

Children in the Administration of The Covenant of Grace

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WHEN we say that children are members by their parents' covenant, I would premise three things for explication.

1. That children of godly parents come to the fruition of their membership by their parents' covenant, but that which gives them their right and interest in this membership is God's covenant, whereby he engageth himself equally to be a God to them and to their seed. This I suppose is clear.

2. That according to the double seed, viz., (1.) Elect seed; (2.) Church seed; so there is a double covenant, (1.) External and outward; (2.) Internal and inward. And because the covenant makes the church, hence there is an inward and outward membership and church estate; there is an outward Jew and an inward Jew. (Rom. 2.28,29.) All are not Israel (i.e., the elect seed) that are of Israel, (i.e., the church seed, or in outward covenant,) to whom the apostle saith belongs the adoption, the covenant, and the promises; that is, the external adoption, whereby God accounts them his children, or the children of his house and family, the children of the church; and accordingly have the promises belonging to them in respect of outward dispensation, although they be not children by internal adoption, to whom belong the promises by effectual and special communication of saving grace. It is clearer than the day that many who are inwardly, or in respect of inward covenant, the children of the devil, are outwardly, or in respect of outward covenant, the children of God. Is. 1.2, "I have brought up children," and yet "rebellious;" and in the next verse they are called "my people," (i.e., by outward covenant,) and yet worse than the ox, or ass. Deut. 32.19,20, they are called sons, and yet provoking God to revengeful wrath; and children, and yet without faith. And look, as some may be externally dogs, and yet internally believers, (as the woman of Canaan, whom, in respect of outward covenant, Christ calls a dog, and the Jews who yet rejected him children, Matt. 15.26,) so many may be externally children, in respect of external covenant, and yet internally dogs and evil men; and we see that the purest churches of Christ are called saints, and faithful, and children of God, and yet many among them hypocrites and unbelievers; because they that, in respect of church estate, and outward covenant and profession, are outwardly or federally saints, are many times inwardly and really unsound. Hence, therefore, it is, that when we say that children are in covenant, and so church members, the meaning is, not that they are always in inward covenant, and inward church members, who enjoy the inward and saving benefits of the covenant, but

that they are in external and outward covenant, and therefore outwardly church members, to whom belong some outward privileges of the covenant for their inward and eternal good.

These things being clear, I the rather make mention of them to undermine divers usual objections against the membership and covenant interest of children; as, that they have no saving grace many times; and that they make no actual profession of any grace, and that many of them degenerate and prove corrupt and wicked, etc.; for suppose all these, yet God may take them into outward covenant, (which is sufficient to make them the church seed, or members of the church,) although he doth not receive them into inward covenant, in bestowing upon them saving grace, or power to profess it; nay, though they degenerate and grow very corrupt afterward.

3. Because you may question what this outward covenant is, to which the seals are annexed, and under which we shall prove children are comprehended; and because the knowledge of it is exceeding useful and very pleasant, I shall therefore give a short taste of it, as a light to our after discourse, especially as it is considered in the largest extent of it. This outward covenant, therefore, consists chiefly of these three branches, or special promises:—

1. The Lord engageth himself to them, that they shall be called by his name, or his name shall be called upon them, as it is Is. 63.19. They shall be called the sons of God, (Hos. 1.10,) and the people of God, (Deut. 29.12,13;) thou becamest mine, (Ezek. 16.8.) They may not be his sons, and people, really and savingly, but God will honor them outwardly (at least) with this name and privilege; they shall bear his name, to be called so, and consequently to be accounted so by others, and to be reckoned as of the number of his visible church and people, just as one that adopts a young son; he tells the father, if he carry it well toward him, when he is grown up to years he shall possess the inheritance itself; but yet, in the mean while, he shall have this favor, to be called his son, and be of his family and household, and so be reckoned among the number of his sons. See Rom. 9.4.

2. The Lord promiseth that they shall, above all others in the world, have the means of doing them good, and of conveying of the special benefits of the covenant. Nay, they shall be set apart above all people in the world, to enjoy these special benefits of remission of sins, power against sin, eternal life, etc., and shall certainly have these, by these means, unless they refuse them; this is evident from these and such like scriptures and examples: What privilege hath the Jew? (saith the apostle, Rom. 3.1, and what advantage by circumcision, if by nature under wrath and sin? for upon that ground the apostle makes the question:) he answers, It is much every way, but chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God, i.e., the word, promises, covenant; which are the ordinary means of saving grace and eternal good: others hear the word, but these in outward covenant enjoy it

by covenant and promise; and hence these, in the first place and principally, are sought after by these means; and therefore Christ forbids his disciples at first to go preach in the way of the Gentiles, (persons out of covenant,) but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, (Matt. 10.6;) and himself tells the woman of Canaan that he came not but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. (Matt. 15.24.) And although he bids his disciples go preach to all nations, yet (Acts 3.26) it is said, Unto you first hath he sent Christ, because you are children of the promise and covenant, (ver. 25;) repent therefore, and be converted. (ver. 19.) Do not resist or refuse Christ, for he hath first sent Christ to you, to bless you and turn you from your iniquities; and the promise is full and fair. (Rom. 11.23.) If they abide not in unbelief, (i.e., in refusing grace and Christ when offered,) they shall be grafted in, for God is able to do it, and will do it; and the reason why the Lord gave his people up to their own counsels, it was because "my people would none of me," after all the means God used for their good. (Ps. 81.11-13, and Deut. 7.6.) The Lord hath chosen you, above all people on the earth, to be a special people to himself, and thou art a holy people unto the Lord. How a holy people? By inward holiness? No, verily; for many of them were inwardly unholy, both parents and children; but thou art holy, i.e., thou art externally sanctified and set apart, by special means of holiness, to be a special people unto God. And therefore (Is. 5.7) the men of Judah are called God's pleasant plant; i.e., planted into the root and fatness of the church, and therefore had all means used for their further special good. (ver. 4.) "What could be done to my vineyard that hath not been done?" And hence it is, that though the word may come to heathens as well as church members, yet it comes not to them by way of covenant, as it doth to church members; nor have they any promise of mercy aforehand, as church members have; nor is it chiefly belonging to such, but unto the children of the covenant and the promise, as hath been said. And hence also it follows that God never cuts off the seed of his servants from the special benefits of the covenant, until they have had the means thereunto, and they have positively rejected those means; and hence the Jews (who are made the pattern of what God will do toward all Gentile churches, Rom. 11.) were never cast off till by positive unbelief they provoked the Lord to break them off by rejecting and refusing the means of their eternal peace.

3. The Lord promiseth that the seed of his people (indefinitely considered) shall have this heart (viz., which would refuse special grace and mercy) taken away, as well as means used for that end; this is evident from Deut. 30.6, "The Lord thy God will circumcise thy heart and the heart of thy seed to love the Lord;" he will cut off the uncircumcision, and sin, and resistance of the heart against God; he will take away the stony heart; not indeed from all in outward covenant particularly, but from these indefinitely; so that there is no promise to do this for any out of the visible church, (though God of his sovereignty and free mercy sometimes doth so,) but the promise of this belongs indefinitely to those of his church, among whom usually and ordinarily he works this great work, leaving him to his own

freeness of secret mercy, to work thus on whom he will, and when he will; in the mean while no man can exclude himself, or any others within this covenant, from hope of this mercy and grace, but may with comfort look and pray for it; for this is God's covenant, that the Redeemer shall come out of Sion, and turn away ungodliness from Jacob, (Rom. 11.26,27;) for the covenant of God doth not only run thus, If thou believe and receive grace, thou shalt have it; but thus also, I will circumcise your heart, I will take away the stony heart, I will turn away ungodliness from you, I will enable to believe. And hence these three things follow from these things thus opened:—

1. That as the covenant runs not only thus, viz., "If thou believest thou shalt be saved," but also, "I will enable to believe," so a man's entrance into covenant is not only by actual and personal profession of faith, (as some say,) because God's covenant runs a peg higher, viz., to make and enable some to believe, and so to make that profession.

2. That the very outward covenant is not merely conditional, but there is something absolute in it; and hence it follows that it is a great mistake of some who think that circumcision and baptism seal only conditionally, the outward covenant being, say they, merely conditional; for those three things mentioned in the outward covenant, you see, are in some respect absolute, and if the covenant was only conditional, then the Lord was no more in covenant with church members than with pagans and infidels; for it may be propounded conditionally to all such, that if they believe they shall be saved; but assuredly God's grace is a little more extensive to the one than to the other.

3. Hence you may see what circumcision once did, and baptism now seals unto; even to infants the seal is to confirm the covenant; the covenant is, that God (outwardly at least) owns them, and reckons them among his people and children within his visible church and kingdom, and that hereupon he will prune, and cut, and dress, and water them, and improve the means of their eternal good upon them, which good they shall have, unless they refuse in resisting the means; nay, that he will take away this refusing heart from among them indefinitely, so that though every one can not assure himself that he will do it particularly for this or that person, yet every one, through this promise, may hope and pray for the communication of this grace, and so feel it in time.

