-granddaughters, and that just there (pointing to a little child seated in the midst of the Assembly), sits his great-great-grandson, upon whose face I myself have been honoured in putting the seal of God’s covenant; when I look forward with assured confidence to the time when he too, in common with so many others, shall be made a happy participant of God’s covenanted mercy and grace, is it any wonder that my eyes overflow with tears of joy, and my heart is full of thanksgiving and praise to Him who hath remembered His covenant, and hath established His faithfulness in the very heavens? And oh, my friends, you who are still without the pale of God’s church and covenant; you who have never dedicated to Him either yourselves or your children; who have never had impressed, either upon you or upon them, the seal of this holy covenant between God and men, is there not something in all this to encourage you to come to Him this day, to enter into covenant with Him, that these blessings may be your inheritance and the inheritance of your children? (91–93)

This steadfast love of God received ample testimony in the life of Mary Clarissa from this day forward. As part of the portrait, Witherspoon included these comments: “But beyond all this, there was a devoted love to the church which kept her from feeling that there was any great cross in the observance of its rules. One of her favourite songs of praise, one that her voice would often be heard singing in the stillness of the night, and in the retirement of her chamber, was Dr. Dwight’s [hymn, “I Love Thy Kingdom, Lord,”], beginning:

I love Thy kingdom, Lord,  
The house of Thine abode;  
The church our blest Redeemer saved  
With His own precious blood.

And while she loved all who profess the name of Jesus, to whatever denomination they belonged; and rejoiced in the welfare of every church in which the pure gospel of Christ is preached, she was especially and ardently

devoted to the Presbyterian church.... Her's was an intelligent attachment, the result of a careful and prayerful examination of the doctrines and polity, the faith and order of the Presbyterian church" (101–102).

Mary Clarissa lived to observe the sickness of her brother, Hart. She encouraged him through the deathshade and was there for his exchange of this world for the next. It was only nine months later that the same disease would grip her body and take her from her friends, her parents, and her church on earth. She died and was buried alongside her siblings on Saturday, August 17, 1867.

The three sketches just summarized fill one hundred and eighteen pages of this little book about God's steadfast love to His people. The balance of the book, one hundred and forty-four pages, contain "An Appeal to the Baptized Children of the Church," "A Word to Christian Parents" and an "Appendix" full of correspondence concerning the children, condolences, and encouragements to the parents.

#### APPEAL TO BAPTIZED CHILDREN OF THE CHURCH

In the "Appeal" Witherspoon writes for young readers, with exhortations to imitate the lives portrayed through faith in Christ Jesus. His prefatory text for this chapter is most suitable: "It is you who are the children of the prophets and of the covenant which God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, 'and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.' For you first, God raised up His Servant and sent Him to bless you by turning every one of you from your wicked ways" (Acts 3:25, 26). His first words following the scripture citation say:

Dear Young Friends—These pages have been written especially for you. The writer, who loves little children, has thought that it would be pleasant to you to read the lives of these bright and interesting children, who were taken away from this world by death in their early youth, and who are now, as we confidently trust, among the number of the redeemed ones in glory. He has hoped too that while you are reading these little sketches, and after you have laid them down, the Holy Spirit may incline your hearts to love the same Saviour whom these sainted children loved, to seek the same experience of His love which they had, and to be prepared by His grace for the same bright world to which they have gone.

Witherspoon proceeds to explain to them the manifold benefits they possess because they are covenant children. In doing so he reminds them "You should be

thankful too that when your parents were converted to God, they chose for their church one which recognizes the covenant of God with His people as extending also to their children, so that little children like yourselves are entitled to membership in the church" (123). He wants them to remember that not all children are so blessed. He wants them to know something special is theirs because of their membership in Christ's church. He continues:

Many churches around you do not admit that little children have any interest in the covenant of God with His people. Therefore they will not administer baptism, which is the outward seal of the covenant, to little children. Although our Saviour expressly says: 'Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of heaven,' and although the apostles, whenever they baptized a believer who was the head of a household, always baptized his household with him, these churches will not baptize little children, and teach that, until they are old enough to enter into covenant for themselves with God, they have no interest in His covenanted promises (123–24).

In an age like ours, where there is considerable disinterest in the church as an institution, even among professing Christians, Witherspoon is a fresh breeze of Biblical devotion. Not only is there a high and proper view of the church in this little book, but a proper view of children born into believing households. There is no regenerative power given to the sacramental waters, but sanctifying covenantal significance abounds. "Sanctifying" in the sense of setting apart unto a special status like Paul gives to those children of at least one believing parent (1 Cor 7:14); "Covenantal" in the sense of the children of believing and faithful parents as the Psalmist explains (Ps 103:17, 18).

Here he is following his mentor, James Thornwell, who believed covenant children to be of a different class than the children born outside the covenant household and church. Thornwell viewed the children of believing parents to be heirs apparent to the gospel of the covenant of grace. Thornwell was precise as usual when he wrote: "If it be asked, why the Church embraces the family, and is not restricted to professing individuals, the answer is plain. The children of the faithful are the heirs apparent of the promises. God has graciously promised to show mercy unto thousands of them that love Him and keep His commandments; the decree of election runs largely in their loins, and through their faithfulness in rearing a holy seed. The Church is perpetuated, and

new recruits are constantly added to the communion of saints. They are all incorporated into the Church, because many of them hereafter are to be of the Church.”<sup>5</sup> They are not of the class “properly called the *world*,” argued Thornwell. It is clear as well that Witherspoon did not view covenant children, baptized and members of the visible body of Christ, the church, as pagans, but as a special people with apparent rights to the eternal covenant of grace.

Listen to Witherspoon as he extends this point: “Is it not a special thought to you that, as one of the baptized children of the church, you are the Saviour’s special care—that He feels in you a deeper interest than in those whose parents have never thus dedicated them to God, and claimed the promises of His covenant concerning them?” (126). He goes on to tell his adolescent readers of his own childhood and the evidence of the Saviour’s special care for him—“One of these [stories] will help you to understand what I mean, when I say that your relation to the Saviour is a more precious one than that of other children who have never been baptized” (126). Again, he writes “Whenever you think of the fact that you are a baptized child of the church, let it encourage in you such thoughts as these: “The Lord Jesus feels a special interest in me. He loves me as one of the lambs of his fold. He seeks my love in return. Blessed Jesus! teach me to love thee. Reclaim me from all my wanderings. Let me abide forever under thy gentle control—one of the sheep of thy pasture—one of the people of thy care” (128, 129).

The pastor then gently moves upon the little lambs of the church to do what lambs need to do, namely, follow the Shepherd. “Do not think for a moment,” he said,

“of waiting until you are older” (135). He urges them in simple trust to take advantage of their special status and His special interest in them. He lovingly calls them to believe in the gentle Savior. Through faith he assures them they will find the fulfillment of all the covenantal promises and, therefore, life in its fullest on this earth.

Having instructed them on their covenanted status with Christ Jesus through the church, and calling them to faith in Christ to own the covenant, he turns to one last exhortation for his young audience. He calls them to loving devotion to the church. Oh, for a revival of this spirit! Witherspoon serves as a prophet to our century by including the visible church on earth in his gospel call to the wee ones of Christ. Like his contemporary, Stuart Robinson, he understood the vital importance of the church “out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation” (Westminster Confession 25.2). Robinson would make his point clear in the very title of his landmark treatment on ecclesiology, *The Church of God as an Essential Element of the Gospel*.<sup>6</sup> The twin spirits of personal pietism and revivalism have severed the good news from the church, our adopted home on earth. Witherspoon reminds his readers not to separate what God has joined—the good news of salvation and inclusion in the family of God, the church of the living Christ.

He drives this point home with illustrations of the Kerr children. “They read the Scriptures” he said, “and read judiciously written books, that they might know the true principles of church government, and compare the creed of their fathers with the Scriptures of Eternal truth” (138). Well, this article is probably not being read by teenaged covenant children, so it behooves our adult readers to take to heart the level of Christian education we are offering our children both in our homes in family worship and in our churches. Are we less zealous to rear godly, Christ-trusting, Bible-loving and reading children than the saints of old? Is it any wonder we are losing generations from our churches? Wouldn’t it be wonderful and heart-pleasing if we, in years to come, could recount our children’s attachment to the church, but not just any church? Do we not believe ours is the one most true to God’s inerrant Word and therefore best for our souls, those of our children, and best for the reaching of the lost world?

Lest we think Witherspoon was obnoxiously sectarian, he goes into some length with his children readers to show the wide-love of God for those who claim faith in Christ Jesus alone. In so doing he includes “all members of evangelical churches,<sup>7</sup> whether they are called Methodists or Baptists, Episcopalians or Presbyterians; whether they are Calvinists or Arminians,

5. James H. Thornwell, “The Revised Book of Discipline,” in *The Collected Writings of James H. Thornwell*, 4 vols. (1875; reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1986), 4:340.

6. Stuart Robinson, *The Church of God as an Essential Element of the Gospel* (1858; reprint, Willow Grove, PA: The Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2009).

7. It probably goes without saying to our readers, but keep in mind that the term “evangelical” in Witherspoon’s day connoted more theological substance and devotion to the fundamental doctrines that make up the good news and life abundant. Remember that in his day, the mentioned denominations were far more biblically and theologically sound than the mainstream version of the same bodies many of us know today. One should also note that Witherspoon does not include Roman Catholics among “denominations” who believe the gospel for they deny the gospel and in so doing hold another gospel, which is soul damning. Furthermore, they do not rightly administer the sacraments of the new covenant. Finally, the reader will notice that he does not include the broader array of “churches” that we often see included in current evangelical definitions, e.g., Churches of Christ, Seventh Day Adventist, etc. He would have been fully aware of them, but did not list them as “evangelicals” for gospel reasons.

Lutherans or Reformed" (141). He then returns to his exhortation: "But while you cherish a kindly spirit towards all other branches of the church.... Be decidedly and frank in your attachment to Presbyterianism.... Let others see that you love the faith and order of the Presbyterian Church, that its doctrines and polity, its history and memories are all dear to your heart" (143).

One last comment about this chapter seems noteworthy. After Witherspoon appeals to his readers to love the church of the Lord Jesus and particularly the Presbyterian Church, he goes into a lengthy exposition on what we would term, ecclesiology. Remember his audience. He repeatedly refers to his "children" readers. Certainly there were adults basking in the warmth of this little book, but he intended it and wrote it (in nineteenth century style) for children! As twenty-first century readers take up this little book it will be amazing to them no doubt that it was consciously written for children. This should serve as a convicting point that he would have reasonable expectations that children would and could read a book that, let me say this gently, would be deemed "advanced" for many if not most Christian readers today.<sup>8</sup> With that said, Witherspoon spent twenty-six (26) pages developing the doctrine of the church from the Abrahamic covenant to the present day, comparing and contrasting the biblical doctrine with systems of men, and concluding: "Let us love her for what she is, and venerate her for what she has been. Peace within her walls, and prosperity within her palaces.... Because of the House of the Lord our God, let us ever seek her good" (171).

Once finished with his precis of ecclesiology, the pastor exhorts and blesses the children. "Oh, that the Lord may bless you, and enrich you with His grace, and prepare you to stand up like men under the responsibilities that are to devolve upon you, so that when, in a green old age, you transmit to others the legacy of Presbyterianism which you have received from us, you may transmit it in its purity, having your names honourably associated with the increase of its prosperity, and the extension of its influence throughout the world!" (172).

#### TO CHRISTIAN PARENTS

The final chapter, as alluded to above, is for the parents of children—"A Word to Christian Parents." He begins with the overarching question—who among you would not want the same for your children as God lavished upon Hart, Sarah, and Mary Clarissa Kerr? What parent does not want his children to enjoy the marvelous work of the Spirit, which so characterized these three covenant children? "In so far as these remarkable

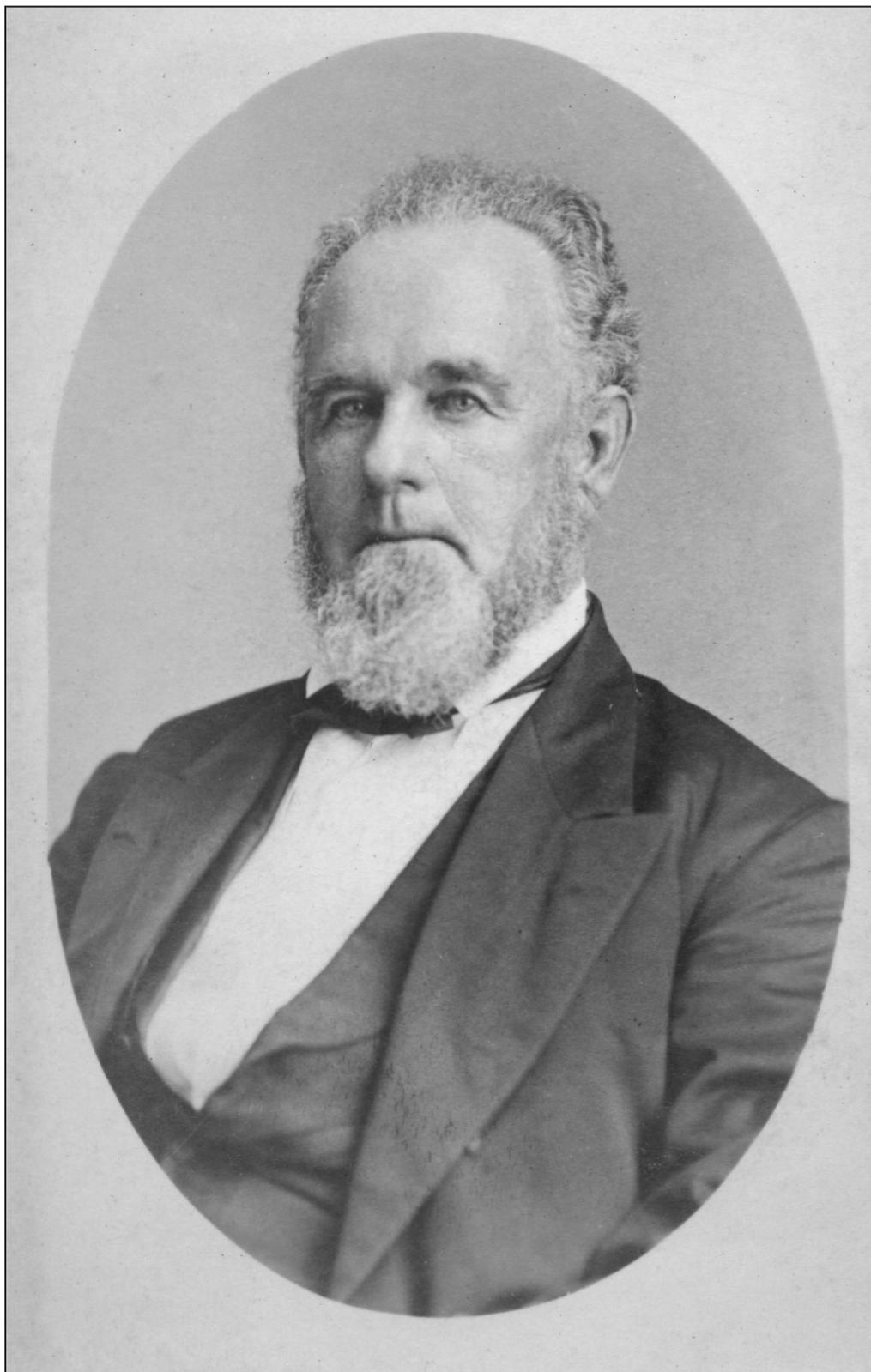
examples of early piety are to be traced to the extraordinary influences of His Holy Spirit,— and it certainly is to these influences alone that we can trace them as their source,—we can only say, as did our blessed Lord: "Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Thy sight" (177). Here we see Witherspoon, consistent to the revealed truth of God, laying the credit at the feet of an all sovereign and loving God who alone can save.

The pastor is also aware that the same revealed truth of God tells us that God has ordained, not only the ends, but the means—"...while He is free to dispense His Spirit, or to withhold Him at His will, yet it is none the less true, that in grace, as in nature, God works ordinarily by means. There are certain channels through which He is pleased to communicate His Holy Spirit. There are certain means, the use of which He is pleased to own and bless" (179). God's grace, Witherspoon acknowledges, "is sovereign; but it is by no means arbitrary" (179). The means are channeled through Christians and the church which is faithfully administering those prescribed means unto grace.

So, our author calls parents to careful attention to their role in the lives of their children. He urges believing parents to expect and pray for great things for their children. Listen as he explains: "Inasmuch as God's covenant with His children embraces not only believers, but their children also; inasmuch as the means through which He communicates His grace, are means which may be made available for children, as well as for persons of mature years; and inasmuch as we know, from the experience of the past, that His Spirit does often times most wonderfully operate upon the minds and hearts of those who are yet in early childhood, we have a right both *to pray for* and *to expect* the early conversion of our children; and if they are not converted in childhood, or opening youth, the fault lies at our own door" (180).

Witherspoon admits immediately that "This may appear very startling to some" (180). But then he proceeds to appeal to Jonathan Edwards as one who supports his understanding of the Scriptures and God's covenant faithfulness to generations of those who love and obey him. Next, he turns to Scripture and the *analogia fidei*. For example, "And yet is there any reason why our children should not be converted in childhood? Did not our blessed Lord, on more than one occasion, say: "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" [Matt

8. Another example of nineteenth century pastoral writing for younger readers can be seen in J. A. Waddell, *Letters to a Young Presbyterian* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1895).



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18:3]. “Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein” [Luke 18:17], &c. Is there anything in the plan of salvation which the child cannot apprehend as truly as the grown man? Is not faith in Jesus Christ the simplest, most child-like exercise of the human mind and heart? If those children who die in infancy, are regenerated by the Holy Spirit before they pass that mysterious bourne, beyond which there is no remission of sins, and no work of grace, may not the same Almighty Agent, who transformed their natures, that they might be new creatures in Christ Jesus, transform also the natures of those who are to remain in this world of sin (182)?” He urges the parents to recognize the power of the covenantal home and the church where the Word is poured out into the hearing and hearts of the children, where the sacraments are set before them to call for their attention, where the Holy Spirit is present for the tasting of those who believe and their children.

It is here he begins to urge parents “to apprehend the reality of the covenant which God has made with believing parents and their children, and the consequent failure to take hold of this covenant by faith, and appropriate to themselves the precious promises which it contains” (185). He further reminds them of the nature of a covenant and the conditions inherent. He says of Abraham, to illustrate:

He was not only publicly to confess, for himself, the true God; publicly to recognize and accept the redemption which God had provided through the sacrifice of atoning blood, and through the regeneration of the Holy Ghost; and publicly to consecrate himself to the true worship and service of God; but he was publicly to confess this Jehovah as the God of his children also; the God whom they were to be taught to fear, to love, and to obey. He was publicly to accept this salvation through the blood of a divine Victim, as the salvation of his children. To the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world, their earliest thoughts were to be directed, that they might believe on Him that justifieth the ungodly, and have their faith counted to them for righteousness. He was, moreover to consecrate his children to the service of God, as truly as he consecrated himself—to feel that, by the condition of this covenant, they were in a peculiar sense the Lord's, in a sense as high and holy as that in which the believer, by the act of self-consecration, gives himself up to the service of God” (186–87).

Now, what of this consecration? What does Witherspoon have in mind that the parents are responsible to do for their children? He answers when he continues saying: “The condition of the covenant, (as that covenant lay at the foundation of the visible church,) embraced, in a word, just what every believing parent is expected and required to do—to consecrate his children to God—to throw them in faith upon the arms of God's covenant mercy, and in daily faith and daily prayer, by the help of divine grace, to rear them as the true servants of God, and the heirs of the promises in Christ” (187). Every believing parent takes upon himself and herself, in the waters of baptism for his children, “the same obligations which Abraham took” (191). Then he laments that parents fail to receive as and believe baptism to be of “true spiritual import” (192). Sadly, he admits, many parents see in the sacrament of baptism a “simply impressive form” (192). It is nothing more than a rite whereby their children are members of the church. The bottom line is this, Witherspoon is accusing parents of not believing in the powers of the covenantal blessings for believers *and their children*. They are not taking God at His word and where there is not faith, we have not (James 1:5–8). With an exhortation then he ends this point: “We, who are the children of the Covenanters, have need to take up God's covenant out of the dust, to put honour upon it, to plead it with Him, to rely upon His faithfulness, and to hope in His mercy. The parent who fails thus to appropriate to himself the provisions of the covenant, does a wrong to his child, that he can never undo, and discards a birthright for him, more precious than the title to princely estates, or imperial honours, or the highest distinctions of rank and fortune among men” (194).

A “second difficulty” the pastor sees in the church of his day (and like the first, we might add, in our day) “is found in the failure, on the part of Christian parents, to begin the work of religious education at the proper season” (195). You must start early, very early, he argues. Why? For the seed of sin is already sown in the heart of every newborn. Parents must not allow those seeds to grow into weeds out of control before casting the seed of God's truth into the child's heart soil.

A third weakness in parenting that leads to gospel failure in the early life is communication, or lack thereof. That is, lack of substantive, free, and intimate communication. Heed Witherspoon: “Many parents never seem to win the confidence of their children at all. They never come into confidential relations with them. The most intimate thoughts of the child's mind, the most sacredly cherished emotions of its heart, are never communicated to the parent. Between father, or

mother, and child, there is an unnatural barrier of reserve—a wall of mutual separation. The few communications as to its inner life, which the natural yearnings of the child lead it to make, are treated with indifference, or, perhaps, made the occasion of severe rebuke” (198). Oh, parents, take heed to this warning. Covenant with your child early, and renew it often, that you will talk ... about everything and anything. Never lose an opportunity. Know the heart of the child and meet the void of that heart with the Savior who fits that God-shaped vacuum, as Augustine said.

Here I would encourage our readers to access this little book and read the full treatment of this “difficulty.” Make it available to your church, especially parents. Witherspoon goes into details covering nine pages on this topic alone! Take this to heart. Let us not fail as parents and grandparents. The lives at stake are too precious.

Admitting that there are many other failures on the parent’s part, he mentions one last—“to make everything in connection with his child subservient, as far as possible, to the advancement of its religious interests. The true parent must feel, if he gives any serious consideration to the matter, that the one great end to be attained for his child, is the salvation of its priceless and undying soul. He must, therefore, feel that the one object which he is to seek, is to fit his child, not to shine in the halls of society, or to excel in the marts of trade, but to attain to eminence in the kingdom of God” (207). Witherspoon proceeds to explain how the Christian parent can and must do this, and in the end, he brings the following exhortation:

Dear Christian brethren, can we not, with the help of the Lord, roll these difficulties out of the way? Can we not, and will we not, suffer the little children to come unto Jesus, and forbid them not? Shall our unfaithfulness stand in the way of the blessings of that covenant-keeping God, who visits the iniquities of the fathers upon the children? Will not every parent who reads this little book, and thinks of the priceless value of the immortal souls of his children, before he lays the volume down, weigh carefully the considerations that have been presented, and enter anew into covenant with God, resolving that, by His grace, every barrier shall be removed, and every encouragement and assistance rendered to the little ones, to deny themselves, and take up their cross and follow Jesus (219–20).<sup>9</sup>

We have presented before the reader a little children’s book. While you may not agree with T. D. Witherspoon upon every detail in regard to theology, there is no amount of argument that can discount the literary beauty of this little book. Likewise, there is no discounting its value to the Church then and now. While the present abstract you are reading falls far short of the literary style of the nineteenth century in general, and Witherspoon in particular, it is our hope that the effort will result in more attention on the part of the Church to her covenant children; that parents of covenant children will take more seriously the sign and seal of the covenant and the benefits of “solemn admission ... into the visible church” (Westminster Confession of Faith 28.1). Parents, talk to your children early and often throughout the short days you have them near you. Guard their hearts and minds. Teach them to love the church. Pastors and elders, teach and preach upon these divine truths. Make them real to the people. Feed the sheep, but also the lambs. Remind the Church of the grand benefits of being covenanted people of God. Put off the ways of the world and communicate the glorious truths of God, God’s way. Pastors and elders, and deacons alike, make Jesus the object of your work and make Jesus the subject of your visits when you are in the homes of Christ’s Church. Witherspoon would have us all be more heavenly minded. Let our children, who are heirs apparent to the glorious kingdom of the King of Kings, know that nothing compares to Christ and His glorious Church. And, by all means, call them to faith in our God and Savior, Christ Jesus. “Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass” (1 Thes 5:24). ■

9. This is a rather lengthy question to end the book, but either the author or the editors omitted the proper punctuation mark.