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THE CHILDREN OF THE COVENANT : THEIR PRIVILEGES AND RESPONSIBILITIES.

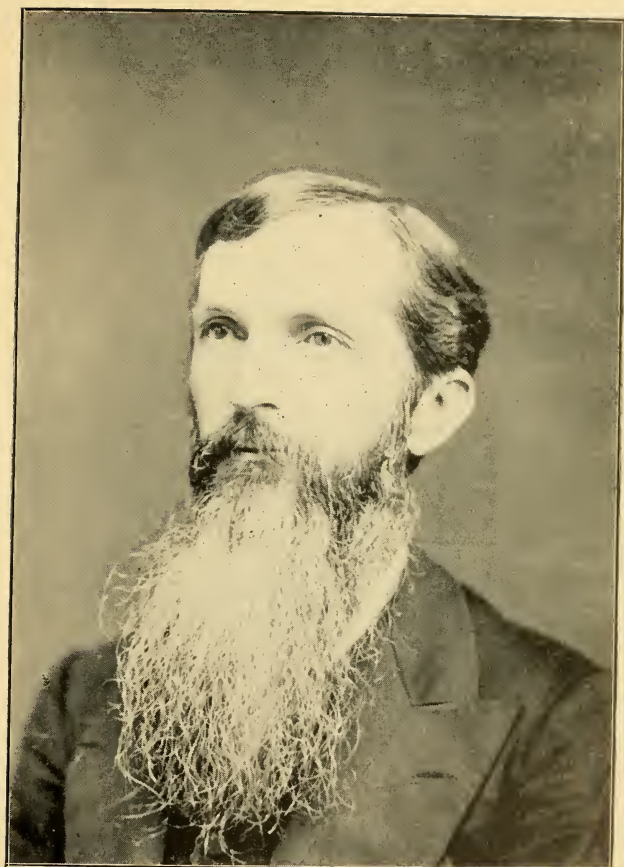
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“Ye are the children of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying unto Abraham, And in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed. Unto you first God, having raised up his Son Jesus, sent him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities.”—
ACTS iii. 25, 26,

WHAT is the covenant here referred to? In what sense were the Jews whom the apostle addressed, and in what sense are all baptized persons now, children of this covenant? . And what are the benefits and duties resulting from this relation?

The covenant here referred to, as the terms used to describe it indicate, is the covenant which God made with Abraham, sometimes called the the Covenant of Circumcision, from its original sealing ordinance. The record of its institution is contained in the seventeenth chapter of Genesis. This covenant marks an important epoch in the history of redemption. From it dates the origin of the church as a visible, organized body, distinct from the family and the state. It was made with Abraham as the representative of the faithful of all ages and nations (Rom. iv. 11, 12, and Gal. iii. 29); and its design and effect was to organize believers and their children into a visible society or church; separating them from the unbelieving world, at first by the outward



rite of circumcision, and afterwards by baptism. The component elements of the church existed before this covenant. There was a revelation of the Saviour and of the way of salvation through him ; there were believers, and there were institutions and ordinances of divine worship, for the instruction, the strengthening and comfort of believers. But there was no visible church organization, separate and distinct from the family and the state. On the other hand, from this time forward, through the entire Scriptures, the visible church can be distinctly traced as a separate organized society, with a government and officers established in it ; as a body externally called to the privilege of receiving the oracles of God, of being under the charge of Jehovah, as his peculiar people, and of being the special beneficiary of the blessings of the covenant.

If starting with the church *as an existing institution*, you undertake to find its origin by tracing its history backward to its source, you will search in vain for it anywhere short of this covenant with Abraham. All are agreed that it has not originated since the age of the apostles. And if you examine the Acts of the Apostles and the later books of the New Testament you will find abundant references to "the church" as an existing institution, but there is no account of its organization. The gospels, in like manner, are absolutely silent on this point, a fact which cannot be accounted for, if, as some would have us believe, the church was organized by the Lord Jesus, or by his great forerunner, John the Baptist. So through all the ages back to Moses we can trace the existence of the church. And even Moses found it in existence when he began his mission ; for it was to the assembled elders of Israel, the representatives of the church as an organized body, that he was directed by the

Lord to present his credentials. But when we take a step further back in the history, and come to Abraham, we find no longer any references pointing us still backward; but here stands this peculiar transaction, constituting him "the father of many nations," under "an everlasting covenant," with a special "seal," marking and separating him and his seed from the world. Here then, we are warranted in concluding, we have found the object of our search; since no where else, as we have traced the history backward, have we found anything like a divine charter or covenant creating this singular and evidently divine institution.

We are justified, therefore, in asserting, that the covenant with Abraham, to which the apostle refers in the text, is the divine charter of the church, as heretofore and still existing; and that there has never been but one church, in the broad sense in which we here use the term. There has not been an Old Testament church and a New Testament church, a Jewish church and a Christian church, in the sense of two separate, independent and in some sense antagonistic organizations; but only an Old Testament *form*, and a New Testament *form* of the one only church of the living God. Its outward ordinances and modes of worship have been changed under different dispensations to suit the requirements of the changing times and circumstances. But the church itself has not been dissolved, nor its divine and everlasting charter annulled. It was in this church that God "set some apostles, some prophets, and some pastors and teachers under the new dispensation." It was from this church that the unbelieving Jews were cast out after they had rejected their Messiah; and it was into this same church that the believing Gentiles were grafted, when they believed the gospel and turned from their iniquities unto God. (Rom. xi. 17-20.)

By this covenant, made with Abraham and his seed, as the representatives of believers and their children in all ages, not only are they organized into a body distinct from the world, called the church; but certain privileges and blessings are guaranteed to them. These are expressed in the declarations, "I will be a God to thee and to thy seed after thee," and "in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed." In which God indicates his purpose to be a God to this peculiar body of people in a special sense; to dwell among them, to manifest himself to them and to bless them, as he does not the world, and through them to make known his grace and salvation to the nations. They are his peculiar people, the special objects of his favor and care; and among them he dwells and manifests the glory of his grace. To them are committed the oracles of God. Theirs are the covenants and the promises. For their gathering, edification and comfort the ministry of the word is ordained, and the ordinances of divine worship instituted and maintained; and they are God's chosen and commissioned agents for disseminating the knowledge of his truth and salvation among their fellow-men.

Now of this covenant with the fathers, organizing the visible church, and guaranteeing to it these precious privileges, the Apostle Peter, in the text, tells the unconverted Jews of his day that they were "the children" or heirs. By which he means, that they were parties to the covenant and interested in its provisions. In other words, they were members of the church and participants in its privileges. And inasmuch as the covenant with Abraham has never been annulled, and the church of to-day is the legitimate successor, the actual continuation of the church which was organized under that covenant, the baptized children of believing parents

sustain a similar relation to the church and its privileges. They are not made members of the church by their baptism any more than the children of Israelitish parents were made members by their circumcision. But the latter were circumcised, and the former are now baptized, because of their being members. It is in reference to this that believers are called *saints*, and their children are said to be *holy*. By this it is not meant that they are sinless, but that they are consecrated to God. They belong to the Lord, they are separated and set apart to the service of the Lord. And as the parents are holy, so also is their offspring. "The believing husband sanctifieth the unbelieving wife; and the believing wife sanctifieth the unbelieving husband; else were your children unholy; but now are they holy." That is to say, the children of believing parents are consecrated to God, members of the church, and sharers in its privileges, by virtue of their relation to their parents; and their baptism is simply the outward sign and symbol of their membership.

But when we affirm that the children of believing parents are members of the visible church and partakers of its privileges, we do not mean to be understood as holding and teaching that they, in all respects, stand on exactly the same footing in the church as their believing parents. Our little children are citizens of the state, subject to its authority, and entitled to its protection. And they are such by virtue of their relation to their parents; but they are *minors*. They do not enjoy the privilege of transacting business in their own names, of voting or of holding office. Their citizenship is compassed with certain limitations until they reach a certain age. So in the church, the children of believers are members, but not in full communion. They are not

admitted to the Lord's table, nor to the privilege of voting and holding office in the church. There is this difference, however, between the minor in the state and the minor in the church: the minor in the state is admitted to the rights and privileges of full citizenship when he attains to a certain age; but in the church the minor is invested with the rights and privileges of full membership as soon as he gives evidence of personal piety, and not until he does give such evidence. Hence the children of believing parents, who do not give evidence of a change of heart and personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, are members of the church in a state of spiritual minority, even though they may be mature men and women.

But though justly and properly debarred from the special privileges which I have mentioned, unconverted children of the covenant, by virtue of their connection with the church, enjoy many peculiarly precious and exalted privileges. Their church membership, though often undervalued and despised, is far from being a mere nominal thing. Among the precious privileges secured to the children of the covenant by their connection with the church, may be mentioned—

1. The example, training, instructions, and prayers of pious parents. How much depends on early training. How infinitely important to men's temporal and eternal interests that this early training should be of the right kind. And what an inestimably precious heritage are the prayers of consecrated fathers and mothers. Is it, then, a matter of small consequence that you were born in a godly home, and of parents who themselves feared God; and who recognized their religious obligations to you, who pledged themselves by solemn vows to train you up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and

who not only continually prayed with and for you, but taught you to pray for yourselves? Have you ever reflected, you who have had pious parents, how different is your condition, and how great have been your advantages over those whose parents are pagans, or like many that you know around you, unbelieving, irreligious, and wicked; who never pray with or for their children, never teach them to pray, or to read God's word, or to go to God's house on the Sabbath, but suffer them to grow up in ignorance, irreligion, and vice? Whatever advantages you enjoy in these respects, you owe them to the fact that you are children of the covenant.

2. Another benefit which you derive from your connection with the church, through your pious parents, is the oversight, the instruction and the pastoral care of the officers of the church. This is a privilege by no means to be despised. It throws around you safeguards, and affords you advantages, for securing your own personal salvation not enjoyed by others. It is a very great advantage to have been taught to respect the Sabbath and the house of God, and from childhood to have known the Scriptures. But as experience proves, the instructions and example of pious parents need to be followed up, and reinforced by the affectionate oversight, the wise counsels, and the tender warnings and appeals of the faithful officers of God's house, and the sanctifying, restraining and elevating influences of the instructions and worship of the sanctuary. These are, under God, most powerful and effective means of bringing men to a saving knowledge of God, and a personal consecration of themselves to his service. And it is to this circumstance that their connection with the church, brings them directly and constantly under these influences, that we are to attribute the significant fact, that the great majority

of all true converts come from among the children of the covenant.

3. But the benefit of greatest value involved in your hereditary connection with the church, is the intimate and peculiar relation into which it brings you with God himself. As children of the covenant you stand in a different relation to God from the children of unbelievers. He stands pledged to be a God to you in a sense in which he is not their God. You are his people in a sense in which they are not. You are lambs of his flock. His name is upon your brows. You are under his special guardianship and care. You are objects of his most tender interest and regard. "However wayward you may be; however forgetful of him and of your duty to him, the Great Shepherd does not forget you." He thinks of you as a wanderer from his fold. He pities you in your wanderings, and longs to see you turn from your iniquities and come back to him. This is what Peter meant when to the Jews, who like you were "children of the covenant," and had like you received the seal of the covenant in infancy, he said, "Unto you first," as those in whom he felt the deepest interest, and for whom he had the most anxious solicitude, "Unto you first, God having raised up his Son, sent him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities." For though, thank God, the Saviour and the gospel are for all men, and "whosoever will may come and take of the water of life freely"; yet there is a sense in which they are specially for his covenant people. For when God sent forth Jesus his Son, he sent him *first*, not to the Greeks, or to the Romans, or to any other Gentile nation, but to his own covenant people. And so still, when he comes by his word and Spirit to bless and to save, it is to you, the children of the cove-

nant, *first*, that he comes, and afterwards to others. You are permitted therefore to feel, without presumption, that you are nearer to him. "You may go to him with more freedom in prayer. You have special promises that you can plead. Like the psalmist you cannot only say, "O Lord, truly I am thy servant"; but you can also say, "I am the son of thine handmaid." You can plead out only the promises that are made to those who penitently turn to God; but you can plead the promises that are made to "the children, and to the children's children of such as love him and keep his commandments." You are therefore under special and peculiar obligations to love and obey the Saviour; and the sin of despising and neglecting him is, in you, peculiarly heinous.

I need hardly remind you that these distinguished privileges are bestowed upon you, not for your sakes alone, not to encourage in you spiritual pride, or arrogance, or carnal security; but that in you, and by means of you, all men might be made partakers of his grace and salvation. All your privileges, great and precious as they are, will not save you, if you do not personally accept Christ as your Saviour, and turn from your iniquities unto God. Not only so, but they will increase your guilt, and fearfully aggravate your condemnation if you despise or abuse them. Esau and Ishmael were children of the covenant. Both of them received the seal of the covenant, and were dedicated to God in infancy. But they despised their birthright and neglected to improve their privileges, and for their unbelief and sin were cut off from the congregation of the Lord; and they and their children excluded from the blessings of the covenant. And many of the very persons to whom the words of our text were originally addressed refused to

believe and obey the preaching of the apostles, rejected the Saviour, and perished in their sins. Take heed, therefore, lest a similar or worse thing befall you. Many of you are yet young it is true; but you are old enough to understand and appreciate your privileges and responsibilities. You are old enough and you know enough to love and trust and obey the Saviour; and yet some of you are not doing it. For all that the gracious Saviour has done for you, your love and gratitude and obedience are due in return to him. Not to love him, not to trust him, not to turn from all sin to him, is a great sin, even in those who have only heard of him with the hearing of the ear; but in you it is grievous and inexcusable wickedness. Let your earnest and daily prayer be, "Gracious Saviour, teach me to know thee and to love thee. Reclaim me from all my wanderings. Bless me with thy light and thy salvation. Let me abide forever under thy gentle control, as one of the sheep of thy pasture—one of the people of thy care."

Some of you, on the other hand, have long passed the period of childhood. The claims of the loving Saviour have often been pressed home upon your hearts and consciences, and as often been neglected or resisted. How much longer do you intend thus to trifle with the patience and forbearance of God? Will his Spirit always strive? Are your birthright privileges in the kingdom of God matters of so little value that they may be bartered away for some momentary sensual gratification, or trifling earthly advantage? Let the melancholly experience of poor Esau, his early folly and profane contempt for his high spiritual privileges, and his subsequent remorse and anguish and hopeless unavailing grief and regret be a warning to all who sustain similar relations to the church and the blessings and privileges that belong to

its true and faithful members ; and let them by sincere and timely repentance and turning to God save themselves from a similar or worse fate.

We are, it will hence be seen, not without a sufficient and satisfactory answer to the question, which many regard as a fatal objection to the doctrine of infant baptism and infant church membership, viz. : What good do they do? Of what practical benefit are baptism and membership in the church to infants, who can neither understand their significance nor design? Our reply is, that their benefits, like those of membership in the family, and citizenship in the state, are not dependent upon the child's understanding of them. The little ones, by the ordination of the beneficent creator, are born into the family, because they need its love and care, and into the state, because they need its protection, and not because they understand anything about these things. So they are born into the church, and receive baptism, the sign and seal of membership, not because they understand the meaning and purpose of these things, but because, from the very beginning, they need the spiritual guardianship, instruction and care of the church, which is charged with the religious oversight and training of both parents and children. The vows which the church exacts of parents, when they present their children for baptism, binding them by the most sacred obligations to train them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, she exacts by virtue of this double oversight and authority ; and in proportion as she is loyal to her divine Master, and faithful to the charge which he has committed to her, she will see to it that these vows are fulfilled. And as from the beginning, " God having raised up his Son Jesus, sent him *first* to bless the Jews in turning them from their iniquities," so still the church's mission is first to her own baptized children and then to the world.