

The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant: An Historical Study of the Significance of Infant Baptism in the Presbyterian Church by Lewis Bevens Schenck. Yale University Press, 1940. Reprinted with a new introduction by Frank A. James III: Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2003. Pp. 188. Reviewed by John A. Battle.

While there are many good books that defend the doctrine of infant baptism from the perspective of covenant theology, there are very few that relate the doctrine of infant baptism to the position of baptized children in the church and their relation to the Lord. This particular question is answered in different ways by Presbyterian and other Reformed churches that practice infant baptism and agree on its overall significance.

Recently the Federal Vision debate has reopened this discussion. According to the FV, baptism actually regenerates the infant infallibly. The baptized child is not only presumed to be regenerated by his baptism, he actually is regenerated. He has all spiritual graces in Christ (except the grace of perseverance). There is no difference in the spiritual state of a regenerated child who remains faithful and dies in the Lord and a child who later apostatizes and ends in hell.

This view of the FV, a virtual denial of the doctrine of Christian perseverance, has provoked reactions in Presbyterian churches. Most react by saying that grace is conveyed only to the elect in baptism, not to all. The time that that grace is conveyed may be before, during, or after the actual time of baptism. Further, the grace of regeneration may be given to children who are not baptized at all. On these points most traditional Presbyterians agree. However, they are divided over another, related question. What is the spiritual state of baptized children? Assuming that we cannot know certainly the elective decree of God, and we do not know who is actually regenerated and who is not, and we do not believe that baptism infallibly guarantees regeneration to anyone, how are we to regard the baptized children of the church?

These questions affect our pastoral practice and the attitudes and actions of parents in our churches. Are the children to be regarded as unsaved, needing conversion, still in the devil's power until we can lead them to a conversion experience? Or, on the other side, are they to be regarded as already regenerated by God, and therefore receptive to the teaching and nurture they receive from their parents and the church? Along the same line, are they members of the church and under its oversight and discipline? Or, are they still outside the church, not subject to its discipline until they "join" the church by their own profession of faith?

It is with these questions that this book provides real help and guidance. Lewis Bevens Schenck (1898–1985) graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary (Th.M.) and from Yale University (Ph.D). For thirty-nine years he served as J. W. Cannon Professor of Bible and Religion at Davidson College in North Carolina. This extensively researched and detailed book is based on his doctoral dissertation at Yale. It is the major literary achievement of his scholarly career.

Schenck was disturbed because many Presbyterian churches of his acquaintance took what he considered to be a more baptistic view, that baptized children were still spiritually unregenerate, and had no special standing in the church other than their being exposed to its

teaching and example. They needed to be born again. Only after their conscious conversion could they be admitted to the church as believers.

Schenck believed this common way of thinking was not properly biblical or Presbyterian. Rather, he believed that children of believing parents belong to the Lord as his own children and that we should treat them as already regenerated by God, but in need of teaching and nurture, so that they would learn the truths they were to believe and know God as he is revealed in Scripture. An unregenerate child would reject the gospel teachings; a regenerate child would receive and welcome these teachings. Parents and the church needed to recognize baptized children as members of the church, not as hostile to it. The presumption that their children were already regenerated by the Lord should serve as an encouragement to parents that their teachings would not fall on deaf ears. If a child should grow older and reveal an unregenerate heart by disbelief or scandalous sin, it is the duty of the church to exercise its discipline. It is important to note that “presumptive regeneration,” the traditional Reformed view that Schenck espouses, is not the same as “actual” or “necessary regeneration”; we do not know if an individual child is regenerate; we only presume him to be and treat him as such. This differs significantly from the FV position. Schenck wrote this book to demonstrate that his view was the traditional view of Calvin and the early Reformed church, the Westminster Assembly, and the bulk of Presbyterians until the revivalistic movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

This book concentrates on the history of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches since the time of the Reformation. It does contain some biblical arguments for infant baptism and its meaning, but these arguments are not a major thrust of the book; they are intermingled with the theological discussions through the various historical eras.

In his first chapter Schenck provides detailed and extensive quotations from the early leaders in the Reformed tradition, along with commentary and discussion, interacting with scholars who agree with and who oppose his understanding of these leaders. He discusses at length Calvin, Zwingli, Oecolampadius, Bullinger, Olevianus, Ursinus, and Knox, giving the longest discussion to Calvin. He also examines the Reformed creeds, including the Gallican Confession of Faith, the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Westminster Standards. Likewise, he traces this doctrine through the theologians most responsible for the origin and development of covenant theology, Cocceius and Witsius. This chapter also contains a lengthy delineation of the adoption of this theology by the early Presbyterians and its codification in the Westminster Standards and in the regulations and practices of the early Presbyterian churches in Britain and America.

Calvin and the early Presbyterians agreed that we baptize our infants, not in order that they may be regenerated (as the FV asserts), but because we are to regard them as already regenerated by God. They have a right to the seal of baptism as much as any adult who confesses Christ. We are to receive into the fellowship of the church infants of believers with that same confidence that we receive adults who profess the true religion. We receive adults on the basis of their profession; we receive their children on the basis of God’s promise. Schenck demonstrates conclusively that this was the position of Calvin, the other Reformed leaders, the Westminster divines, and the early Presbyterians.

The second chapter of the book shows how laxity in church teaching and discipline led to the inclusion of a large number of Presbyterian church members who did not appear to have the saving graces. A partial cause of this decline was the theology of the “half-way covenant.” While this unfortunate view did not gain a majority status among Presbyterians, it led to an overreaction in the revivalistic movements, which demanded a discreet “conversion experience,” often including massive guilt and the emotionally powerful change to relief and joy at the point of conversion. Those church members who believed in Christ, led orderly Christian lives, but could not remember such a personal experience were accused of being hypocrites and lost until they could have it. This conflict produced the Old Side – New Side division in the eighteenth century, and many divisions surrounding the nineteenth century revivals as well. The extraordinary measures taken during these revivals tended to replace the more ordinary process of infant baptism and Christian nurture as the most desirable way to make disciples and build churches.

The third chapter continues the development of this conflict into the nineteenth century. Schenck provides ample documentation to show how the pro-revivalist Presbyterians tended to associate baptism, not with the eternal covenant of grace, but with an ecclesiastical covenant made with Abraham. Baptized children were taken under the general guidance of the church, but were not presumed to be regenerate; in fact, they were presumed to be unregenerate (unless they died in infancy, in which case they were regenerate). In general the Southern theologians favored the revivalist view, while the Northern theologians favored the traditional view that baptized children were presumed to be regenerate. This conflict of perspective produced an extended theological argument between Charles Hodge and J. H. Thornwell, which Schenck traces in some detail. The particular issue that brought the conflict to the fore was the attempt to amend the Presbyterian Book of Discipline so that baptized children were removed from the discipline of the church session. This was the natural consequence of considering them to be unbelievers until they gave their own professions of faith. In this regard Thornwell had very harsh words regarding the spiritual state of the church’s baptized children (pp. 94-95). When the Presbyterian Church divided during the Civil War, the Southern church continued to consider this change, finally adopting it in 1879.

The fourth chapter defends the doctrine that covenant children are to be considered as regenerated by God on the basis of God’s promise, and therefore are entitled to receive baptism and be under the care and discipline of the church. Schenck provides a detailed examination of the Princeton theology regarding infant salvation and baptism, comparing the writings of several of its professors to those of Calvin and the early Reformers and contrasting them from later schools of thought, such as the New England theology. His careful analysis exposes and avoids the extremes that some have taken on one side or the other of this issue. He also includes a valuable discussion of the relation of the promise that God would save our children to the responsibilities of the parents and the church in bringing up their children in the nurture of the Lord. God uses means in bringing faith and sanctification; we cannot expect him to work apart from those means. While we “presume” their regeneration, and “consider” them as saved, we still have the obligation to teach the saving truths to them in time; indeed, this doctrine encourages that teaching. If we fail in this task, we cannot presume on God that he will save them anyway. The same principle applies as with preaching the gospel to adults.

In his final chapter Schenck decries the modern tendency to regard children in the church as unsaved and thus to make infant baptism a merely formal entrance into the visible church. It becomes a kind of “wet dedication ceremony.” Rather, by understanding baptism as a sign and seal of the covenant of grace and as a means of grace along with the Word and prayer, we recognize the true importance and value of water baptism. Also, we restore the importance and centrality of Christian nurture of covenant children in our Christian families and in the church.

This book has the added benefit today of helping in the conflict over the Federal Vision theology. FV proponents observe and capitalize on the weakening of the doctrine of baptism in many Presbyterian and Reformed churches. They also recognize the faulty model of a conscious “conversion experience” being required for covenant children. They know that many true believers cannot remember such an experience, that they can never remember a time when they did not believe in Christ. To answer these deficiencies in the churches, they present their doctrine of baptismal regeneration and teach that all their baptized children are undoubtedly saved (they are ambiguous about unbaptized children); however, they must remain faithful or they will fall away. Some have sought to answer this challenge from the FV by presenting a greatly weakened, baptistic doctrine on the meaning of baptism and the status of covenant children. Schenck provides a better way. We can presume our children to be saved, consider and treat them as saved, without asserting that they are for sure—something only the Lord knows. If in time they show themselves to be unsaved, the church can and should discipline them, even excommunicate them. However, in the mean time, we teach and train our children in faith, believing them to be the Lord’s and therefore receptive to this teaching and training. If they die at a young age, we assume they are with the Lord; if they live, we assume that the time will come when they will confess Christ themselves; but we regard them as saved before then. In this regard we have the exact same confidence that they are the Lord’s as we have for adults who come into the church by their own confession of faith. On the basis of God’s promise we presume them to be saved and teach them as such, but only God knows their hearts.

The new printing of the book has a valuable introduction by Frank A. James III, introducing the reader to this little-known Presbyterian scholar, and summarizing the book’s contents and importance for today. The book has an excellent bibliography and is well indexed. I highly recommend this book for pastors, elders, and all Presbyterians who desire to be faithful in the treatment and nurture of our covenant children.