

WHY I BELIEVE

Children of Covenant Families Who Die In Infancy Are Saved

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. This study on infant salvation has shown that in a few cases the Bible implies that some infants who die are lost (cf. Lesson #23) and in other cases some infants are definitely saved (Lesson #24). There must, therefore, be some way to harmonize these two positions. The answer is found in the concept of covenant families (children of believing parents).
- B. Covenant families is a Biblical doctrine and the salvation of children of covenant families who die in infancy is a doctrine based on inference rather than a direct statement of scripture or a command. The Westminster Confession says,
The whole concept of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in scripture, or by a good and necessary consequence may be deduced from scripture. (I-VI)
- C. Doctrines based on inference are not uncommon to the Christian. For instance, there is no command that the day of worship should be changed from Saturday (Sabbath) to Sunday; yet the inference of scripture is that it has changed (Acts 20:7; I Cor. 16:2). Another example is there are no commands admitting women to the Lord's Table; yet this is the right of women because in Christ there is neither male nor female (Gal. 3:28). This same line of reasoning may be applied to infants of covenant families who die before reaching an age of accountability.

II. THE COVENANT FAMILY

- A. Introduction: A covenant family is a family with believing parents at its head. The covenant family concept can be officially traced back to God's covenant with Abraham, although the concept of the father being the priest over the family goes back to the beginning of mankind.
- B. Old Testament References
 - i. Job: Job was the head of his family and made sacrifices for his children (Job 1:5). We see that God gave Job the right and the

power to act on behalf of his children. Parents are to plead with God for the conversion of their children.

- ii. Abraham: God made a special covenant with Abraham which included earthly and spiritual blessings for Abraham and his posterity (Gen. 12:1-3). The spiritual aspects of this covenant deal with the blessings of salvation, which is sometimes referred to as the Covenant of Grace. These spiritual blessings are for children of believing parents (Gen. 17:4-8) and this covenant was signed and sealed by the physical act of circumcision (Gen. 17:9-14). Abraham's descendents in all ages are to be considered potential heirs of the Covenant of Grace as soon as they come into existence. Each child becomes an heir to the covenant promise at birth. It was not circumcision that gave the child heirship but the faith of the believing parents. Circumcision was merely an outward symbol of the parent's faith. NOTE: The child could lose his covenant privileges by parents who failed to instruct their children in spiritual matters, or if the child, after reaching the age of accountability, should repudiate his covenant privilege. Being a member of a covenant family does not automatically bring salvation to a child but it does bring special privileges. NOTE: It is interesting to note that Isaac was blessed because of Abraham's faith as well as his own faith (Gen. 26:3, 5, 24).
- iii. Noah: Noah and his family were saved because of Noah's faith, for the father acted on behalf of his children (Gen. 7:1 cf. Heb. 11:7). Noah acted as a representative for his whole family.
- iv. Passover: The Paschal Lamb was aimed at deliverance of the families as well as individuals (Ex. 12:3, 23). Among the Egyptians it was the first born in every house that died, as representing that house, even as in Israel it was the first born that was saved by the blood on the doorposts. The first born was the one in whom the family blessing was perpetuated, the succeeding head of the family. The father ministered the covenant of faith to the children (Ex. 12:26-27). The parent dealt with God on behalf of his children, and the parent also dealt with the children on God's behalf, instructing them and seeking to lead them to a personal knowledge and acceptance of the covenant God as their God and Redeemer.
- v. Conclusion: These cases of covenant family deliverance do not teach that children are saved if born to believing parents, but they do show that children of believing parents have special privileges that children from unsaved homes do not have.

C. New Testament References

- i. Acts 2:39: This is a significant verse and makes a connection between the Old Testament concept of covenant families and the New Testament concept.

“For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all who are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.”

The promise in context refers directly to the promise of the Holy Spirit, and indirectly it refers to the Covenant of Grace as centered in the Abrahamic Covenant (Acts 2:33 cf. Gal. 3:14). All the blessings connected with the Spirit’s ministry in this age is an integral part of the covenant made with Abraham. This promise was made to Jewish-Christians, and they would naturally connect it up with the promises of God to believers and their families in the Old Testament. Children of believing parents became potential heirs of the Covenant of Grace when born into a believing family.

NOTE: This promise is to as many as God will call to salvation, and He will call all children of believing parents who will lay hold of their covenant privilege by faith.

NOTE: The covenant family is also for Gentiles who believe, for those who believe are children of Abraham (Gal. 3:6-7) and are heirs according to the promise (Gal. 3:26, 29).

The promise would naturally include the children of believing Gentiles.

- ii. I Cor. 7:14: It was quite common in the early church to have Gentiles who were saved but were married to an unsaved partner. The question would naturally arise as to the validity of the covenant family if only one of the parents was a Christian. This verse says that the unbelieving party is sanctified (set apart) by the believing partner and the children are made holy (set apart). We conclude then that children of a believing parent are set apart unto God in a very special way in this dispensation just as in the former. They have special blessings under the Covenant of Grace.
- iii. Conclusion: These verses say nothing about infant salvation per se but they do imply that children of believing parents have a special promise from God.

III. IMPLICATIONS OF COVENANT FAMILIES

- A. Passages Which Teach Infant Salvation Imply Salvation of Infants in Covenant Families
 - a. Christ blessed little children and said, “Of such is the kingdom of God” (Luke 18:15-17; Matt. 19:13-14; Mark 10:13-16). NOTE: Those who brought these children to Jesus were believing parents or they would have never asked Christ to bless their children.
 - b. King David gave indication that he would see his dead son again in eternity (II Sam. 12:23). We know that David was a believing parent.
- B. Age of Accountability: Children of believing parents who are incapable of exercising believing faith are saved and numbered among the elect of God. When the child reaches the age of accountability – God only knows when that is with each individual – he is directly responsible to God to believe and enter into the spiritual privileges of a covenant child.
- C. Advantage of Covenant Families: Based on a logical deduction from scripture, it seems that all children of believing parents are saved if the children die in infancy. This is one of the great advantages of covenant families, for believing parents do have the promise of God. This should

be a great incentive for parents to become Christians, for they then can have the promise of God for their children. NOTE: Those who hold to covenant families usually hold out no hope for children of unbelieving parents, for those children like their parents are outside of any of the privileges of the covenant. Usually the Reformed theologian says that he leaves the destinies of children of unsaved parents in the hands of a righteous and gracious God.

III. DIFFICULTIES IN INFANT SALVATION ARE BEST SOLVED BY COVENANT FAMILIES

- A. Faith is Exercised on Behalf of a Child by Believing Parents: The faith of the parents becomes the key for the salvation of infants in a Christian family. Children of believing parents who die in infancy are saved by God's pure grace as is any other adult person. The child is not capable of exercising faith. There is no teaching which insists that one incapable of personal faith cannot be saved. The faith by which one is saved may be the faith of another, especially if the former is incapable of personal faith himself. NOTE: It is not uncommon in the New Testament to see where the faith of one person was applied to another person: (1) the nobleman believed the word that Jesus had spoken unto him but it was his son who was healed (John 4:50); (2) the four men brought their palsied friend to the Savior and he was healed on the basis of their faith. This man was also spiritually healed, for Christ said to him "Thy sins be forgiven thee." Certainly the palsied man was given faith too, but the healing was on the basis of his friends' faith (Mark 2:5); (3) the centurion's faith was the basis for the healing of his servant (Matt. 8:8, 13). NOTE: This same principle applies to children who die in infancy, for they are saved through the parent's faith until they reach the age of accountability. The covenant family concept answers the through faith aspect of salvation (Eph. 2:8-9). The death of Christ is applied to the infant based on the parent's faith. Therefore, the cross is in no way by-passed and Christ is still the only way of salvation (John 14:6; Acts 4:12).
- B. A Child of a Covenant Family Who Dies in Infancy is Among the Elect: The covenant family concept does not say that all children are saved before they reach the age of accountability and then are lost and need to be saved again. Children who die in infancy are among God's elect because of the covenant relationship.
- C. Infanticide Ruled Out in Covenant Families: When one believes in the salvation of all infants before reaching the age of accountability, then it would seem right to kill children before they reach a state of maturity to choose for or against Christ. However, parents of believing families have the promise of God for their children that they will be saved providing the parents and their children keep their parts of the covenant. NOTE: Children are not automatically saved because

of the covenant relationship but are placed in a favorable position to be saved, and the parents are to claim God's promises on behalf of their children.

IV. PROBLEMS OF SALVATION OF INFANTS IN COVENANT FAMILIES

- A. What if There Is Only One Saved Parent in the Family? According to I Cor. 7:14, the promise would apply for the believing parent can claim the child for Christ. The inference is that children who die in infancy are covered in this relationship of one believing parent.
- B. Is The Covenant Promise Retroactive? Suppose a family loses a child before the parents were converted to Christ, does the covenant principle apply to this child? The answer is that we do not know for sure because the Bible says nothing on this matter. This situation must be left in the hands of a sovereign, loving God.

- VI. BIBLIOGRAPHY: Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology
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