A Pastoral View of Baptistin1 of Infants

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Theology is derived from the Scriptures. But for some of us our theology comes to life only after we have lived through an experience that forces us to reassess what we have been taught and what we have always believed. I can remember, for example, sitting in a courtroom in Cicero, Illinois, where a crooked judge released some local crime syndicate figures in spite of the strong evidence arrayed against them. A sense of outrage lifted me from the relatively comfortable position of preaching to others about Christians becoming involved in the well-being of the community to a role as leader of a group of Christians actively working for justice. In a similar vein, my own deep feeling for infant baptism derives from personal experience — experience that sent me back to the Scriptures for answers I had never before tried to find. My attachment to the doctrine of infant baptism has by some of my friends been referred to as a "love affair." And I confess to a certain fondness for the term, because it is true that there is a powerful sense of emotion when I contemplate the meaning of this sacrament being administered to a child of believing parents. Join me then in the experience. From there we will go to the Bible and to our Reformed theology. And then to deal with the objections.

My experience goes back to the days when my wedding day was drawing near. At that time in their lives some young men start to get cold feet and wonder if they should go through with their plans. That was not my concern. What suddenly became very real and alive to me was the realization that I and my bride-to-be would become, if the Lord so blessed, parents of a child, or children. We were reasonably prepared to take responsibility for feeding a baby, for seeing that a little child was educated, for giving all the love we knew how, and also for praying for that baby and teaching him or her to pray and to love Jesus. But what I was not prepared for was the nagging question, "Is it possible for this child to be lost for eternity?" Is it possible for a father and mother to place their lives in the hands of Jesus, to know the joy of being part of God's creative process in bringing a new life into being, to walk before the Lord in faith, fulfilling their responsibilities as Christian parents, and still to stand before the judgment seat of Christ one day and be faced with the crushing reality that their child never had been touched by the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit and would never, for all eternity, be a part of that innumerable host who sing the praises of the Lamb? This question may not have been bothering other young men in 1953, but it certainly was bothering me. Are there no promises in Scripture for a young man with a question like this who is about to be married? I inquired of persons older and presumably wiser in the things of the Lord and got only one answer — "That's the chance you have to take!!" I couldn't believe it then, and I don't believe it now.
Although I did not then know what Hebrews 6:9-12 said, my heart told it to me before I discovered these precious words, "God would not be so unjust as to forget all you have done, the love that you have for his name ... . Our one desire is that every one of you should go on, never growing careless, but imitating those who have the faith and the perseverance to inherit the promise" (Jerusalem Bible). I could not imagine that God, would ask me to cooperate with Him in bringing a new unique life into the world and then "take a chance" on that child's salvation. I knew that there had to be some promise that was as firm and solid "as the mountains are round about Jerusalem" (Psalm 125:2). God was not "so unjust." I knew it deep in my heart, but I couldn't find anybody else who shared my conviction, either among my acquaintances or in the theologians whose writings had informed my thinking.

Dwight Small, in his book "The Biblical Basis for Infant Baptism," says what all the other Reformed authors I have read say on this subject, "A child of the covenant, reared with all the privileges which this involves, may choose in his maturity to confirm his covenant relation by faith in Christ, or he may choose to renounce that covenant by rejecting Christ" (p. 110). Even Pierre Marcel in his masterful work, "The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism," says, "His (the child's) choice, his option, his liberty then involve either the rejection of God's grace, the decision not to enter into the covenant, or the acceptance of this grace, the confirmation of the covenant" (p. 207). Again, he says, "Both advocates and adversaries of infant baptism agree in deeming that the little children of believers who die in early years are saved and inherit eternal life ... Consequently, if they die before the time when it becomes possible for them to make a choice, pious parents ought not to doubt concerning their election and salvation" (p. 216).

But what about those who die after it is possible for them to make a choice? Apparently, for these theologians, there are no promises for them. At least none that are sure. From the standpoint of eternity believing parents have more confidence that their children will inherit eternal life if they die than if they live!! Could this really be what the Bible and Reformed theology have to say?

**The Biblical Teaching**

While experience may force us to deal with uncomfortable questions, the only sure guide is what God tells us. Without the support of Scripture our experience is just that — our experience. What does the Bible say? The promise of the covenant in Genesis 17 is the one that lays the foundation for the kind of confidence that a believing father and mother ought to have when they bring their child to receive baptism. To Abraham, our spiritual forefather, God said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you .... and I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you .... to be God to you and to your descendants after you" (vss. 1, 2, 7). The preacher within me would like to expand on what it means to have Yahweh as God to me. In the words of the forty-eighth psalm, "This is God, our God forever and ever. He will be our guide for ever." Defender, protector, warrior, guardian, guide, saviour. These
are words the Bible uses to describe God in his relationship to those whom he makes members of his family and who both begin and continue their participation in the life of the family by faith, "never growing careless, but imitating those who have the faith and the perseverance to inherit the promises" (Hebrews 6:12). Imagine, if you are able, a person who has responded to the gospel by faith. This is a person who has taken up his cross in response to the call of Jesus Christ and has followed Him. This person comes to the end of his earthly road and stands before the judge of all the earth. His only plea is the finished work of Christ. No works of righteousness that he has done does he offer. He casts himself on the mercy of the Lord and points to the One seated at the right hand of the Father. "There is the one who has been my saviour, my defender, my protector, my warrior, my guardian, my guide," he cries. Is it conceivable that He who gave the promises might say, "You honored my Son, even as you honored me, in life and in death, but I'm sorry. I've decided to change the rules, and I'm turning you over to the enemy of your soul to do with as he sees fit. Farewell!" Incredible! Impossible! "It is impossible that God should prove false" (Hebrews 6:18). The Lord's word is sure.

If such a bit of imagining is helpful to us in getting a grasp of what the covenant promise meant to Abraham and to all believers since him, it can be equally helpful in getting a grasp on what the second half of the covenant promise entailed, namely, "and your descendants after you." But before we proceed we must deal with a valid objection from those who point out that the whole covenant promise in Genesis 17 is couched in earthly language. A great and mighty nation; the promised land; and a blessing to all nations. Those are the three components of the covenant promise. By what sleight of hand do we vault from a piece of land called Israel and a people called the Jews, and a blessing in the lives of all other nations to a heavenly scene before a final judge and an eternal destiny? Again it is the author of the Letter to the Hebrews who sees the relation between the earthly and the heavenly. In 11:8 he says, "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called . . . . he went out not knowing where he was to go . . . . for he looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God." In verse sixteen he continues, "They desire a better country, that is a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city." (The preacher in me cries out to preach a sermon, "Is God Ashamed to Be Called My God?") The covenant promises to Abraham and Sarah went far beyond the assurance of an earthly line of descendants, a piece of real estate, and world-wide prosperity. "If it is for this life only that Christ has given us hope, we of all men are most to be pitied" (I Cor. 15:19 NEB). Abraham's faith and hope for himself and for his son Isaac, while centered to a larger degree than ours on an earthly fulfillment, nevertheless looked up and beyond to the heavenly Jerusalem, to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to a judge who is God of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect (Hebrews 12:22, 23).

The second half of the covenant promise made to Abraham and Sarah related to their children. In addition to the promise to be their "God," with all that that entails, Yahweh also promised to be "God to your descendants after you." If the first part of the promise placed the parents under the obligation of the "walk of faith" and
supported the word of promise with an “unchangeable oath” along with the sign and seal of circumcision, what about the second part? Could Abraham and Sarah claim the same sure promise for their son Isaac, even before he was born, or was the promise good only until Isaac was old enough to know what he was doing, at which point the promise ceased to have any validity except as Isaac personally accepted its provisions? Put in terms of the young father and mother standing before the baptismal font, does the gospel announce the good news to them that God includes their baby in his covenant family and that he will fulfill his promise to awaken new life in Christ within that child at some time before the child departs this life? Or is his promise limited to the period of time before the child is old enough to make his or her own confession of faith, at which time both God and parents must wait with earnest hope that the young person will eventually make the right decision?

We used our imaginations when we thought of our own personal standing before the final judgment seat. Let’s do it again, this time as parents. As we stand there and point to him who in life and in death was our faithful Saviour, who fully paid for all our sins with his precious blood and set us free from the tyranny of the devil, who watched over us in such a way that not a hair fell from our heads without the Father’s will, who assured us of eternal life and made us whole-heartedly willing and ready to live for him and then — we look around us for our children and the Judge of all the earth says, “You honored my Son, even as you honored me, but I’m sorry. I’ve decided to change the rules. I decided to work my work of regeneration in two of your children, but the third one I let go to make his own free decision to reject my Son. Sorry about that. Farewell!!” Incredible! Impossible! Just as incredible and impossible as God not making good on his covenant promise not to desert the parents to their foes. “God is not so unjust.” If he really is the one who saves, and if he does it in fulfillment of his freely given covenant promise, then such an imaginary scene is impossible. “It is impossible that God should prove false” so that “we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to seize the hope set before us” (Hebrews 6:18). “I will be God to your descendants says the Lord . . . because you have done this . . . I will indeed bless you . . . because you have obeyed my voice” (Genesis 17:7, 22:16-18). This is God’s promise, sworn to by His oath, and signified and sealed for Isaac in circumcision — for us and our children in baptism. It is the most “exceeding great and precious promise” that I know of, and I have claimed it for nearly twenty-five years.

Further Biblical Data

The “Shema” of Deuteronomy six gives specific instruction concerning the responsibilities of parents in instructing their children in the meaning of the covenant. “And this is the instruction — the laws and the rules — that the Lord your God has commanded me to impart to you, to be observed in the land . . . so that you, your son, and your son’s son may revere the Lord your God and follow, as long as you live, all his laws . . . to the end that you may long endure . . . Obey, O Israel, willingly and faithfully, that it may go well with you . . . as the Lord, the God of your fathers spoke
to you ... Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone .... Take to heart these instructions .... Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up .... when, in time to come, your son asks you, 'What mean the exhortations, laws, and rules which the Lord our God has enjoined upon you?' you shall say to your son, 'We were slaves to Pharaoh ... and the Lord freed us ... then the Lord commanded us to observe all these laws .... for our lasting good and for our survival ... it will be therefore to our merit before the Lord our God to observe faithfully this whole Instruction, as He has commanded us’' (From Deuteronomy 6 in The Torah, Jewish Publication Society). Moses reinforces what had been said to Abraham. God will fulfill his promise to bless children when parents are faithful in walking before him.

In Deuteronomy 12:28, the promise is repeated, "Be careful to heed all these commandments which I enjoin upon you; thus it will go well with you and with your descendants after you forever, for you will be doing what is good and right in the sight of the Lord your God" (JPS translation).

The beautiful one hundred third Psalm contains words that reinforce our understanding of the meaning of God’s promise, "But Yahweh’s kindness is from eternity, and to eternity toward those who fear him; and his generosity to children’s children, to those who keep his covenant, and remember to fulfill his precepts” (vss. 17, 18, in Mitchell Dahood’s, Psalms III, p. 24). Calvin’s comments on this verse are instructive. He says, "It is a singular proof of his love that he not only receives each of us individually into his favour, but also herein associates with us our offspring, as it were by hereditary right, that they may be partakers of the same adoption. How shall he cast us off, who, in receiving our children and children’s children into his protection, shows to us in their persons how precious our salvation is in his sight” (Calvin, Psalms, Vol. IV, p. 139)?

David’s instructions to his son Solomon contain words that at first sight cast doubt on our interpretation of the covenant promise to godly parents. In I Chronicles 28:9, David says, "And you, Solomon my son, know the God of your father, and serve him with a whole heart and with a willing mind; ... if you seek him, he will be found by you; but if you forsake him, he will cast you off forever.” Our understanding of this warning by a godly father is no different from that of all the other texts that warn believers against presuming on the grace of God. For a believer to know that God saved him by grace and that God upholds him by grace every step of the pilgrim path does not free him of the responsibility of responding in obedient faith. The warnings of Hebrews four about failing to reach the promised rest remind us that God expects us to live and walk by faith. One of the strong emphases of the Reformed faith is that found in the Apostle Paul’s Letter to the Philippians, “God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (2:13). When David warns his son against disobedience he is consistent with all of Scripture. And take note of the beautiful way this father turns the whole matter over to the Lord. In a prayer that could well be on the lips of every father here today he says, “O Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, our fathers, keep for ever such purposes and thoughts in the hearts of thy people, and direct their hearts toward thee. Grant to Solomon my
son that with a whole heart he may keep thy commandments, thy testimonies, and thy statues, performing all’’ (I Chronicles 29:18, 19).

**Objections**

What do we do with Deuteronomy 21:18-21? This is the passage where a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father or mother. The parents are instructed to “take hold of him” take him to the elders and join in with all the men of the city in stoning their son to death. It is not likely that anyone here at this conference has ever preached on this text. My understanding of the covenant promises of God given to parents is not that every parent who presents his child for baptism takes seriously and fulfills the obligations and responsibilities of the covenant. In Deuteronomy 21, as in Exodus 21:15 and Deuteronomy 27:16, I believe that we are dealing with parents who have failed to take seriously their covenant vows and who as a consequence are vainly trying to control a rebellious son who has turned against the faith of his parents. There is not a one of us here with experience with families of church members who cannot tell a tale of two parents who are church pillars whose child or children have turned away from the Lord. But in all honesty we have to confess that if we had been raised in a home with those parents we would probably have been turned off to the things of the Lord too. Scripture repeatedly warns against an outward show of piety that is not supported by the reality of the new and Spirit-led life. Calvin sees this law in Deuteronomy twenty-one as protecting children by placing a restraint on parents who would resort to brutality against their children if they were not required to bring the problem before the elders of the people. He comments, “Suppose the moroseness of the father and mother were notorious; or that the father accused the son by the instigation of a stepmother; or that any unworthy spite were discovered, etc . . .” (Harmony of the Pentateuch, Vol. III, p. 16).

What about the Christian parents who give every evidence of living the life of faith and obedience and whose children show no interest in the things of Christ? This objection gets right to the heart of the value of this understanding of God’s promise for the Christian pastor and/or parent. He does not despair of God’s mercy nor abandon his prayers and godly living as though these fail to bring about the desired results. Instead he continues to walk by faith and to surround his child or children with his prayers. I have put it this way in explaining my own personal feelings in this matter, “If I were to be on my deathbed saying my last earthly good-bye to my children, not a one of whom was a confessing or practicing Christian, I would say to each one of them. ‘I’ll see you in the morning.’ ” This has appeared to some to be the height of arrogance. But I am reminded of the polemic that used to be carried on with Roman Catholics thirty years ago when they would object to the calm assurance we Reformed people had in our salvation. We found ourselves accused of arrogance then, thinking that we were “saved” and if we died we knew we would be received into heaven. They were much more “humble,” so they said. They would only “hope” to measure up. Our answer was based on the promises of God’s Word. And I base my assurance on the promise of God’s Word to me, my wife, and my children.

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But how do you know whether you and your wife have walked by faith? Here is where the alert pastor will make wise use of the exhortations to godly living in the latter half of the epistles, and throughout the Scripture. The number of people sitting in our pews, and standing in our pulpits, who are blissfully unaware of how wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked they are is enough to give us work for the rest of our lives. The One who held the seven stars in his right hand said to people like this, "Be zealous and repent." And I confess that the realization that I and my wife must continue to practice the Christian faith right up to our last breath serves as a powerful incentive to continued faithfulness. As I look back over twenty years of being a father I recognize that I am a better father today than I was twenty years ago. And I will be a better grandfather tomorrow than I am a father today. For the life of the Christian is one of moving on from comparative immaturity to full personhood in Jesus Christ.

The parent who takes his or her baptismal vows seriously will always be asking, "Is there something in my life that is hindering the free flow of the Spirit in my family?" The basic stance is that of humility, of self-searching, but always within the framework of God's protecting love that does not condemn us for our shortcomings, but forgives, heals, and helps us grow.

Implications

What about grandparents? The promises of God are not confined simply to one generation. In our own family my wife and I have often spoken of how crucial has been the role of godly grandparents on both sides. Our children have experienced adult models of Christian integrity that go back beyond their parents. And they have heard of the lives of great-grandparents who walked with Jesus. Their sense of who they are has been molded and shaped by more than their immediate parents. And it would perhaps be possible for some in our midst today to tell of the decisive influence of a godly grandparent, uncle, or aunt who took God's covenant promise seriously even when a parent failed to do so. And the circle can be drawn wider even than this. When a child is baptized the congregation takes vows and assumes responsibility for being faithful in praying for and walking in godliness before that little child. I can remember certain older people in the congregation in which I was raised who seemed to take a special prayer interest in my life. I wonder how often when I was tempted to kick over the traces some unseen person was there — a teacher, a coach, a youth leader — praying for me at that moment, calling down the Lord's protective shield around me. And I was quite unaware of it.

Doesn't this take away the liberty of a child to make his or her own decision? This objection hits hard at our understanding of the doctrine of election. What we as Reformed people believe by the freedom of a person is that he or she is not subject to external constraint. That is, he or she is not forced against his or her will to do what he or she doesn't want to do. We have never been Pelagians, seeing each new human being fresh and new, with the ability to choose or reject God's life. We glory in the grace of God in salvation. At the child care center of our church when the teacher opens the door at recess time nobody has to force the children out onto the play-
ground. When Jesus touches a person with his new life that person is not having his or her freedom taken away. Instead, he or she has become truly free — free to be all that God intends him or her to be.

“But don’t you believe that covenant children must make a conscious decision for Jesus Christ?” No question has been asked of me more than this in twenty-four years in the ministry. And to it I give one response, “Yes, a decision every morning of their lives.” My understanding of the relationship of a growing child to Jesus Christ is that there ought never to be a time in his or her life when that child does not consider him or herself to be a believer in Jesus. There may, and will, be times of unusual, joyful experiences. And there will be the other kind too. But every morning, and at every point of decision during the day, we must “decide,” we must “accept” Jesus Christ as our Saviour and Lord. The “decision-day” theology that says, “And it’s because of that wonderful day, When at the cross I believed; Riches eternal and blessings supernal, From His precious hand I received,” is quite misleading. When these words are sung by one who was raised in the family of God, he begins to think that he or she, like one entering God’s family from outside, must be able to point to “one wonderful day.” And even the person coming to Christ from a non-Christian background is pointed in the wrong direction when he is pointed back to what an older song writer called “O Happy Day, When Jesus Washed My Sins Away.” An Episcopalian priest was visiting our city of Denver this summer. When asked, “When were you saved?” he replied, “It was on a Friday, around Noon, a couple of days before Easter.” His eye had found the right target, Jesus Christ crucified. He didn’t find his own decision something to magnify.

There are some words in a new publication of our General Program Council that seem to pick up and rejoice in the understanding of God’s promises that I have tried to share with you today. On page four of “Reformed Church Growth — Perspectives and Proposals” are these words, “That record (the Book of Acts) and our own experiences of God’s grace make it normal to live in an attitude of confident expectation of growth — growth itself is dependent on God.” My wife and I have claimed the sure promise of God and have found it to be a precious source of confident expectation, as well as of gentle discipline. I thank God for the seal of his promise, baptism.
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