

The Lord's Children

An Appeal to Baptist and Reformed Friends

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My Baptist friends disagree with me about baptizing infants and many of my Presbyterian and Reformed friends disagree with me about allowing infants to receive communion from the time they are able to eat bread. The debate on both of these issues will no doubt continue for a long time. It is not my intention here to attempt to contribute to it. Rather, I wish to make a pastoral appeal. Whatever we may believe about the propriety of infants being baptized and whatever we may think about toddlers taking communion, there is the issue of little children who are old enough to confess their faith. What of them?

It seems to me that the question can be bluntly stated in these words: How old does a child have to be before we take his profession of faith seriously? I do not mean to sound terse or rude, but I do want to put the issue in straightforward terms. Little children from the age of two to four or six can and do profess their faith in Christ. Our tendency — and I say “our” because I have done this also — is to reject their confession of faith on the grounds that they are children and their confession is not quite the “real thing.”

I have come to believe that treating children in this fashion is wrong. We need to rethink what it means that God has given us children as a blessing to train for Him and His glory. We also need to rethink the implications of our Lord's teaching about children.

The Blessing of Children

The Bible teaches that God's gives children to His people as a blessing. Not all children actually turn out to be a blessing for their parents, as Adam and Eve found out when Cain grew up. But children are given to believers as a blessing. From the time of Abraham, parents in the Old Covenant circumcised their sons at the age of 8 days. They were not merely performing an external rite with no thought of the spiritual condition of the child. On the contrary, circumcision pictured the rolling away of the flesh, the taking away of that which hinders the work of God. The real meaning of circumcision was expressed clearly in the book of Deuteronomy.¹

Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked. (Deu. 10:16)

This shows us what a godly Jew prayed and hoped for when he circumcised his son. He saw the circumcision of the flesh as a covenant sign pointing to the circumcision of the heart. He would never have disassociated the two. No doubt Abraham understood this, and at least from

¹ All Biblical quotations in this essay are from the American Standard Version of 1901 unless otherwise stated.

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the time of Moses, when the book of Deuteronomy was written, all of his children should have understood it also.

Centuries later, during a time of national apostasy and rebellion, Jeremiah warned the Jews to fulfill the true meaning of their circumcision or else they would face the judgment of God.

Circumcise yourselves to Jehovah, and take away the foreskins of your heart, ye men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem; lest my wrath go forth like fire, and burn so that none can quench it, because of the evil of your doings. (Jer. 4:4)

The LORD though His prophet Jeremiah leaves no doubt that a mere external circumcision was never His intention. God is not now nor has He even been satisfied with mere ritual.

Behold, the days come, saith Jehovah, that I will punish all them that are circumcised in their uncircumcision: Egypt, and Judah, and Edom, and the children of Ammon, and Moab, and all that have the corners of their hair cut off, that dwell in the wilderness; for all the nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in heart. (Jer. 9:25-26)

When the children of Israel circumcised their children, therefore, they were supposed to understand the meaning of circumcision and to seek for its proper fulfillment in their children. The law pointed the way to this when it enforced upon parents their most sacred duty as parents.

Hear, O Israel: Jehovah our God is one Jehovah: and thou shalt love Jehovah thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be upon thy heart; and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. (Deu. 6:4-7)

To confess that God is One places the believer under the obligation to love the One God with all his heart, soul, and strength. To offer anything less than all to God would undermine the meaning of the confession. Furthermore, to love God with the mind, soul, and strength is made concrete and specific when Moses goes on to command 1) that the word of God be in their hearts and 2) that they teach the words of God diligently to their children. To love God is to have our hearts filled with His word and to teach our children so that their hearts are full of His word also. Deuteronomy 30:6 articulates the God-designed connection between circumcision and the command to love God in Deuteronomy 6, which Jesus called the first and great commandment (Mat. 22:37-38).

And Jehovah thy God will circumcise thy heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love Jehovah thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live.

Assuming the godly Jew understood these truths, imagine now, the Jewish child in a good home. The little boys and girls would be raised in an atmosphere filled with the word of God. They would have been taught the word of God until it was in their hearts. Their parents would have talked of it day and night, in all their activities. Children would have prayed with their

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parents from the time they could talk. They would have heard the Scriptures recited. They would have been taught about the creation of the world in six days, about the faith of the patriarchs, about the miraculous salvation God accomplished in bringing His people out of Egypt.

Would the children have believed what their parents taught them? Of course. That is the way God made them. Children naturally believe what their parents teach them because God has created the parent-child relationship to reflect His relationship with mankind. He is our Father in heaven and we are His children. We are supposed to believe Him because we know that He is our Father who loves us. We cannot understand everything He says, but we can trust Him, just as our own children believe and trust us.

It is true, of course, that as our children get older, their faith must mature. It is tried and tested. They have to learn to relate to God as adults and not simply through their parents. They must struggle to understand the basic teachings of Scripture, learn to pray, fight against sin and temptation, and come to know God's calling for their lives. All of that is part of growing up and becoming an adult. But none of it implies that the faith they had as a child is invalid. There is no reason to believe that their prayers to God were not heard or that their worship of God was rejected because they were underage.

On the contrary, the law in the book of Deuteronomy suggests just the opposite. Children were to be instructed in the way of loving God from their earliest youth. As we have seen, boys were circumcised on the eighth day with a view not simply or primarily to the outward blessings of the covenant. Circumcision expressed, among other things, the prayer of the parents that their children's hearts would be circumcised to love God and a godly Jew would have sought for nothing less.

In the child's simple faith in his parents' words and in the Scripture-filled family atmosphere, God provided the normal, providential way for the parents' prayers to be answered. Most children would believe what they were taught and remain in the way when they grew old (Prov. 22:6). In the Old Covenant, parents had God's assurance that if they reared their children in an atmosphere filled with the living word of the living God, they could expect their children to have a living faith.

Jesus and the Children

Jesus teaching gives us an even deeper appreciation of what it means that God has created children to believe their parents' words.

In that hour came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven? And he called to him a little child, and set him in the midst of them, and said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye turn, and become as little children, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me: But whoso shall cause one of these little ones that believe on me to stumble, it is profitable for him that a great millstone should be hanged about his neck, and that he should be sunk in the depth of the sea. Woe unto the world because of occasions of stumbling!

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for it must needs be that the occasions come; but woe to that man through whom the occasion cometh! (Mat. 18:1-7)

Jesus called to himself a *παιδίον*. According to the Greek lexicon², a *παιδίον* is a very young child, usually below the age of puberty. The word was used of Jesus when he was still an infant and when he was a little older (Matt. 2:8-9,11,13-14,20-21). It is also used of the twelve-year-old girl that Jesus raised from the dead (Mar. 5:39-42). It is not clear, therefore, how old the children were, but the Greek word includes very young children, toddlers, and infants. In verse 6, Jesus refers to these children as “little ones,” suggesting that they are indeed toddlers or at least very young children.

The Gospel of Luke adds further light on the subject in the following often quoted verses.

And they were bringing unto him also their babes, that he should touch them: but when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. But Jesus called them unto him, saying, Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for to such belongeth the kingdom of God. Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall in no wise enter therein. (Luk. 18:15-17)

The word translated above as “babe” (*βρέφος*) refers either to an unborn child, the so-called “fetus,” or to an infant.³ It is not used of older children. Verse 17 uses the broader word *παιδίον* as a synonym.

The conclusion is that Jesus received little children, even infants and toddlers, to bless them and told his disciples not to reject them. Whatever we think about infant baptism, verses in the Gospels that speak of Jesus accepting little children, including infants and toddlers, should give us pause. We must not despise the faith of the “little ones” and “babes.”

The Church and the Children

For most churches in the history of Christianity, both East and West, believing Jesus' teaching about children meant baptizing infants and accepting them into the Church. For the first millennium of Christian history, it also meant that toddlers were accepted to the Lord's Supper.⁴ For Reformed churches today, these verses mean that infants may be baptized. Baptist churches might quote these verses as a basis for a special service to bless babies, but otherwise, unless a child makes a “credible profession,” he cannot be accepted either for baptism or the Lord's Supper.

In my opinion, the universal practice of the Church in the first millennium of her walk with God is the correct application of the verses above, not to mention many other verses that apply to the issue. But the debate over infant baptism and paedocommunion has gone on for so long and everyone's trenches are dug so deep that I despair of making any contribution to the ongoing

² *Greek - English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. F. W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, third revised edition).

³ *Ibid*, *βρέφος*

⁴ See http://www.reformed.org/sacramentology/tl_paedo.html

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discussion. I have attended Baptist churches, Lutheran churches, Reformed churches, and others. I have no reason to doubt the sincerity or goodness of any of these groups. For my Bible study, I read Luther, Calvin, and Spurgeon, as well as a host of other Evangelical commentators, theologians, and Bible teachers from a variety of churches with all sorts of theological backgrounds. Like most Christians, I am sometimes troubled by the fact that we are not able to attain unity on issues like baptism and the Lord's Supper. Perhaps unlike most Christians I live in a society that is fundamentally idolatrous, Japan. What strikes me most deeply is how much unity we already do have. Those who confess the Apostle's Creed have an underlying oneness of faith that gives them something to build upon.

A Suggestion

Therefore, rather than attempting to persuade my brothers and sisters in Christ to change their views on baptism and the Lord's Supper, I would like to make a suggestion concerning our practice based upon the Bible's obvious acceptance of little children.

First, we all know that little children are "programmed" to believe what their parents teach them. God has created us in such a way that when we are small children we accept what our parents say without question or doubt. Some parents tell their children that a fat jolly man will come down the chimney on Christmas Eve to put presents under a Christmas tree. Children do not ask how he can fit into the narrow corridor of the chimney. Or, if they do ask, they believe when parents tell them, "He just does." Children do not ask how one person can visit so many millions of people in one night. They do not ask how he can have so many presents in his sleigh. They implicitly believe what their parents say.⁵

Now the question is, is this faith real *faith*. The verses from the Gospels suggest that it is. In fact, Jesus says not only that the faith of little children is real faith, *He says it is model faith*. It is the only kind of faith that will lead to eternal life. Little children believe what their parents say and do not imagine questioning the authority of their parents. According to Jesus, adults should have the same unquestioning trust in the heavenly Father and His word given to us in Holy Scripture. Children may not always put their faith in the proper object, but their faith is as psychologically authentic as the faith of an adult. When they trust in Christ, therefore, their faith is genuine, however immature.

Second, that being the case, we ought to take seriously the faith of little children. At what age? Let each church decide. My point is that little children, whether they are two, four, or six, can pray to the true God with real trust. They will believe what their parents say about who God is and what He has done for them. They will believe what we teach them about Jesus. God has made them to believe and it is a wonderful blessing for us that He has.

Third, this means, then, that the profession of faith of a child is a real profession. Again, I am not trying to say what age should be the standard. All parents know from experience how much children vary. Some seem to understand very early, others develop late. Churches could deal with each child individually or they could set an age at which almost all children can make a relatively intelligent profession. For the sake of argument here, let's say 4 years of age.

⁵ Which is why, by the way, I never did the Santa Claus thing with my children. I did not want to intentionally deceive them about something like this, especially since Christmas is a celebration of the birth of Christ.

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A 4 year old can tell you what he believes, if you teach him. He will accept his parents' teaching that God is a Trinity, though, of course, he will not understand exactly what that means. That is not a problem. Neither his pastor nor his parents really understand all that it means that God is a Trinity. It is a faith we confess because like little children we are willing to believe what our Heavenly Father teaches us, even when it transcends our understanding. Why should the child's lack of deep understanding bother us?

Fourth, if we can accept the child's profession of faith, why not baptize the child? Why wait until he is 12 or 14 before we accept his profession?

The standard answer that I have heard is that so many of those who sincerely profess faith at 4 or 5 fall away by the time they are teenagers. I know this is true. I have experienced this tragedy in churches I have attended in the past and it is something that deeply disturbs me. Since this essay addresses a different topic, I will only briefly discuss the problem of children departing from the faith. In my opinion, this has relatively little to do with the sincerity of the child's profession. It is really a matter of education.

The fact is that most Christians in the advanced world commit their little children — who believe whatever they are told — to a godless educational system. From the time they are 4 or 5, children are trained to believe they can understand the world without faith in the Triune God, prayer, or study of His word. That training continues until they are adults. It occupies the greatest part of their time during the week for most of the years of their lives from the time they are 5 or 6 until they are 18 or 22.

Now think. If we sent our little ones to the Mormons 30 or more hours a week for 12 years or more, would we be surprised if they eventually thought and acted like Mormons? If we send them to godless, secular schools, is it a surprise that they grow up to think and act like the rest of the godless world? This is not a question of baptism or of the genuineness of the children's faith. This is a question of churches and families being guilty of a gross dereliction of duty. Concerning our children, God commands us to “nurture them in the chastening and admonition of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4b). We have not done that and we suffer the consequences of our sins.

We also know, by the way, that many adults who profess faith will also fall away. That does not prevent us from accepting their professions of faith or from baptizing them or from accepting them to the Lord's Supper. Ask yourself, if an adult professed faith and we had every reason to believe his faith was sincere, what would happen if we sent him to the Mormons to be educated from Monday to Friday from 8:00 AM to 3:00 PM? What if we did this with all young professors and they received this education for 12 years? What would be the rate of loss? How many of those who seemed to make a true profession would turn away? If we know that immature adult believers need to be protected from error, why do we subject our children to an education that can only undermine their faith in Christ?

What if, instead, we accepted their profession of faith and baptized them? I am not saying that Baptists should baptize infants (though I believe that they should); I am suggesting that they should baptize young children of 4 or 5 or 6 who profess faith in Jesus.

What if we treated them like little believers and allowed them to confess their sins and trust in Jesus saving grace to cleanse them? What if we allowed them to take the Lord's Supper beside their parents, knowing that they can examine themselves at a certain level (cf. 1 Cor. 11:28) and they can repent as sincerely as we? (Remember Jesus pointed to them as model believers. Surely that includes repentance.) I am not suggesting that Reformed or Lutheran

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churches accept toddlers to communion (though I believe that they should); I am suggesting that they should allow children old enough to repent and profess faith to receive the Lord's Supper.

What if we gave them an education of the sort that God commanded His people to give their children in Deuteronomy 6? I firmly believe that most of them would grow up to have a mature faith — a childlike faith that is able to tackle adult level problems. I believe that is God's promise and I accept that promise in simple faith.

Conclusion

This is my appeal to my Baptist and Reformed (Presbyterian, Continental Reformed, or Lutheran) friends. As those who follow Jesus and trust in His word with the faith of little children, let us take seriously our little children's professions of faith. Each church will have to make its own decisions about what age is appropriate. But no one believes that the little ones and babies that Jesus accepted and used as an example for His disciples were 13. Quite the contrary, at 13, children are programmed to question our faith and teachings, to ask why and to demand an explanation. That is also good and we are responsible before God to answer their questions.

But is it not odd that one of the most important and fundamental answers that we have to give to them is that we must trust God with the faith of a little child? I do not mean that it is odd from the Biblical perspective. That is exactly what Jesus taught. I mean that it is odd in this sense — for years we have been telling our children that they are not ready to be baptized or to take the Lord's Supper. Their faith is too immature. Their profession is not yet *credible*. Then, when they reach the age at which they begin to question everything, we tell them that they must have the faith of a little child — *the very faith we have been rejecting for so many years!*

No wonder they do not find this satisfying. If we doubt the faith of little children, if we are suspicious about the repentance and self-examination of pre-school and elementary school children, should we be surprised if our teenage children regard such baby faith as foolishness? Now that we have taught them by our example that the faith of little children is worthless, or at least worth *less*, how can we expect to persuade them that believing like little children is the essence of mature and developed faith?

Would it not be wiser, more humble, and more Christ-like if we would accept the little children like our Lord told us to do? Then when our children became teenagers who question everything, we could point to these verses of the Bible and say to them that Jesus taught us to believe like little children with implicit trust in God. We could answer them:

Of course we cannot understand everything. Of course, there are many things that are a mystery to us. To seek understanding with prayer, trusting in God, is good and we should always try to grow in knowledge and wisdom. But we should do so in the spirit of childlike faith. We never grow so wise that we no longer need to trust in the Heavenly Father with an implicit and absolute reliance. He is our Father, we cannot and should not doubt Him. We may doubt our selves and we may doubt the whole world. But we may never doubt the One who loved us and sent His Son into the world to die for our sins and save us.

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I trust in God with the same kind of faith that a little child of 3 or 4 trusts in his parents. I accept what Jesus taught that this is the only kind of faith which can bring us into the kingdom. When you were 4, I accepted your faith. I treated you like a fellow believer because your faith and mine were fundamentally the same. I have not progressed to some advanced condition in which I now have knowledge and no longer need the faith of a simple child. On the contrary, the older I get and the more I learn, the more my faith is purified to the simplicity of relying on Jesus. I urge you to stand in that same faith. Seek knowledge, wisdom, and understanding on the basis of that faith. Never doubt your Father in Heaven, just like you did not doubt me when you were 4. That is the kind of faith I have. It is the faith Jesus taught us all to have.

If we reject a small child's profession of faith and treat them as half-believers, not admitting them to the Lord's Supper, we have no real answers to the many questions they will ask us when they become teenagers and want answers to every problem that has ever confronted the human race. If we reject the profession of little children, our own faith will appear to our teenagers to be nothing more than an escape from the overwhelming difficulties of understanding the world. Urging them to return to the simple faith of a child that we previously suspected and rejected will be thought to be hypocritical at best — if the teenager notices the discrepancy.

In most cases, the contradiction will just be *felt*, not reflected upon. For reasons that the teenager will not be able to specify, he will simply not be convinced that childlike faith is a good thing. He wants to be an adult and to think and act like adults. All the adults he knows treat childlike faith in children as "play faith." It is not treated as model faith, like Jesus said, but as dumb trust, credulity, gullibility. No wonder they are not impressed when parents urge them to utter trust in Jesus and the Bible.

If we changed our practice, our teenagers would be different, too. If we treated children's faith as authentic faith, our own faith might grow also. If we treasured the implicit trust of a child in our practice of baptism and the Lord's Supper, teenagers and adults would be persuaded when we set one of the little ones in their midst and said: "Of such is the kingdom of heaven."