

The Children in the Hands of the Arminians

Benjamin B. Warfield (1851-1921)

PROF. CHARLES W. RISHELL, of Boston University, has written a very interesting little book on the relation of little children to Christianity and to the Christian Church. * The object he has set before him is the very laudable one of pleading for the religious education of children. In order to give force to his pleading he argues the possibility of religion in children of the tenderest years. He insists on the importance for them of religious instruction and example. He demands of the church recognition of their church membership and provision for their care and development as children of God with the same right to the privileges of God's Church as other members. As he expresses it, he pleads with the Church "to count the children in, not out."

* *The Child as God's Child*. By Rev. Charles W. Rishell, Ph. D., Professor of Historical Theology in Boston University School of Theology. New York: Eaton & Mains. Cincinnati: Jennings & Graham (1904), p.181.

The significance of the book is that it emanates from Arminian circles and reasons from Arminian postulates. This is its significance; and this is its weakness. There is no other system of belief of widespread influence in the churches to which it is not a commonplace and mere matter of course that children are capable of religious life from their very earliest years, and ought to be recognized from their infancy as members of Christ's Church and brought up in its fold and under its fostering care. There is no other system of belief of widespread influence in the churches to which these principles are logically so unconformable. Professor Rishell has undertaken a most important task in pleading for them in Arminian circles. He has undertaken a task difficult to the verge of impossibility in pleading for them on Arminian principles.

The children certainly must be a source of gravest concern to a consistently Arminian reasoner. The fundamental principle of Arminianism is that salvation hangs upon a free, intelligent choice of the individual will; that salvation is, in fact, the result of the acceptance of God by man, rather than of the acceptance of man by God. The logic of this principle involves in hopeless ruin all who, by reason of tenderness of years, are incapable of making such a choice. On this teaching, all those who die in infancy should perish, while those who survive the years of immaturity might just as well be left to themselves until they arrive at the age of intelligent option. Let no one suppose that we are insinuating that our Arminian brethren live on these principles. They are far from doing this. They people heaven with infants who die in infancy; infants who are saved by the sovereign grace of God operating quite independently of co-operation on their own part. Infants dying in infancy certainly

cannot "improve grace." And that is to say, those who die in infancy, if they are saved at all, must be saved on the Calvinistic principle of monergistic grace. And it is not to be believed that our Arminian brethren neglect the religious training of their children more than other Christians. It must be confessed, however, that Professor Rishell brings grievous charges against what, from his representations, may be a considerable party in his church. He charges that they prosecute the religious training of their children with some degree of listlessness, on wrong presuppositions, and, in wide circles, with no firmly-grounded expectation that it will bear particularly rich fruit.

This much, at least, must be allowed: that in no other than Arminian circles could such indifference to the religion of childhood, or to the recognition by the church of the membership of Children in it, as is here charged, intrench itself in the recognized principles of the system. The sacerdotalist holds that in baptism God has placed in his hands the instrument by which the child of the tenderest years may be incorporated into the church and into Christ. Failure to baptize any child to whom he could obtain proper access would be to him a crime against humanity and against the love of God. Failure to recognize all baptized children as members of the mystical body of Christ would be to him blasphemy against the holy ordinance and the power of the Spirit of God which works through it. The Reformed Christian, suspending salvation for all alike upon the sovereign grace of God alone, operating in accordance with God's covenanted purposes of mercy, points with confidence to the terms of the promise, "To you and to your children." He enjoins parents who trust in the covenanted mercy of God, therefore, to present their children, on the credit of this promise, to the Lord in baptism, and to bring them up in His nurture and admonition. And he enjoins the Church to recognize them by means of this holy ordinance as God's children, heirs of all the promises; and to take order for their training as such, that they may adorn in life and conduct the Gospel by which they are saved. Failure to recognize them as the children of God would be to him treason against that very covenant in whose terms he finds all his own warrant for hope and peace. The Arminian, on the other hand, strenuously contends that all that God has done, or does, looking to the salvation of man has been done with reference to the mass; and that the salvation of the individual absolutely depends, therefore, on his own improvement of the universal provision. He is under constant temptation, therefore, to look upon the individual as outside the Church - the company of God's people - until by his own act of choice of Christ as his portion he has incorporated himself into it. This means, of course, an inherent tendency in the logic of the system "to count the children out." If the incorporation of the individual into Christ and therefore into His Church depends on his own voluntary act of intelligent choice, how, indeed, can children as yet incapable of choice be "counted in"? One would think it tolerably clear that they would be "counted out" until they arrive at such years that they may intelligently and voluntarily "count themselves in."

Dr. Rishell's effort to correct this sad state of things among our Arminian brethren must, of course, meet with the deepest sympathy of every Christian heart. Only we cannot say that he goes about his task in a very hopeful way. Obviously, the root of the difficulty lies in the Arminian doctrine of the function of the human will in salvation. But Dr. Rishell does not attack the problem by seeking to correct this error. From all that appears he is himself firmly holden in it, and would think of nothing so little as commending to his brethren a frank abandonment of their fundamental postulate of autosoteric [Greek: self-saving] Christianity. He elects to approach the problem, therefore, from another angle, and seeks to meet the difficulty by bringing into prominence another doctrine of at least Evangelical Arminianism. This is a doctrine which, as Dr. Rishell suggests, has fallen somewhat into the background in the mind of the average Arminian - as well, indeed, it might, seeing that it clearly stands in direct contradiction to the fundamental Arminian postulate that in the salvation of the individual everything depends upon his exercise of his own power of free choice. This doctrine is that postulate by which the Wesleyans have sought to cure the pelagianizing tendencies of original Arminianism by declaring, to put it somewhat roughly, that all men come into the world already saved. That at least is the way the old Evangelical Arminianism put it, though no doubt a new Arminianism - which is much the same as the old Rationalism - may prefer to phrase it that all men come into the world "safe." This doctrine, it seems, has, in its more evangelical form, stood in the thought of Arminianism heretofore rather as a theoretical postulate saving its theoretical evangelicalism, than as a practical principle of thought and action. Dr. Rishell proposes to bring it out of its position of "innocuous desuetude." and to make it the basis of recognizing children as the children of God, demanding recognition and treatment appropriate to that condition.

The fundamental proposition of Dr. Rishell's book becomes thus the hitherto, as it seems, somewhat neglected Arminian doctrine that all children are born into the world in a state of salvation. His contention is that, this being the case, children are not to be looked upon as subjects who are to be saved. They must not be dealt with therefore as subjects who are to be trained for salvation. They are rather to be thought of as already saved; and are to be treated as needing to be trained only to preserve intact the salvation of which they are already possessors. He spares no emphasis or reiteration to make this fundamental proposition plain. And he omits no effort to give it validity - in his entire conception of the work of the parent and child in child-training. Children, having no guilt of original sin, need no forgiveness. Being already in a state of grace, they need no conversion. They are at least as free from corruption and as well-placed in every respect as adult converts (see e.g., pp.34, 37, 38, 41, 43, etc.). They ought not to be taught, therefore, that they require a Savior. They ought not to be told that they are to repent of their sins, and to rest on the Savior in faith, and faith only. They ought rather to be instructed that they are in a state of grace, and that they need only to preserve intact that good thing that has been committed to them.

As one reads on, from page to page, he is appalled by the extremity to which Dr. Rishell

pushes these contentions. What he says, it is to be observed, is not that the children of believing parents are to be presumed, on the strength of the covenant promise, to be the children of God, and are to be treated accordingly. This is a Reformed doctrine; and we could only wish that Dr. Rishell and all our Arminian brethren were not only almost but altogether such as we are, in it. What he says, he says of all children that come into the world, without exception. He formally bases a doctrine of universal baptism of children upon this postulate. Since all children are born saved, they all without exception have an indefensible right to the temporal as well as to the eternal gifts of God to His people. Nor does he say that we should treat children as presumably the objects of God's mercy, present them to God in faith, and seek the gifts of grace for them. He says that they are already - all of them - the possessors of God's saving grace; that they have, all of them, already been born anew, as truly and as effectively as any adult convert; that they, all of them without exception, begin life on this high plane, and that their only concern is to preserve the salvation they already, all of them, enjoy, and to keep the grace they, all of them, possess.

One is dismayed as he thinks of the vigor of the doctrine of "falling from grace" which is here involved. Every mother's son of the children of the heathen throughout the world; the large majority of the children born in Christendom; even a considerable portion of the children of Christian parents - forthwith "fall from grace" on the first motions of conscious life! And so serious is this fall that, as Dr. Rishell tells us, only sixty per cent. of the "Christian children" who attend Sabbath school, for example, ever find their way even into the Church as an external organization, to say nothing now of finding their way to Christ! In this state of the facts, surely, whatever may be its theoretical value in evangelizing the Arminian system, the practical value of the postulate that all children are born in a state of grace is as nothing; and we cannot wonder that our Arminian brethren have neglected it and have diligently sought to save their children. Born saved or not, they are no longer saved when they come under our observation; and every Christian heart will be zealous to secure or recover, as we choose to call it, salvation for them. In recommending parents and the Church to reverse their methods, to cease to seek the salvation of their little ones, and to treat them consistently as all already by virtue of their very nature saved, or at least safe, we fear that Dr. Rishell has "pressed beyond the mark"; and if his teaching were universally adopted, we very greatly fear we should soon find that the quotation would need to be filled out to its bitter end. We shall not benefit the children by teaching them - or by teaching those who have their spiritual good in charge - that their part in salvation is so of nature that the "faithful saying" that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" has but a modified application to them.

There is much in Dr. Rishell's hook about the duty of Christian parents and of the Christian Church to their children which it is well to say, and which is well said. Perhaps the whole of it might be read with profit by an Arminian parent who is imbued with the terrible notion - Dr. Rishell is our authority for fearing it may exist among our Arminian brethren - that children must be left untrammelled to exercise their own free choice as to salvation when the choosing time comes.

As against such a dreadful idea he rightly pleads the duty and profit of Christian nurture, and seeks to put on the hearts of his readers the Biblical precept, Train up a child in the way he should go. We have heard of a Mr. Rufus Hood, who sought to put this shocking principle into practice, and met with results which scarcely commended themselves even to his genial biographer. What would the world be if all were Constance Trescotts [popular 1904 novel by S. Weir Mitchell]? But the whole of Dr. Rishell's counsel is so vitiated by his fundamentally false postulate that its universal adoption would be as noxious as, perhaps more noxious than, the abuse which he seeks to correct. We have spoken of the postulate as finding its best expression in popular speech in the assumption that all children are born saved. But we have also spoken of it as, perhaps; more accurately expressed by declaring that they are all born safe. The difference of expression marks the difference between the Evangelical Arminian and the Pelagianizing, or, to use a more modern term, the Rationalizing Arminian. The difference is a purely theoretical one; it has no practical significance. In either case every child is presumed to come into the world in no need of saving. In either case the problem with the whole human race is not to save it, but to keep it from getting lost. So to state the problem is, to a believer in the Scriptural revelation, already to dismiss it. Surely the Bible does not think of the world as a saved world, which needs only to be kept saved; but as a lost world, which needs saving. To say that this lost estate in which the world is found is for every generation purely post-natal may be an easy rejoinder for those who are determined to support a theory and are careless of the props used. But it can convince nobody. Everybody knows in his heart of hearts that the world is by nature a lost world, and that he himself has been born a child of wrath, even as the others. To tell him that this is not true is to him the prime absurdity; and it will matter little whether he is told he is born saved or safe. The difference between the two answers is, in fact, a difference of tone rather than of principle. The one reveals a deeper sense of dependence on Christ for all the goods of this life and the next: the other reveals a stronger feeling of self-dependence. Arminianism and Rationalism - how close they lie together! The human soul is too much of a unit, and its "faculties" too little separable entities, for a strong feeling of autonomy in the one sphere of its operations to fail to work its way through all. Say that Arminianism is formally Thelematism [from the Greek for "will" - thelema] rather than Rationalism. It is certain that Thelematism will never escape the dangers of Emotionalism or of Rationalism, according as the temperament (or the temperature) of the individual opens this or the other channel for its extension. Professor Rishell's temperament appears to be that which is more inclined to the rationalistic side, and there is accordingly a very unpleasant tone of rationalism running through the whole volume. He makes visible efforts to keep true to current Methodist conceptions. The efforts are indeed too visible; too obviously needed. And the leaven of Rationalism is working throughout the whole discussion.

The very ideal of the Christian life as well as of Christian training suffers in consequence. Dr. Rishell sums up his appeal at the close of his volume, in some very beautiful words. "So to train a human being from infancy to maturity," he says, "as that he will never fall into the evils of an

unbridled appetite; that he will lead a clean, pure, helpful life; that he will find in the service of God and the service of his fellow-man his chief joy; that he will gladly take his place by the side of Christ in the saving of other human beings - this is worth while." It certainly would be worth while. Can it be done? That is, not indeed the question, but a very important question. The question is whether, when it is done, all is done; or, indeed, in the deepest sense of the word, anything is done. We have been told of one for whom as nearly, probably, as in the case of any one who has lived on the earth, all this was done. The note of his character was expressed in the great declaration, "All these things" - all the things commanded by the law of God - "have I obeyed from my youth up." When he saw Jesus, with the natural impulse of one so trained and so richly endowed, he wished to take his place by His side: "Good Master," he called Him, and fell on his knees at His feet. "And Jesus, looking upon him, loved him." Surely here, if anywhere, may be found Dr. Rishell's well-trained youth. Was there nothing lacking in his case? According to the judgment of our Lord, everything was lacking. Seeing him, and seeing his lack, seeing how difficult it was for him to perceive what he lacked and how impossible for him to supply it, our Lord was moved to deliver His great discourse on the human impossibility of salvation. And by this example we may see that Dr. Rishell's program of training for youth lacks everything to this point.

What is lacking in it is the whole evangelical note. There is lacking all sense of the joy of redemption from sin. What will Dr. Rishell make of the great declaration, "Verily I say unto you, there is more joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth than over ninety and nine just persons who need no repentance?" Where in his whole scheme is there place for the joy of believing? Where for the fervour of love? Where for the inextinguishable bliss of redemption? Worth while so to train a child that he will "never fall into the evils of unbridled appetite"? Worth while to teach a child to live a clean life? Worth while to train a child to zeal in religious and humanitarian activity? Of course it is worth while. But there are some things that are much more worth while than these, great things as these are. It is much more worth while to train a child to recognize the sinfulness of his heart and the amazing deceit and subtlety of its sinful movements. It is much more worth while to teach him to contemplate with ceaseless wonder the unspeakable love of God in the gift of his only begotten Son as a sacrifice for the sin of the world. It is much more worth while to lead him to this Savior's feet in humble trust in His blood and righteousness. It is much more worth while to implant within his soul a longing for the gift of the Spirit by whom, being born anew, he is led onward in the holy walk with God his Savior. Oh, certainly it is worth while to teach a child that he ought to be good; and to train him in good thoughts and good words and good deeds. But it is infinitely better worth while to teach him how he can become good. And no more now than at any other period of the world's life is there any other dynamic for goodness than just Jesus Christ. Now, too, as ever the great principle holds good, "Not out of works, but unto good works which God has afore-prepared that we should walk in them." "The frozen reason's colder part" - there may be some mild pleasure in that, surely; but "the joy of salvation" - nothing can take the place of that in any heart, young or old. Of course, if children do not need saving, there can be no need of bringing

them to Jesus; or of teaching them to trust humbly in Jesus. Jesus in that case is not "Jesus" to them: for "they called His name Jesus because He should save His people from their sins." Only, we wonder then, why He took the little children in His arms and said, "Of such is the kingdom of heaven." And, then, these little children grow up; and did any one ever see one who had grown up and had no need of Jesus - not as one to whose side he might come to help Him save the world, but as One to whose feet he might flee to receive from Him the salvation of the soul? It is a sad thing if there are any Christian parents anywhere who fail in their duty to give their children a full and rich religious training; we have to learn religion as we have to learn anything else It would be an infinitely sadder thing if any Christian parents anywhere should teach their children that they do not need salvation, and do not need to seek it diligently, and when they have found it to sell all that they have and purchase it.

Originally published in Vol. xvii of the *Union Seminary Magazine*, 1904.



ReformedLiterature.com