



S O J O U R N

Our Theology of Children

Introduction

It's imperative that every local church develops a biblical and theological foundation for understanding the relationship of their children to Christ and His Bride. The question this article attempts to answer is: "How does Christ, the Head of the Church, view the children of parents within the Church?" The answer should serve as a basis for how we care for and minister to the children within our body.

At Sojourn, we desire to root our convictions in Scripture while acknowledging that we are influenced by our tradition. Just as children grow under the tutelage of teachers, churches grow under the tutelage of their traditions. Therefore, we build our theology from the Scriptures and interpret the Scriptures through the lens of our shared convictions.

Theologian Michael Horton puts it this way, "Although it is subservient to Scripture, tradition was taken seriously [by the reformers] as a guide to interpretation. Creeds and confessions reflected a common understanding of the Bible's basic teachings. All believers must have equal access to Christ and his Word, but there was no 'right of private interpretation.' Rather, we all read the Bible together, submitting to the common mind of the church through its representative bodies."

Sojourn is part of the Acts 29 Network, which embraces a "reformed" view of salvation, so in joining Acts 29, we submit to a broadly reformed tradition. Thus, while our theology must be derived from the Scriptures, this article includes references from within our tradition that help us to interpret the Scriptures.

In laying a biblical and theological foundation for children in our church, we will work from "left to right," from Genesis to Revelation. Beginning with the inauguration of biblical covenants, we'll move to the Kingdom then on to the Church to see how this theological trajectory impacts Sojourn today.

Biblical Covenants Include Children

Throughout the Scriptures God enters into covenants with His people. These covenants and their corresponding blessings include our children. This is found in both the Old and New Testaments. The best place to begin seeing this unity is in the respective establishments of both the Old and New Covenants. *Emphasis Added:*

*Genesis 17:7-8 — And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to **you and to your offspring** after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God."*

Acts 2:38–39 — *And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for **you and for your children** and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.”*

So at the establishments of both the Old and New Covenants, we see a divine promise “for you and for your children.” This is foundational evidence that when God makes a covenant with a people, their children share in that covenant.

The Kingdom Includes Our Children

Jesus launched his ministry declaring, “The kingdom is at hand” (Mark 1:15). The King was here, and he was a King who invited children to him. Jesus taught us to welcome and not to despise children. He invites children to be with him, and the church must follow his lead. Jesus taught us that children are to be valued, that the gospel of the kingdom of God and the mission of God are for children.

Matthew 19:13–15 — *Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, but Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.” And he laid his hands on them and went away.*

Matthew 18:10 — *“See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.”*

Matthew 21:15–16 — *But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” they were indignant, and they said to him, “Do you hear what these are saying?” And Jesus said to them, “Yes; have you never read, “ ‘Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise’?”*

The Local Church Includes Our Children

There is one Church, and she is both local and universal. The local church is known as the visible church, the universal church is known as the invisible. The visible church is made up of professing men and women and their children who gather together for worship. The invisible church is made up of those from every nation, throughout all of history, who have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit and redeemed by the blood of Jesus.

Every local church will share in both realities. When we gather, there are men and women who believe and there are men and women who do not (1 Corinthians 5; Hebrews 6; 10). This is summarized with the following statements:

“The catholic or universal church, which (with respect to the internal work of the Spirit and truth of grace) may be called invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ, the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all.” 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith, ch.XXVI article I.

“The catholic or universal Church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fulness of Him that fills all in all.” Westminster Confession of Faith, ch.XXV article I

“The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the Gospel... consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children” Westminster Confession of Faith, ch.XXV article II.

The following texts help put flesh on our understanding of the visible (local) church including the children of believers. The texts below are meant to build on one another, piecing together an overview of the Bible’s relevant passages.

Deuteronomy

According to Deuteronomy, our children are subjects of discipleship.

Deuteronomy 6:4–8 — *“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, 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. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.*

Exodus

In the Ten Commandments, which are instructions for how the people of God are to live, one of them is explicitly for our children. There seems to be the expectation that the children of Israelites would live as members of God’s covenant.

Exodus 20:12 — *“Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.”*

Acts

Immediately following Pentecost, Peter says, “the promise” is for “your children.” When children are born to parents who have been redeemed by Jesus and who live within the

covenant community, they grow up in regular contact with the Spirit of God. They enjoy the benefits of church life and continually hear the gospel promise that invites them to faith.

Acts 2:39 — “For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.”

First Corinthians

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul addresses issues around singleness, marriage, and divorce. In the middle of his argument, he uses old covenant ceremonial language in describing children of believers. He says they are clean and “holy.” This word for holy means sanctified or set apart. They are set apart upon being born into a believing family (at least one believing parent) within the church family.

1 Corinthians 7:14 — For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

Ephesians

In Ephesians, Paul is walking through life inside God’s family, life inside the local church. He instructs our children by quoting the Ten Commandments, taking something written to Israelite children at Mt. Sinai and applying it to Gentile children in Ephesus. It seems clear, especially in light of 1 Corinthians 7, that Paul acknowledges strong similarities between the children of the church and the children of Israel.

Ephesians 6:1–3 — Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise), “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.”

As we put the pieces together from the passages listed above, we can see that the Old and New Testaments view our children similarly. If you were born into an Israelite home, you were born into the covenant community; if you were born into a Christian home, you were born into the covenant community. Those born into the covenant community are to be taught how to live as members of the covenant community, God’s church.

What Does this Mean?

The children of believers are born into the visible church, not the invisible. Just like Paul wrote in Romans 9, “not all who descended from Israel belong to Israel.” Israelite children were born into the physical Israel but not the spiritual Israel, the redeemed Israel. In the New Covenant, we see a similar pattern. The children of believers are not born Christians; they are born into the visible church. John Piper, a Reformed Baptist pastor, speaks of the benefits of being born

into the visible church:

Christ did purchase privileges for the children of believers {or} it would seem to be pointless to say, "The promise is for you and for your children" (Acts 2:39), and to say, "His righteousness is to children's children" (Psalm 103:18), if there was no more significance to a Christian ancestry than a pagan one. There is a good that comes to the children of believers. God says in Jeremiah 32:39, "I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them." This "good" is not the guarantee of faith, but the gift of God's word (Deuteronomy 6:6-7), the restraint of God's discipline (Ephesians 6:4), the demonstration of God's love (Colossians 3:21), and the power of prayer (Job 1:5). God has ordained, regularly and normally, to work through these means for the salvation of the children of believers.

To summarize Dr. Piper, Jesus bought the church with his blood, children are raised within the church, and God "regularly and normally" works through the covenant community as a "means for the salvation of the children of believers." This does not negate the need for each of our children to believe and be saved, but we can parent with strong expectation and hope that God will indeed extend His saving grace to our children.

What Does this Mean for Sojourn?

The visible church is a spiritual family that includes those who are single, dating, engaged, married, and married with children. In a real sense, Sojourn is a family of families. God has set our children apart as participants in the visible church, who receive many of the blessings of the church. We are to make disciples of our children and teach them how to live out of love for Christ our Savior. On a practical level, no matter what tradition you come from, all Christian parents functionally treat our children as disciples even as we pray and plead for their salvation. Our understanding of (1) the visible church as a family of families, (2) the call to disciple our children, and (3) their need for salvation, lay the theological foundation for our philosophy of ministry at Sojourn Heights.