

Evangelizing Our Children

A Reformed and Covenantal Practice

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Part One: Theological Foundations

Christians of Reformed persuasion, like myself, have always taken great comfort from the words of the Apostle Peter to the crowd in Jerusalem on Pentecost. “The promise,” he told them in Acts 2:39, “is for you and your children.” Our federal, or covenantal, theology recognizes in that statement a wonderful truth: that God’s promises are multi-generational, that fathers represent their children in God’s sight, and that therefore the children of believers enjoy a tremendous privilege that the children of unbelievers don’t. Paul’s assurance in 1 Corinthians 7:14 that the children even of just one believing parent are “holy,” set apart, reinforces our confidence as we think of our children, as does his statement to the Philippian jailer, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:31).

We find the root of this comfort in the covenant between God and Abraham. In Genesis 17:7, God said to Abraham, “I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants [literally, *seed*, singular, as Paul insists in Galatians 3:16]—I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your seed after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants [*seed*] after you.” We recognize that this federal teaching lies at the root of our practice of infant baptism, as it lay at the root of the Old Testament saints’ practice of infant circumcision. The covenant child is to have the covenant sign.

He is also to be raised faithfully in the covenant signified by his baptism, reflecting God’s comment in Genesis 18:19, “I have chosen [Abraham], so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice.” Thus covenantal believers take very seriously God’s instructions in Deuteronomy 6:6-9: “These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” We attend carefully—or we *should*, anyway—to the words of Psalm 78:1-7:

Listen, O my people, to my instruction; Incline your ears to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings of old, Which we have heard and known, And our fathers have told us. We will not conceal them from their children, But tell to the generation to come the praises of the LORD, And His strength and His wondrous works that He has done. For He established a testimony in Jacob And appointed a law in Israel, Which He commanded our fathers That they should teach them to their children, That the generation to come might know, even the children yet to be born, That they may arise and tell them to their children, That they should put their confidence in God And not forget the

works of God, But keep His commandments.

But lately in some Reformed circles now widely known as the “Federal Vision” movement, this covenantal teaching is twisted so that it becomes a guarantee—or *nearly* a guarantee?—of salvation to every child born to a believer—or at least to every *baptized* child born to a believer. In addressing the problem of how one is to have assurance of salvation, Reverend Steve Wilkins of Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church (a congregation of the Presbyterian Church in America), in Monroe, Louisiana, said, “Don’t get all tangled up trying to see whether you have sincere faith in Christ. Look to your baptism!” Then he explained,

when we say . . . ‘Look to your baptism,’ we’re talking about looking to Christ in the covenant, and realizing what you can *know for certain*. You *cannot know if you were ever sincere*. You *cannot know* if you really meant it when you asked Jesus into your heart and threw the pine cone into the fire. You can’t know those. Those questions are *unanswerable*. Were you *really* given a new heart? Well, you can’t answer that question. *God knows*. You *don’t know*. What you *can know* is that *you have been baptized and you have the Lord’s Supper*.

This view helps pastorally, he said, in that “It makes our standing before God **and that of our children plain**, and yet it prevents presumption. . . . We belong to Christ. Baptism is the **infallible** sign and seal of this”¹ More conclusively, Wilkins wrote elsewhere, “If [someone] has been baptized, he is in covenant with God”; “covenant *is* union with Christ. Thus, being in covenant gives all the blessings of being united to Christ. . . . Because being in covenant with God means being in Christ, those who are in covenant have all spiritual blessings in the heavenly places.”²

Similarly, Reverend John Barach, now pastor of Reformation Covenant Church (a congregation of the Confederation of Reformed Evangelicals) in Medford, Oregon, said,

There is nothing better, nothing more glorious than living in covenant with God, being brought right into the family life of the Triune God Because we are united with Christ, because He is our covenantal representative, when He was raised from the dead and vindicated by God, we were vindicated by God, justified. In Christ we have sanctification. . . ., we have new life . . . [and] the Spirit . . . [and] have been glorified. . . . But who shares in those blessings? . . . who is in Christ? . . . those people are in Christ who have been baptized into Christ. . . . there is an objective covenant made with believers **and their children**. Every baptized person is in covenant with God and is in union then with Christ and with the Triune God. The Bible doesn’t know about a distinction between being internally in the covenant, really in the covenant, and being only externally in the covenant Every baptized person is truly a member of God’s covenant. . . . every baptized person is in Christ

¹Steve Wilkins, “Covenant and Baptism,” taped lecture at the 2003 Auburn Avenue Pastors’ Conference, transcript, 11-12, italicized emphases original to the transcript and reflecting the speaker’s voice in delivery; boldfaced emphasis added.

²Steve Wilkins, “Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation,” in *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros & Cons: Debating the Federal Vision*, edited by E. Calvin Beisner (Ft. Lauderdale, FL: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004), 254-269, at 267, 262.

and therefore shares in his new life³

Steve Schlissel, pastor of the independent Messiah's Congregation in Brooklyn, New York, wrote on a whiteboard during a colloquium on Federal Vision theology in August 2003 hosted by Knox Theological Seminary, "The children of believers are saved."

Showing a little more restraint, popular pastor and author Reverend Douglas Wilson of Christ Church (another congregation of the Confederation of Reformed Evangelicals, a denomination Wilson founded) of Moscow, Idaho, wrote,

In faith, we want to say that children of believers are saved. But we are not making a categorical statement of the "All P are Q" kind. We are saying that we believe God's statements and promises concerning covenant children, and we think others should believe them, too. Now these promises (in all our theological systems) have apparent instances of non-fulfillment. How are we to account for this? We all acknowledge that some of our children grow up and depart from the living God. We see the same kind of thing with adult converts. Many of them have fallen away also. Have the promises of God fallen to the ground in either instance?

The question of levels of discourse is central in understanding this. On one level, all of us confess that some children of believers are reprobate, and will eventually fall away. On another level of discourse, we say that God is God to our children. In preaching, in catechesis, in liturgy, the second level of discourse is operative. This level is operative because faith in the promises requires it. But an important point to note is that we are *not* saying contradictory things within one level of discourse. Nor are we denying the first level of discourse.⁴

Wilson, recognizing that some baptized children of believers will spend eternity in hell, tries to escape the logical consequences of statements like those by his fellow Federal Visionists Wilkins and Barach by a logical sleight of hand, saying that when he and his comrades "say that children of believers are saved" they "are not making a categorical statement of the 'All P are Q' kind. We are saying that we believe God's statements and promises concerning covenant children." But Wilson ought to know that *children of believers are saved simply is* a categorical statement.

Between the categories (a) children of believers and (b) people who are saved, there can be only four relationships:

1. All children of believers are people who are saved [All a are b.].
2. No children of believers are people who are saved [No a are b.].
3. Some children of believers are people who are saved [Some a are b.].
4. Some children of believers are not people who are saved [Some a are not b.].

³John Barach, "Covenant and History," 2002 AAPC lecture transcript, pp. 45-48, boldfaced emphasis added; compare Barach, "Covenant and Election," 2002 AAPC lecture transcript, p. 86, lines 15-27, for the same point.

⁴Douglas Wilson, "Union with Christ: An Overview of the Federal Vision," in *Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros & Cons*, 1-8, at 7.

If, when the Federal Visionists, as part of their strategy to deliver people from “unanswerable” questions about whether they are true believers and direct them instead to the objectivity of the covenant, insist that the children of believers are saved, then they must be asserting one of these relationships. If they are asserting (1), “All children of believers are people who are saved,” then it follows logically (by the type of immediate deduction called obversion) that no children of believers are not people who are saved, and consequently that (2), “No children of believers are people who are saved,” and (4), “Some children of believers are not people who are saved,” are false, for they are the contrary and the contradictory to “All children of believers are people who are saved.” If that is what they mean, then they have provided (rightly or wrongly—but at least validly) the assurance they intend. But if they are asserting only (3), “Some children of believers are people who are saved,” then they can infer absolutely *nothing* about the truth of (4), “Some children of believers are not people who are saved,” and their attempt to provide assurance by appeal to the objectivity of the covenant collapses.

Wilson’s attempt to justify such inconsistencies by appeal to “levels of discourse” does not suffice. What it really leads to is precisely the sort of upper-story/lower-story dualism against which the late Francis Schaeffer indefatigably warned. Does Wilson, after all, mean to tell us that at one “level of discourse”—whatever that means—all children of believers are saved, while at another “level of discourse” some are not saved? What parents crave regarding their children is not “Well, on this level of discourse, your child is saved, but on another level, he might not be.” What fretting church members crave regarding their own assurance is not “Well, on this level of discourse, your baptism assures you that you’re saved, but on another level it doesn’t.” Such equivocation is not the responsibility of the minister of the Word of God, who is called to sound a clear trumpet (1 Corinthians 14:8), whose “Yes” should be “Yes” and whose “No” should be “No” (Matthew 5:37), whose message is to be “not Yes and No, but . . . always Yes” because in Christ “all [not just some!] of the promises of God” are “Yes” and “Amen” (2 Corinthians 1:19-20). No one will spend eternity blessed in heaven in one “level of discourse” and cursed in hell in another.

The trouble—the reason their effort to provide assurance of salvation by telling people to “look to their baptism,” **or to their parentage**—is that the Federal Visionists have not provided any promises of God of type (1), “All children of believers—or all baptized persons—are people who are saved.” Consequently it is of no use for Wilson to say, “we believe God’s statements and promises concerning covenant children, and we think others should believe them, too,” and think that is adequate ground for assuring believers, because of the objectivity of the covenant, of their children’s salvation (or for assuring baptized persons of their own).

A major part of the debate over the Federal Vision is precisely over whether indeed the Bible does teach that all children of believers (or all baptized persons) are saved. It will not do simply to assume that conclusion as a premise. Neither is it of use for Wilson to say, “these promises (in all our theological systems) have apparent instances of non-fulfillment.” That in itself assumes what the Federal Visionists must prove—that God has promised the salvation of all children of believers (or all baptized persons). For if instead God has promised the salvation of only *some* children of believers (and of *some* baptized persons), then the damnation of some (of either) cannot be raised as an instance of the non-fulfillment of His promises. Indeed, if He has not promised the salvation of *any* children of believers or baptized persons *simply because they are children of believers or baptized*

persons, then it is possible for any or even all children of believers, or baptized persons, to be damned.

Scripture clearly teaches us that all God's promises are perfectly fulfilled (2 Corinthians 1:20; Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:13-20). If it appears to us that one of them goes finally unfulfilled, then we have misunderstood either the promise (and this is what the Federal Visionists do) or the phenomena (i.e., the child's parents or the baptized were not really believers). That is, we have mistaken either the major or the minor premise (or both). Take the syllogism,

1. All children of believers are saved.
2. Richard is a child of believers.
3. Therefore Richard is saved.

In their attempt to comfort parents by reference to the objectivity of the covenant, the Federal Visionists want to affirm this. But they know that, as Wilson put it, "some of our children grow up and depart from the living God." Consequently, when challenged, they (rightly, though inconsistently!) shrink from the conclusion. But they can avoid that conclusion only if they deny one of the premises. That Richard is a child of believers (the minor premise) is assumed, so they can't deny the minor premise. They must then deny the major and admit that some children of believers are not saved. Once they have done that, however, nothing follows, for the resulting argument,

1. Some children of believers are saved.
2. Richard is a child of believers.
3. Therefore Richard is saved.

commits the fallacy of undistributed middle. It tells us only about *some* children of believers, not about all of them.⁵

It is clear, then, that simply being the child of believers, or even being the baptized child of believers, does not guarantee salvation. As Paul explained in Romans 2:12-29, it is not sufficient simply to "bear the name 'Jew'" (that is, to be a covenant child) and to be circumcised.(that is, to bear the mark of the covenant).

For indeed circumcision is of value if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. So if the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? And he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter of the Law and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law? For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.

⁵The interaction above with Wilkins, Barach, Schlissel, and Wilson is adapted from my "Concluding Comments on the Federal Vision," in *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros & Cons*, 304-325, at 307-309 and 321-323.

What then are we to make of those precious passages with which we began? What of Peter's statement, "The promise is for you and your children"? What of Paul's that the child of even just one believing parent is "holy"? What of his promise to the Philippian jailer, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household"? What of God's promise to Abraham, "I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants [*seed*] after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants [*seed*] after you"? Perhaps we need to look at them a little more carefully.

Consider first Peter's comment in Acts 2:39. Thus far we have quoted only part of it. The whole of it is, "the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself." Are those who insist that here is a promise of the salvation of the children of believers as quick to say that here is a promise of salvation "for all who are far off"? Those are not simply the children of believers; those include all men everywhere in the world. But does God promise salvation to all men everywhere in the world. Certainly not. Neither, then, does He promise salvation to all the children of believers. What *does* He promise, then, to all the children of believers and to all people everywhere? Look at verse 38—and I'm going to use my own very literal translation here to make clear the grammatical cause-and-effect relationship that is clear in the Greek but ordinarily gets obscured in English translations: "Y'all repent for the remission of y'all's sins, and let each one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, and y'all will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (As an aside, let me explain: The command to repent is in second person plural, while the command to be baptized is in third person singular; the "your" modifying the sins to be remitted is second person plural, not singular. The grammatical connection, therefore, is between repentance and remission, not between baptism and remission. But refuting baptismal remission isn't the topic of today's talk, so we'll leave that alone now and return to the point.) The promise is conditional: If you repent and believe in Jesus Christ, you'll be forgiven. That promise does indeed apply to each and every child of each and every believer; and it also applies to each and every other person who ever lived or ever will live.

Consider Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 7:14 that the child of even one believer is "holy." Does this mean no such child will go to hell? Certainly not. The Greek word ἅγιος, "holy," means simply "set apart," or "devoted to the gods" or, of course, in the Bible, "to God." Elsewhere the Bible tells us that "He who believes in [Christ] is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (John 3:18). Granted this, it follows that the unbelieving spouse of 1 Corinthians 7:14 is *not* saved. Yet Paul says the unbelieving spouse *is* "sanctified," the Greek verb ἁγιάζω, that is, "made holy." It must be possible, then, for someone to be "holy" without being saved.

Consider Paul's promise to the Philippian jailer, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." Does that imply that whenever a head of household believes, every one of his household will be saved along with him, regardless of his or her faith? Certainly not. Clearly Paul's point is that the same promise that applies to the jailer applies to everyone in his family: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved." But there is no promise at all here to one who doesn't believe.

And finally consider God's promise to Abraham, "I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants [*seed*] after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants [*seed*] after you." Does this imply that every physical descendant of Abraham—or even every one of his own direct, first-generation offspring—would be

saved, that none of them would go to hell, all would go to heaven? Certainly not. As Paul explained in Romans 9:6-8,

. . . they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: "Through Isaac your descendants will be named." That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants.

Likewise he wrote in Galatians 4:22-31:

. . . it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman and one by the free woman. But the son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and the son by the free woman through the promise. This is allegorically speaking, for these women are two covenants: one proceeding from Mount Sinai bearing children who are to be slaves; she is Hagar. Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother. For it is written, "Rejoice, barren woman who does not bear; break forth and shout, you who are not in labor; for more numerous are the children of the desolate than of the one who has a husband." And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise. But as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also. But what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be an heir with the son of the free woman." So then, brethren, we are not children of a bondwoman, but of the free woman.

Notice that: "it is *not the children of the flesh* who are children of God, but *the children of the promise*." Notice again: "the son by the bondwoman was *born according to the flesh*, and the son by the free woman *through the promise*. . . [and] he who was *born according to the flesh* persecuted *him who was born according to the Spirit*." Paul equates being born of the flesh with being born of the bondwoman, and being born of the promise with being born of the Spirit and of the free woman. He who is born only of the flesh is not a child of God; he who is born of the promise, of the Spirit, of the free woman, *is* a child of God.

Haven't we heard some similar phrases somewhere else? Yes! In John 1:10-13, John tells us that the incarnate Word, Jesus, "was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world"—those who had no special relationship to Abraham—did not know Him. He came to His own—that is, to the Jews, the children of Abraham according to the flesh, "and those who were His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them"—whether those of the world, or those of Abraham according to the flesh—"as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."

But if all this is so—if indeed there is no blanket promise of salvation to the children of believers—then what advantage is there to being born to Christian parents? Is covenant theology irrelevant? Certainly not! Haven't you heard that question before, but slightly revised? Of course you have. In Romans 3:1-2, Paul wrote, "Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision? Great in every respect. First of all, that they were entrusted with **the oracles of God**." That is it! "First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God." That is an advantage that

must not be minimized. It is a tremendous advantage!

. . . for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God. For, “all flesh is like grass, and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls off, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” And this is the word which was preached to you. [1 Peter 1:23-25]

Stop and think about that for a moment. Linger over it. “All flesh is like grass, and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls off.” That is true of each and every believing parent. Every believing father is like grass. Every believing mother is like grass. Every one of us will wither and die, not only when the blood stops coursing through our veins but also every day when we sin and show our children that we, unlike the Word, are fallible. “But the Word of the Lord endures forever.” “The Scripture cannot be broken.” Unlike us, “the law of the Lord is perfect.” “Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also. The body they may kill, God’s truth abideth still!” It is not on our birth to a believing father or mother that our salvation rests, but on the living and abiding Word of God, that powerful Word that created the universe and can make a new creation out of any human being. My children’s salvation depends not on me, and not on my wife, but on God Himself speaking the gospel to them in His Word—that gospel that “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Romans 1:16), that is, whether he is a child of Abraham according to the flesh or a child of the world according to the flesh; whether he is a child of a believer, or a child of a pagan. The message to everyone is the same: “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.”

Indeed, everyone’s salvation depends—whether he is born of believers or of unbelievers—not on bloodline, or on the will of the flesh, or on the will of man, but on the will and Word of God. Is there then no advantage to being born to believers? Of course there is! Who is more likely to be exposed to the life-giving Word of God day by day? The child of a Muslim, or the child of two faithful Christians? The child of a humanist, or the child of a faithful Baptist? The child of a neo-pagan, or the child of a faithful Lutheran? The child of a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Shintoist, a Taoist, or even of an irreligious American consumerist, or the child of a godly Presbyterian? Of course there is an advantage to being born of Christian parents! What other children have such a privilege as to hear the Word in the home, to be brought up in the church where they are exposed to the preaching and teaching of the Word week in and week out and where their friends and Sunday school teachers and friends’ parents all encourage them to believe and obey the Word? Where they learn the great hymns of the faith and soon have them in memory? Where all around them strive to live as Scripture teaches them to live?

That is the great advantage of being born in the faith. Yet even that does not entail that every child of believers will be saved. In Part Two I will look specifically at Christian parents’ responsibility.

Part Two: Practical Application

In Part One I argued that while the Scriptures do not guarantee the salvation of every child of believers, any more than they guarantee the salvation of every baptized person, nonetheless they do teach that the children of believers have a great advantage over the children of nonbelievers. Still, however, the promise of salvation is to all who believe, and only to them. Does either this shared promise, universally applicable to everyone—“Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved”—or the fact that believers’ children have that advantage—particularly that they are in church and Sunday school and, one hopes, Christian school rather than public school—relieve Christian parents of responsibility for their salvation? Can we say, “Oh, I take my children to church and Sunday school. They hear the gospel there. That’s enough. I don’t need to do more”? Or can we say, “Oh, I want my child to make up his own mind, so we know he’s sincere. So I’m not going to push the gospel on him”? Or can we say, “After all, God is sovereign. If my child is predestined to believe, he will. I don’t have to worry about it. In fact, I can’t make any difference I God’s plan”?

Does any of this relieve Christian parents of responsibility for our children’s salvation? Certainly not! Our responsibility is rooted not in what we are able to achieve but in what we are commanded by God to do. He tells us to command our children to keep the way of the Lord, and certainly that “way of the Lord” includes faith in Jesus Christ. We are to command our children—not beg them, but command them—to trust in the Lord Jesus for their salvation. And when we do so, we are also to teach them the fifth commandment, “Honor your father and mother,” and its implication, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right” (Ephesians 6:1). “Child, God tells you to obey me, and I tell you to trust in Christ.”

The words of God, both law and gospel, are to be on our hearts. We are to teach them diligently to our sons and talk of them when we sit in our houses and when we walk by the way and when we lie down and when we rise up. We are to wear them as signs on our hands and make them frontals on our foreheads. We are to write them on the doorposts of our houses and on our gates.

What I have said thus far has been meant to drive home one main point and one sub point.

First, the main point: *We must evangelize our children.* Doing so doesn’t mean treating them like pagans, as some hyper-federalists would have us believe. It means treating them like children according to the flesh—covenant children, yes, just like both Isaac and Esau—but children according to the flesh, and calling them to be children according to the promise. It means telling them the basic facts of the gospel at every opportunity, before and after they ever profess to believe: that Jesus Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried, and that He rose again from the dead according to the Scriptures. It means teaching them, time after time, before and after their apparent conversions, that through the law comes the knowledge of sin and that therefore no flesh will be justified by the works of the law, but that we are justified by faith apart from the works of the law. It means repeating to them over and over again, before and after they are admitted to the Lord’s Table, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.”

It doesn’t mean my wife and I must assume our child doesn’t believe until he offers us some sophisticated testimony adequate to convince the most jaundiced board of credobaptist elders that he’s ready for baptism, or the most jaundiced session of Scottish or Dutch paedobaptist elders that he’s ready for the Lord’s Supper. Far from it! We want every one of our children to be able to testify,

“I can’t remember a time when I didn’t love Jesus and know He loves me and trust in Him alone for my salvation.”

We teach our children the law and that they are sinners. We teach them the gospel and that if they will trust in Christ, their sins will be forgiven. We command them to believe. For incentive we convey to them God’s marvelous promise that if they believe they will have eternal life, reconciliation with God, justification, God’s preserving and sanctifying power, and finally glorification in heaven, and if they don’t, they will suffer in hell forever. And when they join us in expressing their faith in Jesus, and in singing

- “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so”–or
- “Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in Thee. Let the water and the blood, from Thy riven side which flowed, be of sin the double cure–cleanse me from its guilt and power”–or
- or “And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Savior’s blood? Died He for me, who caused His pain, for me, who Him to death pursued? Amazing love, how can it be, that Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?”–or
- when they recite with us and the whole church the Apostles’ Creed–or
- when they join us in reciting the answer to the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism, “What is thy only comfort in life and death?” “That I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Savior Jesus Christ; who, with his precious blood, has fully satisfied for all my sins, and delivered me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, and therefore, by his Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, and makes me sincerely willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto him.”–

When they sing those hymns and recite that creed and that catechism with us, we don’t say, “Sorry, kids, but we don’t believe you. We think you’re little liars. You don’t really believe. You don’t really love Jesus. Tell us again next year, when your life measures up a little better, and we’ll see if you can convince us then.” No, no, no! We realize that the heart is deceitful and desperately wicked and that we don’t know it, but we also realize that we have no right to presume our children guilty of lying about their faith without convincing evidence. And so we treat them as truth tellers until they give us reason to do otherwise.

Second, the sub point: We *can* evangelize our children, and we can have confidence that our labor will not be in vain. Although the Bible nowhere guarantees to any parent the salvation of any child, it does encourage us to believe that God works through means to achieve His ends and that we are among His most prominent means in the salvation of our children. “Train up a child in the way he should go,” says Proverbs 22:6; “even when he is old he will not depart from it.” Being a proverb, this is to be understood as a generalization, stating not a universal truth but a usual truth, but it still gives great comfort to those parents who diligently, prayerfully, consistently, persistently, humbly, trustingly, fervently, zealously raise their children in the faith. It gives no comfort whatever to the lazy, careless parent who neglects to instruct his child in law and gospel, but it gives great hope to the faithful, who can say, “Though I am like grass, and I’ll wither and fade, nonetheless the Word of the Lord endures forever!”

That there is normally a connection between a parent's faithful teaching of law and gospel to his child and that child's believing is implicit in one of the qualifications of an elder. He must have "children who believe" (Titus 1:6). Believing children are evidence of this elder's ability to manage his own household well, to "[hold] fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict."—His child raises an objection to the truth of the gospel, and this man, qualified to be an elder, is able to answer it, "to refute" that child who contradicts!--Believing children are evidence of this elder's being "above reproach." Indeed, they are even evidence of his being "the husband of one wife," or literally, "a one-woman man," because his own love for his wife, and his faithfulness to her, will testify to his children of Christ's love for and faithfulness to His bride, the church.

Recognizing this connection between faithful parenting and the salvation of our children no more compromises the sovereignty of God in salvation, or the uniqueness of Christ as Savior, than does Paul's writing to Timothy, "Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you" (1 Timothy 4:16). It no more compromises the sovereignty of God than Paul's asking, "How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?" (Romans 10:14). God works through means. "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). Whether that Word is spoken to the whole congregation by the minister or to the children by believing parents, it remains the Word by which God begets people to new life.

These two points being made, let me conclude by speaking to *how* we can evangelize our children. And honestly, brothers and sisters, it isn't all that difficult, at least not in principle. It is difficult in execution, because it requires self-discipline, patience, consistency, hard work, diligence, persistence, zeal, and prayer, sometimes for many long years. But in concept, it isn't difficult, and I hope to persuade you that even in execution it is within your reach.

The fundamental thing is this: Your children will be more likely to embrace your faith in direct proportion to the extent to which *you* embrace your faith. The more they see that *you*, though you know yourself to be a guilty sinner fully deserving God's wrath, nonetheless "[believe] to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God himself speaking therein; and [act] differently upon that which each particular passage thereof containeth; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life, and that which is to come," but principally that you "[accept, receive, and rest] upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace," as the Westminster Confession of Faith describes the acts of saving faith, the more your children will be likely to follow in your footsteps, for it is ordinarily the case, as Jesus put it about Himself and His own Father, "whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner" (John 5:19).

Now for three concrete, practical things you can do to ensure that your children frequently, regularly encounter the saving gospel in a context that will encourage them to believe it.

First—and I believe this is foremost in the children's younger years—involve them regularly, frequently, preferably daily, indeed if at all possible twice a day, in family worship. I understand that not every family is able to schedule morning and evening family devotions every day. But I do believe that far more families *could* do it if they would. It requires making choices, setting priorities, realizing

that there is no higher calling for Christian parents than raising their own children in the faith, ministering the Word of God to them, day in and day out. For about the first sixteen or seventeen years after the birth of the first of our seven children, we were able. As he and his first two sisters got older and older and took on more and more responsibilities outside the home, and as we took a grandparent suffering from Alzheimer's disease into our home, we had to modify that. Still we managed to gather for family worship morning and evening most days, but we had to be flexible about when, where, and sometimes whether. Even so, the children recognize that family worship is top priority for us, so that even though we don't do it as consistently today as we once did, nonetheless we make great sacrifices to ensure that we can do it whenever possible. That in itself testifies to them of its importance.

Many parents are intimidated by the idea of trying to have family worship. I believe this usually stems from trying to make it too complicated. It should be simple, but we don't always approach it that way. We husbands, I think, have a macho tendency to figure that *we're* going to do *family worship*, and *we're* going to do it *right!* And so we set a standard way too high, and predictably we fail.

In the first year of our marriage, my wife and I tried to begin having devotions together. I got out Matthew Henry's *Commentary*, and we would read a chapter from the Bible, and then read aloud through the commentary. That worked—about once or twice! We were overwhelmed, and in short order we quit. We didn't try anything else for a while. Each time we tried, we bit off more than we could chew. It wasn't until our first child was three or four that we finally hit on what has worked for our family ever since, and it's simple.

We sit down together, we read a chapter (sometimes more, sometimes less, but usually a chapter) of the Bible aloud, we might make a few comments on it but more often don't, we pray, and then we sing a hymn or chorus or children's Bible song together. That's it. I don't try to play expert Bible teacher every day, or even once a week. We just read the Word, working our way through whole books of the Bible, and pray, and sing, and we let God minister to us. While we make a special point of reading repeatedly through the Psalms, the Proverbs, the Gospels, and Romans, we make sure that we read through the whole Bible over and over through the years.

Occasionally, for certain periods, we have added catechism to our family worship—teaching the children, by daily repetition, to memorize the Westminster Shorter Catechism. That has been a tremendously effective way to give them a solid, basic, systematic understanding of the Christian faith. But catechizing has come and gone, as one batch of children has completed the Catechism and another waits to become old enough to follow it well. (We have also found the Children's Catechism, based on the Shorter, helpful.) What doesn't come and go is the three-step basic of family worship: read the Bible, pray, and sing.

Many families find the idea of trying to sing together intimidating. Our daughter Susan, now 20, has set out to pull the fangs from that monster. A truly extraordinary pianist, she has produced an album of four CDs of piano accompaniment to eighty-eight fine hymns, with a brief musical introduction to each hymn, followed by playing it as many times as it has verses, just as if she were accompanying our own family worship or a church congregation singing. The CD insert includes a list of the hymns by title and a table telling the page numbers in several widely used hymnals. Called

“Listen While We Sing,” the album is available here or over the web at www.parnassum.net, along with two and soon to be three single-CD albums: “Redeeming Love,” “Chiefest Joy,” and “Silent Word,” all of them meditative piano treatments of hymns or psalms.

Now let me insert two comments on the side: First, notice that I said hymns. I didn’t say shallow worship choruses. The great hymns of the faith have for centuries been among the most important media for transmitting the faith. Our children have been brought up on such hymns, and through them they have learned much of their systematic theology. Susan has gone so far as to say that she has never encountered an orthodox doctrine for the first time outside a hymn. Second, we must not let our children’s formal schooling undermine what they’re taught at home. There is no justification for Christian parents’ sending their children to Pharaoh’s academy when they have the legal option of either home schooling or private Christian schooling.

Second—and this becomes increasingly important as children grow older and nearer to going out on their own—we need to inculcate the discipline and habit of personal devotions among our children. Again, simplicity is key. Simply reading a chapter of the Bible and praying are all the children need to do. If they want to keep some kind of journal, a prayer list, or write notes on what they’ve read, that’s fine, but it isn’t necessary, and if pushing for it intimidates them, it’s best not to. Several of our children have taken up blogging, and frequently they write about Bible passages they’ve read, or Christian books they’ve read, or sermons they’ve heard. The blogging technology seems attractive to them, and it’s also a way for them to share their thoughts with their friends. (One caution, however: the blogosphere can be dangerous, so we require our children to keep their blogs private, with only certain invited persons, with passwords, permitted to enter and comment.)

Third—and this remains most important from birth to leaving the nest to raising their own families—it is absolutely essential to have our children, every Lord’s day, in the worship of God, under the preaching of the Word, in the fellowship of the saints, partaking regularly of the Lord’s Supper from their earliest ability to confess their faith. While personal and family devotions are important, we must face the fact that the Bible puts much more emphasis on corporate worship, on the church gathered, than on personal or family worship.

Notice that I said the children should be in the worship service. In principle, we don’t believe in “children’s church.” As illustrated in the great worship service during the restoration of Jerusalem under Nehemiah, not only men and women (adults) but all who can understand (down to little children) should be gathered together in worship for the hearing of the Word (Nehemiah 8:3). We believe the youngest children need to learn to show reverence to God by sitting still and quietly in worship service. We believe that very early on they begin to be able to follow some of the Scripture reading, some of the preaching, and some of the hymns and prayers of the worship service. At a far younger age than many people think, they become able to participate intelligently in the whole worship service. And the age at which they reach that point only gets delayed, we believe, by sending them to “children’s church.” Further, we are not raising children. We are raising adults. They just happen to be children at the moment, but they’re going to become adults, and that’s our goal. Consequently, we want our children to emulate adults, or at least significantly older children, not other children of their own ages. That’s one reason why we home school. It’s also another reason why we keep them in worship service, and generally also in adult Sunday school classes, with us.

You might be wondering, “So what’s been the result in your own family?” I know that Proverbs says, “Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; A stranger, and not your own lips.” But let me simply report some basic facts, in much of what I say here repeating what others have said to us after observing our family, and give all the glory to God for what He has done among us. The Apostle Paul boasted in the Lord; we may, too.

The fruit of all these practices in our children has been tremendous. Last Sunday we met for the first time a former prison inmate, a fine and godly believer whom I’m eager to have as a student at Knox Theological Seminary someday, recently released after we’d corresponded with him for several years. He joined three families as guests in our home for Sunday dinner. As he left at the end of the day, he said—as have so many said to us—“Your children are a tremendous witness to Christ,” or words to that effect. He is right. By the marvelous grace of God, all seven of our children clearly and credibly profess faith in Christ alone for their salvation. They know their Bibles, and their Catechism, well. They know how to pray, how to sing God’s praises. The Lord’s Day is the high point of their week, when they get to enjoy corporate worship and then fellowship with various families we have over to dinner and an afternoon of singing and almost always excited talking and sometimes play, and then finish the day with more corporate worship as we go back to church again. Two are off at college, witnessing and serving and studying for the Lord’s service. Two have completed almost all the courses for Knox Seminary’s Master of Arts in Christianity and Culture—before starting college—and one of those has also taken all the Greek the Seminary offers and, with her brother (who is taking yet other courses), is now starting Hebrew. Three have completed extensive training in evangelism and are fully capable of explaining the gospel to nonbelievers—and have done so. Two more are in the midst of that training. All demonstrate love for Christ, respect for their parents, love for their brothers and sisters in Christ, compassion for the lost—and almost uninterrupted joy.

That is the fruit. Evangelizing your children through family worship, teaching them personal devotions, and faithful participation in corporate worship is the way to cultivate it. Now, brothers and sisters—March! With joy and patience, with humility and faith, with love and delight—March!