

Towards a theology of children

Part one: the value of children

Part two: children in the church

Hayden Smith



www.mountainstreetmedia.com

Copyright © 2015 Hayden Smith / Mountain Street Media.

Scripture taken from the Holy Bible, NEW INTERNATIONAL READER'S VERSION®. Copyright © 1996, 1998 Biblica. All rights reserved throughout the world. Used by permission of Biblica.

NEW INTERNATIONAL READER'S VERSION® and NIrV® are registered trademarks of Biblica. Use of either trademark for the offering of goods or services requires the prior written consent of Biblica.

Part one: the value of children.....	3
1. Seen but not heard	3
2. The complex morality of children	3
3. The value of children	6
4. Dependency and vulnerability	7
5. The kindness of strangers: independence, autonomy and security	7
6. The value of vulnerability	9
7. Jesus and children	10
8. Conclusions	12
Part two: children in the church.....	13
1. Anglican silence and a lack of discernment.....	13
2. A defence of method	13
2.1 Baptism: washing and welcome	13
2.2 A history of infant baptism in the early church.....	14
2.3 In defence of a theological and cultural reading of the New Testament...	14
3. Covenant.....	15
3.1 A sign of faith or a sign of faithfulness?.....	15
3.2 To you and your children: Abraham and Peter	16
3.3 Circumcision and baptism: two signs, one reality	18
4. Objections to a covenantal theological understanding of children and baptism	
.....	19
4.1 Faith in the promise: the Anglican ceremony of baptism	19
4.2 Other theological models	21
Adoption	21
Kingdom of God.....	22
4.2 A little faith.....	22
5. Jesus and children	23
6. Objections to infant baptism	23
Individualism.....	24
Arminianism	24
Experientialism	25
6.1 Modern credo-baptist theology.....	25
7. Why does the place of children matter?	25
8. Pastoral conclusions.....	26

Part one: the value of children

1. Seen but not heard

Though less commonly used today, many of us are familiar with the chiding idiom, “children should be seen and not heard.” A cursory survey of popular theological enquiry reveals a dearth of sustained reflections on the place and contribution of children. It seems that, whilst seen, children are not heard in the church. However, in practice, every family, every church, every culture has a theology of children. Every parent has wrestled with the place of children in God’s family. Every church has children’s ministry practices that speak an unspoken theology. The question is simply whether such a theology is articulated and, therefore, subject to critique.

It is critical for the sake of our children that the Christian community takes the time to develop, or perhaps dust off, our theology of children.

The contention of this paper, however, is not simply that a theology of children is vital for a healthy gospel-shaped children’s ministry but, rather, that children have a particular and necessary contribution to make to the theology of the whole church – particularly to grown-ups.

Our understanding of children shapes our understanding of what it means to be human.

Our understanding of children shapes our understanding of the gospel.

Our understanding of children, therefore, shapes our understanding of the God who calls not on the basis of our capacity but by his sovereign choice (Rom. 9:10-18).

Indeed, it is fitting that Jesus should adopt ‘little ones’ as a term of endearment for all believers. Children teach us daily the good news that we are all children.

2. The complex morality of children

“And when she was good, she was very, very good...”²

Some of the most influential contributions to Western cultural attitudes towards children have come from very different figures.

Firstly, it is difficult to underestimate the influence that St Augustine has held over Western Christianity and Western society more broadly. Augustine’s understanding of children was developed through a combination of self-reflection, observation and philosophy. Noting a selfish tendency within children Augustine saw through their chubby charm to see the wicked inclinations of a child’s heart. He suggests that the only reason for the relative harmlessness of infants lay in their lack of ability rather than a lack of vice for “It is the weakness of infants’ limbs that makes them

² From the 19th century poem ‘There was a little girl’, by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

innocent, not their intention.”³ Children are also given to jealousy, as was the case with one child Augustine observed, who “without speech, he, pale with anger, looked upon his fellow nurse-ling with a bitter face.”⁴ Even the manipulative wail of a baby who would steal breast milk from another was offered by Augustine as evidence of the corruption even of children.⁵ Augustine concluded that children are born sinful and, appealing to his own experience and the testimony of Psalm 51, reached the following rhetorical conclusion:

Who can recall to me the sins I committed as a baby? For in your sight no man is free from sin, not even a child who has lived only one day on earth... If I was born in sin and guilt was with me already when my mother conceived me, where I ask you, Lord, where or when was I, your servant, ever innocent?⁶

Continuing in Augustine’s mould, Martin Luther argued that the will of children must be trained to curtail the sinful inclination of their nature. In order to mature in virtuousness the will of the child must be “tamed” and, even, “constantly broken.”⁷ Calvin also upheld that, “Even infants themselves... are guilty not of another’s fault, but their own.”⁸ This view found expression in an emphasis on discipline in the education of children. Miller Mc-Lemore observes that, “a primary parental task was to suppress and control what was seen as a child’s natural depravity.”⁹

Though undoubtedly Augustine’s doctrines of sin and anthropology are more nuanced than they might first appear, this largely negative view of children as sinful and needing correction undoubtedly influenced the Western view of children. And whilst it is commonly accepted that discipline is necessary for the healthy development of children we must grieve the way that Augustine’s thinking has been contorted to perverse and dangerous ends. Passages, like Proverbs 13:24, “he who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him,” have been employed as a licence for violence and abuse. The church must repent of any part that she, indeed we, have played in the damaging of such little ones.

Thomas Aquinas, though influenced by Augustine, drew also on Aristotle and emphasised above all else the value of rational thought. This, of course, necessarily diminished the value of children. Aquinas believed in the importance of education in aiding children in the development of their contemplative selves for, “so long as he has not the use of reason he is like a non-rational animal.”¹⁰ According to Aquinas, society is responsible for developing the higher and nobler human faculties.

³ Augustine in *Augustine for Armchair Theologians*, 24

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Augustine in *Graced Vulnerability*, 4

⁶ *ibid.*, 5

⁷ *ibid.*, 6

⁸ *ibid.*, 83

⁹ Bonnie. J. Miller Mc-Lemore, *Let The Children Come*, 13

¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas in *Graced Vulnerability*, 8

In contrast with Augustine, however, Aquinas' belief in the limited cognitive command of children mitigates the extent of their sinful culpability. As such, a child's "lack of maturity [impedes] his use of reason [and] excuses him from mortal sin."¹¹ The essence of this view is what Jensen describes as "*the original incompleteness*" of the child.¹²

There are a number of problems with Aquinas' depiction of children, not least of which is the seemingly arbitrary choice of reason as the quality to be most prized. Whilst few would doubt the value of reason, one could mount (as does Westerhoff) an argument for the value of the intuitive, of affections or of love (what he calls the pre-ration[al]) as the highest human pursuit. Which is more important – loving or thinking? Which is more important – to articulate or to be loved? That the answer is not immediately clear speaks volumes concerning the dangers of Aquinas' arbitrary and reductionist emphasis on rationality. This view, however, has been enormously influential in Western culture, such that now it is those who have a limited cognitive capacity – the very young, those with intellectual disabilities and the elderly, namely, the most vulnerable members of our society – are now threatened rather than protected by their communities.

18th Century Romantic Jean Jacques Rousseau developed Aquinas' thinking in setting forth children not simply as incomplete but as without corruption at birth; "Everything is good as it comes from the hands of the Author of Nature; but everything degenerates in the hands of man."¹³ Children are born full of potential and with the innate ability to develop into a healthy adult. The problem with children lay not with their own corrupt nature but with the corrupting power of society. The answer then lay not with educational institutions but with the provision of the freedom to pursue one's own natural development, preferably in a rural setting far removed from the influence of society.

Jensen summarises this position: "We do children a disservice if we teach them that corruption lies within; indeed, we instruct them to loathe themselves if this is the message they receive. Nature is the source of all good; our task in educating children is to allow them to reclaim their original nature and blessing."¹⁴

Both Aquinas and Rosseau signalled a significant shift in the Western conception of children. Now, with English Philosopher John Locke, children were understood as a "blank slate" filled with possibility.¹⁵

This attitude has shaped much of modern educational theory. The work of Piaget heralded a boom in child psychology and his principles set a trajectory which has culminated in the present focus on child-centred development. One recent and influential example of child-centred development demonstrates the culmination of Rosseau's philosophy; Alice Miller contends that "a child who has been allowed to

¹¹ *ibid.*, 9

¹² *ibid.*, 9

¹³ *ibid.*, 6

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 7

¹⁵ *Let the Children Come*, 13

be egoistic, greedy and asocial long enough will develop pleasure in sharing and giving.”¹⁶

Such ideas seem a long way removed from Augustine’s criticism of the infant who cries for a mother’s milk. And whilst children stubbornly resist neat categorisation, we must recognise that there are dangers in each of these reductionist views. Miller-McLemore argues that “If Christian theology has erred on the side of moral mastery and condemnation, psychology errs on the side of moral naïveté.”¹⁷

The answer, though, lies not in the dismissal of either position as extremes to be avoided or, worse, as extremes to alternate between. Sound Christian evangelical theology upholds the principle of total depravity introduced in Augustine’s thinking and articulated in the work of John Calvin. The doctrine of total depravity rightly contends that there is no area of the human person that is not affected by sin. The corrupting effects of sin are such that a person cannot *of their own volition and power* choose to do good.

For this reason the remedy for sinfulness is not effort or education but only *the grace of God*. Christians acknowledge God’s common grace in restraining the sinful will of humanity. For Christians we may add the work of the Holy Spirit in changing even young hearts to incline them towards obedience. The sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit does not enjoy a prominent place within popular evangelical theology because of the church’s emphasis on the sinfulness of humanity, atoning work of Christ as a propitiation for sins. Evangelicals have also reacted against Pentecostal triumphalist theology. However, the Spirit who leads us to repentance and trust in Christ is the same Spirit who leads us to live lives of Christ-like holiness. It is vital for the sake of our children that we rediscover both the doctrine of sin *and* confidence in the Holy Spirit as the one who works powerfully in our hearts and in the hearts of our children. For only then shall we have a framework that allows us to see children as moral agents who are neither insatiably wicked nor luminescent in innocence, but rather as capable of displaying both profoundly selfish and self-less behaviour. Children, like adults, are complex moral creatures in need of grace.

3. The value of children

Common to each of the preceding views of children is the emphasis on the child’s potential and development. Whether development comes through discipline, reason or freedom, the focus of each contribution is to assist and enable children to reach maturity. Jensen describes this as “the most influential interpretation of children’s lives: children are adults-in-the-making.”¹⁸ By this definition, the value of children lies not in who they are but in *who they will become*. The rush for our children to grow up seems to be confirmed in every area of life: children with packed diaries, accelerated learning classes, scouting for sporting talent and intensive training programs, as well

¹⁶ *Let the Children Come*, 50

¹⁷ *Let the Children Come*, 50

¹⁸ *Graced Vulnerability*, 20

as the disturbing research that Melinda Tankard Reist has done on the sexualisation of children.¹⁹

But I wonder whether, in our haste for children to grow up, we've missed something of *the value of children as children*. Of course God could easily have created humanity without the need for children, who undoubtedly occupy the messiest and most inconvenient stages of human development. Is childhood simply a necessary and unavoidable step on the road to higher levels of function? Or could it be that children have something *to teach adults* about what it means to be truly human and to reflect the image of God?

4. Dependency and vulnerability

Jeremy Worthen observes that children embody “a dialectic of dependency and dynamism.”²⁰ The dynamism is seen in the potential for development and constant growth of children. The value of such dynamism has been discussed at length, however relatively little attention has been given to the dependency of children. In the case of infants, this dependency is seen in every area of life. Children rely on others for the provision of material, relational, educational and spiritual needs; “Without relationship, children die.”²¹

Dependency and vulnerability cannot be separated. To depend upon another is to place your wellbeing in the hands of another and to be at their mercy. To be dependent is to be vulnerable. Children are extremely dependent on others and as such are extremely vulnerable. In Australia and especially in places where social structures and protections have been eroded, children fall victim to abuse; neglect, malnutrition, disease, physical, sexual and emotional abuse, child labour, child soldiers and child prostitution are all tragically rife.

Even a cursory glance at the Scriptures will demonstrate that God has a special concern for the vulnerable. God's people are called to care for the orphan, the widow and the refugee (Isa. 1:17). Children need ‘caring others’ to protect them and provide for them. As Christians we should, as we have opportunity, seek to be those ‘caring others’ for those children who have none.

5. The kindness of strangers: independence, autonomy and security

Western society fights powerfully for autonomy, independence and security, believing dependency is a weakness that will, inevitably, be exploited. Nations seek military and economic security and even the United States is working hard to end its dependence on foreign oil. Capitalism rationalises that parties should advocate for themselves and any vulnerability will be exposed either by rival companies, investors or consumers.

¹⁹ http://www.publicchristianity.com/Videos/sexualisation_of_girls.html

²⁰ Jeremy Worth in ‘Babes in Arms: Speechlessness and Selfhood’ in *Children of God*, 47

²¹ Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability*, 32

This drive for security is expressed in the lives of individuals as well. Individuals seek job security, financial security and physical security.²² It is not uncommon for cultures to defend and secure their lifestyle by imposing limits on the number or origin of immigrants. Insurance products of *every kind* demonstrate the Western attitude of self-reliance. For many, asking for help is synonymous with the worst kind of social humiliation.

Seeking independence and security can even be seen in attitudes towards *personal relationships*. Rather than entering into a relationship of mutual trust and dependence and risk being hurt or, worse, relied upon, many are eschewing traditional friendships and romantic involvement in order to be free (independent) to pursue other goals.

Such attitudes demonstrate the sinful and foolish desire to assert independence from God and others. Such “grasping for... autonomy”²³ demonstrates a self reliance that refutes the dependent nature of the human existence. This sentiment is captured powerfully in the poetry of William Ernest Henley; “I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul.”²⁴

Just as the sinful nature pursues independence from God, so also it seeks independence from other people, for “man does not assert his independence of God to surrender it to a fellow man, if he can help it.”²⁵

The Bible, however, corrects our wicked and fanciful pretence by demonstrating clearly that we are, by virtue of being creatures, dependent and therefore vulnerable. God in no way depends on humanity yet all people depend on God for their very life and breath.

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. (Acts 17:24-25)

Luke 12:1-33 and James 4:13-15 highlight the foolishness of seeking independence through saving and future proofing whilst failing to acknowledge God as the one who provides. Even the foundational Christian anthropological statement of Genesis 1:27 places the identity of humanity in relationship with another, namely God. For in creating Adam and Eve in “the image of God” we are reminded that the essence of humanity is to be found neither in introspective philosophy nor material accumulation, but only with reference to God. This is not profound spirituality but rather the simple acknowledgement of our own finite and derivative nature. For this

²² One might observe the rise of the ‘gated community’ as one such example.

²³ “Sin”, in *New Dictionary of Theology*

²⁴ William Ernest Henley, *Invictus*

²⁵ Roy Hession, *The Calvary Road*, 35

reason Jonathon Edwards called faith, “a *sensibleness* and an acknowledgement of this absolute dependence upon God.”²⁶

Humanity can never achieve true independence, autonomy or security. For each person is in every way dependent upon God who holds each life in his hands and sustains people from one breath to the next. Neither can humanity achieve independence from one another, for in decreeing that “it is not good for man to be alone,” God affirms the natural goodness of community. The profound value of persons existing in interdependence is confirmed in the apostle Paul’s beautiful description in 1 Corinthians 12 of the Christian Church as a body each contributing and benefiting from one another. Human identity is only found in community.

In this regard, children have something profound to teach and model to adults. For in embodying dependence upon others, children function as a reminder of what is essentially human; to be human is to be vulnerable:

The vulnerability of children, then, is a fact of God-given relatedness into which all persons are born; though most visible in infancy, we never outgrow it.²⁷

6. The value of vulnerability

The necessity of dependence and vulnerability are clearly seen in the testimony of Scriptures and of life. However the moral status of vulnerability is yet to be explored. Is vulnerability a necessary evil to be endured or an enduring virtue to be affirmed? The contention of this paper is that *when it is an expression of love*, vulnerability is praiseworthy and good; in the words of C. S. Lewis, “to love at all is to be vulnerable”.²⁸ Vulnerability cannot be separated from love, for in loving something or someone we open ourselves to loss, disappointment and broken trust however we also open ourselves to the joy of beauty, reciprocal affirmation and faithfulness.²⁹

In love, the clumsy teenager willingly makes himself vulnerable when he nervously invites that special girl to dinner. In love, the would-be missionary family willingly make themselves vulnerable when they travel to an inhospitable country in order to share the gospel. In love, the faithful friend makes herself vulnerable when she forgives the one who has repeatedly proven untrustworthy. In love, the Son of God makes himself vulnerable when he takes on human nature and is born as an infant to an unwed peasant in a small town in an unwelcoming world.

²⁶ Jonathon Edwards, *God Glorified in Man’s Dependence*

²⁷ *Graced Vulnerability*, 49

²⁸ C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*

²⁹ To make oneself vulnerable is not always an expression of love. For example, we may observe within our 21st Century Australian setting an increasing culture of young adults continuing to depend on their parents and extended family *in order to prolong self-centred pursuits and to avoid adult responsibilities*. Such vulnerability is not an expression of love but of selfishness.

“But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.

If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back.” (Luke 6:27-30)

Some might argue against such a position on the basis of the many abuses carried out against those who are most vulnerable. In response we might offer two observations:

Firstly, affirming the goodness of vulnerability is *not synonymous* with affirming the goodness of the abuse of vulnerability. Taking into account the picture language of Isaiah 11:6-9, we observe that, even in the redeemed creation, there is still a strong power imbalance between the strength of the predatory animals and the weakness of the child. In the Kingdom of Heaven the child is still vulnerable (and childlike!) in reaching into the nest of the viper; however *what is different is that this expression of love is not exploited or abused but, rather, it is met with reciprocated gentleness and love.*

The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. (Isa. 11:6-9)

Secondly, as we have previously discussed, affirming the goodness of vulnerability is *not synonymous* with indifference towards protecting the weak. As we have previously noted, Christians have a special mandate to care for the oppressed and the weak. Indeed, a willingness to recognise and embrace our own vulnerability ought to find particular expression in lovingly putting ourselves at risk in order to protect those who cannot protect themselves. We uphold the loving command of Scripture: “Defend the cause of the weak” (Ps. 82:3).

To love is to be vulnerable, for to love is to entrust ourselves into the hands of another. Vulnerability and openness form the beauty and cost of love. As such, it is not something to be outgrown or endured but, rather, to be treasured and honoured. In this way, the dependence and vulnerability of children become not simply a reflection of what we are but also of *what we are called to be.*

7. Jesus and children

He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me.” (Matt. 18:2-5)

From this passage we may observe that Jesus affirms two significant attitudes concerning children.

Firstly, the expectation that his adult hearers would change to become like children. Such a teaching was unprecedented in the rabbinic tradition and offensive to the broader Greco-Roman culture.³⁰ Within our own setting the expectation of change is largely geared towards children who will develop into adults. These words are therefore counter-cultural in our own context as well.

Within the context of the disciples' question, "Who is the greatest?" Jesus' answer affirms the humility of children as that which is antithetical to the disciples' self-reliant attitude. Their emphasis on power, ambition and status contrasts with children, who are relatively weak, modest and anonymous. Each of these qualities are expressions of childlike vulnerability and manifest themselves in dependence upon others for provision, protection and care. Jesus teaches us that we are to recognise and embrace our own childlike dependence and vulnerability. Such is the attitude that receives the Kingdom in faith – recognising our own limitations and depending wholly upon God in everything. This attitude is most clearly seen in thankfulness, prayerfulness and trust.

Children are a gift to us for they are a constant reminder to live in joyful reliance upon God who is the giver of all good gifts. For in recognition of our own weakness we are reminded of God's power; in our own foolishness we are reminded of God's wisdom; in our own lack we are reminded of God's sufficiency, in order that all God's people might glorify Christ in whom we have every spiritual blessing. As it is written, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord."³¹

Secondly, Jesus calls his hearers to welcome children and in so doing we actually welcome Christ. The way we engage with children reflects our understanding of the way God has engaged with us. To welcome children is to welcome Jesus *precisely* because in loving children we show that we have understood the way in which Jesus has loved us. Jesus made himself vulnerable in becoming a human and subjecting himself to wicked people in order to love, dignify and redeem us. In making ourselves vulnerable and risk looking foolish in order to love children we reflect the way that Christ loves. We love because we have been loved.

The gospel turns the world on its head for in the Kingdom of Heaven the weak are not abused but protected, the poor are not extorted but provided for, the lowly are not ignored but honoured. In the eyes of the wise, powerful and esteemed, children are foolish, weak and unimportant, yet the Apostle Paul describes the cross of Christ in the very same terms (1 Cor. 1:27-29). When we welcome children, we welcome Jesus who humbled himself in love.

³⁰ Gundry-Volf, *The Least and the Greatest*

³¹ 1 Cor. 1:31

8. Conclusions

Children indeed embody a wonderful “dialectic of dependency and dynamism” however we must not allow the wonderful potential and growth of our children to take away from the value of children *as children*. The humanity and value of children are not to be diminished because of the inherited sinful nature in which they share or because of their lack of mature rational thought or articulation.

The Christian gospel reorients our thinking to see the dependency and vulnerability of children not as something to be resisted and outgrown, lest they be abused by those in power, but as a clear reflection of the dependency that is at the very heart of humans as those created in the image of God. This childlikeness also reflects Christ himself who, in the incarnation and passion, models for us making oneself vulnerable as an expression of love.

Within this framework lies not only a mandate to love and welcome children by caring for and teaching children, but also the call to be taught *by* children what it means for us to express dependence and vulnerability as creatures and followers of Christ. In this way children remind us that the childlike traits of asking for help, thankfulness and joy are not merely childish frivolities to be outgrown but, rather, are attitudes of great value in the Kingdom of Heaven. Children evoke in us all a longing for a time when the vulnerabilities of the weak are met, not with cynical exploitation but, rather, with protection, provision and the reciprocation of self-giving love. The Christian gospel is one of hope of the New Jerusalem in which “the city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing” – and perhaps even the theologians will play *Duck, Duck Goose* (Zech. 8:5).

Part two: children in the church

1. Anglican silence and a lack of discernment

As observed in the first paper, just as there is a relative silence on the value and place of children in theological enquiry, so there seems to be an all too common reticence amongst Anglican preachers to address this crucial issue. Whilst still maintaining the practice of infant baptism, Sunday School and many other expressions of care for children, with the exception of the theological contribution contained in the liturgical content of the baptism service, many Rectors simply fail to articulate a position concerning the place of children in the Christian church. This has led to confusion amongst the children, parents and congregations in our churches resulting in an indifference or even objection to the traditional Anglican understanding of children. Many attitudes and practices in our churches treat children as provisional or partial Christians, or worse as unbelievers who must be evangelised!

This confusion is compounded, both within the church and without, by the common practice of baptising the infants of unbelievers and those outside the community of faith. Whilst often defended on the basis of the evangelistic opportunities that no doubt attend this new connection, such baptisms diminish the promises given only to the church and leave the unbeliever with a dangerous and baseless sense of spiritual assurance.³²

Firstly, as an Anglican Minister, I must apologise for the harm effected by the silence of the pulpit. Secondly, we must rediscover the biblical and theological basis for recognising the children of believers as full members of Christ's church. Thirdly, we must find our voice and teach the children, parents and congregations concerning the value and place of children as fellow-heirs of the life-giving promises of God. Though Cranmer reformed many of the practices of the Church in Rome, we ought to give thanks that his insistence that "the Baptism of young children is in any wise to be retained in the Church" is grounded in a sound biblical and theological method.³³

2. A defence of method

2.1 Baptism: washing and welcome

Whilst the title of this paper contains no mention of baptism, much of the present discussion will be spent exploring the historical, biblical and theological arguments for

³² Though often Anglican Ministers will seek to, through a series of disclaimers and qualifications, place the spiritual responsibility on the shoulders of the parents, the one who performs the ceremony and speaks the promises of baptism retains spiritual responsibility and, as such, will be held to account.

1 Cor. 11:29 speaks of the dangers of partaking in the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner. Clergy's position of ecclesial authority does not make provision for the absolution of responsibility in the suitable administration of the sacraments.

³³ Article XXVII

the practice of baptising the infants of believers. The reason for this is found in our understanding of baptism. Whilst the sacrament of baptism is a rich well of theological discussion, we shall, for the time being observe that baptism is a symbol of cleansing for the forgiveness of sins (in this regard it fulfils John's baptism in Mark 1:4) and of new union with Christ and with his church (1 Cor. 12:13). In this way we can think of baptism as *a symbol of washing and welcome*.³⁴ The baptism of children and the place of children in Christ's Church share a reciprocal relationship; it is only suitable to baptise the infants of believers if they are truly part of the redeemed people of God, and if they are part of God's people then we ought not to withhold from them the sacrament of baptism. We shall now turn to the historic baptismal practices of the early Christian church.

2.2 A history of infant baptism in the early church

Though there is much debate concerning the baptismal practices of the early church, there is evidence that the practice of infant baptism was, if not universally practiced, certainly widespread. By the early 3rd Century, only one generation removed from the Apostles, Origen, continuing the theology of Polycarp and Iranaeus, could say, "The Church has received the tradition from the apostles to give baptism even to little children."³⁵

That opponents of infant baptism cite Tertullian's appeal for the delaying of baptism shows that infant baptism was indeed practiced. Whilst we shall later explore the theological and cultural reasons why it is remarkably unlikely that the church would break with Jewish tradition of including children as full members of God's people, for evangelicals the traditional practices of the church are rightly subordinated to the testimony of the Scriptures.

2.3 In defence of a theological and cultural reading of the New Testament

The strength of the credo-baptist position is its simplicity. Almost without exception the practice of baptism in the New Testament is preceded by an expression of repentance and faith on the part of the one offering themselves for baptism.³⁶ The weakness of the credo-baptist position, however, is that it fails to locate the texts of the New Testament within its cultural-theological context. Much as one cannot truly grasp the meaning of Jesus as the Lamb of God without appreciating the interpretive significance of the Exodus and the Passover, so too due reflection on the biblical

³⁴ "Baptism" in *The New Dictionary of Theology*

³⁵ Origen in *Commentary on Romans* 5.9.11 as quoted by Sinclair B. Ferguson in *Baptism: Three Views*

³⁶ Frequently in the NT (Acts 11:14, Acts 16:15, Acts 16:31-33, Acts 18:8) we see examples of entire households being baptised in response to the faith of the head of such households. It is significant to note that the Greek word for household (*oikos*) is a translation of the Hebrew word *bayit* which, as Ferguson notes, would have "included all members whatever their ages... The Hebrew term expresses the corporate concept of family in the biblical world, in distinction from the atomistic concept of individuality characteristic of our post-Enlightenment (and postmodern) world": *Baptism: Three views* 1454-66.

antecedents of the New Covenant allows us to grasp more clearly the power and the meaning of baptism.

We do well to recall the simple truth that the first Christians received the gospel through the biblical framework of the Old Testament.

3. Covenant

Covenant in the Old Testament refers to a promise, confirmed with a sign which establishes or formalises a relationship; indeed, one might think of a modern wedding with vows, the exchange of rings and the establishment of a new marriage relationship.³⁷ There are numerous examples of God establishing covenants such as the Noahic, Mosaic and, most significantly, the Abrahamic covenants. Each of these covenants is confirmed with a corresponding sign which seals the covenant, namely, the rainbow (Gen. 9:13), the Sabbath (Exod. 31:16-17) and circumcision (Gen. 17:10-11).

Baptism is the sign and seal that confirms the new covenant and, as previously noted, points to the promise of the cleansing of sin and union with Christ and his people – the *washing and welcome*.

3.1 A sign of faith or a sign of faithfulness?

The question of the purpose of the covenantal sign becomes clear in studying the biblical structure of covenant. God's initiation of the covenant with Abraham provides helpful insight into the nature of covenants and covenant signs.

The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's family. Go to the land I will show you.

² "I will make you into a great nation.

And I will bless you.

I will make your name great.

You will be a blessing to others.

³ I will bless those who bless you.

I will put a curse on anyone who puts a curse on you.

All nations on earth

will be blessed because of you."

(Gen. 12:1-3, NIRV)

⁵ You will not be called Abram anymore. Your name will be Abraham, because I have made you a father of many nations. ⁶ I will greatly increase the number of your children after you. Nations and kings will come from you. ⁷ I will make my covenant with you last forever. It will be between me and you and your family after you for all time to come. I will be your God. And I will be the God of all your family after you. ⁸ You are now living in Canaan as an outsider. But I will give you the whole land of Canaan. You

³⁷ P. A. Lillback in 'Covenant' in *The New Dictionary of Theology*

will own it forever and so will all your family after you. And I will be their God.”

⁹Then God said to Abraham, “You must keep my covenant. You and your family after you must keep it for all time to come. ¹⁰Here is my covenant that you and your family after you must keep. You and every male among you must be circumcised. ¹¹That will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. ¹²It must be done for all time to come. Every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised. That includes those who are born into your own family or outside it. It also includes those bought with money from a stranger.” (Gen. 17:5-12, NIRV)

Of particular significance is God’s *unilateral initiation* in establishing the covenant. The emphasis is on what God has done. The covenant is not a response to the faith of Abraham, but rather it begins with the promise of God. We may observe the repeated “I will” language as evidence of God’s primary contribution. Abraham is not without responsibility however his role receives far less emphasis and the faith of the Patriarch is generated by and conditional upon the promise given.

The covenantal sign is to reflect the covenantal emphases, namely the initiative and promises of God. For this reason the covenantal signs of circumcision and baptism point *primarily* to the *objective* promises and faithfulness of God, namely, the righteousness granted to Abraham and all the saints.

In contrast with this, credo-baptists traditionally place the emphasis of baptism on the *subjective faith of the believer* and for this reason argue that Christian baptism is “an act of obedience *symbolizing the believer’s faith... It is a testimony to his faith*” (though such faith is in Christ Jesus, the primary focus is, nevertheless, on the faith of the person being baptised).³⁸

This position fails to take into account the unilateral nature of covenant making and the radically asymmetry of the gospel in which humanity contributes nothing to Christ’s redeeming work (Eph. 2:1-10, Rom. 9:8-16). Baptism is not primarily a testimony to the faith of the one being baptised, but rather to the faithfulness of God. In short, baptism is first and foremost about Jesus and not about you.³⁹

3.2 To you and your children: Abraham and Peter

The covenant with Abraham is a defining moment in the salvation history of God’s people. This covenant provides a critical framework and foundation for understanding God’s redemptive acts in both the Old Testament and in advent of Jesus. For this reason it is worth developing several key elements in the text.

- I. The covenant is relational. God promises to be the God of Abraham and to all his children. This relationship is a relationship of blessing. We ought to ask, if God is

³⁸ *Baptist Faith and Message*, 2000.

³⁹ We shall in due course, in exploring Anglican sacramental distinctives, examine the significance of the subjective faith of the recipient of grace.

the God who blesses the children of Israel, how much more might God include children under the New Covenant in the sending of the Son and the indwelling of the Spirit?

2. The sign of the covenant is not limited to those old enough to rationalise and articulate faith, but, rather, is extended to even the youngest of infant males. Children are not excluded on the basis of immaturity, but are fully included in the community of God's people.
3. Not including children in the sign of the covenant represents excluding that child from the blessings of the covenant. To do so is to curse the child and to break the covenant.
4. The promise contains the future hope of Abraham's family bringing blessing to all people.
5. We might also pause to note that in establishing relationship with the family of Abraham, God overturns the fractious family relationships inherited from Adam and Eve and restores the significance and blessing of family as seen in Eden.

It is within this context that the Apostle Peter, speaking as carried along by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, speaks.

“Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. “Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” Peter replied, “Repent and be baptised, 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. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off — for all whom the Lord our God will call.” With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” Those who accepted his message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. (Acts 2:22-24, 36-41)

There are numerous points that confirm *the essential continuity of covenants*:

1. The emphasis on what God has done in Christ Jesus.
2. In the giving of the Holy Spirit and the forgiveness of sins, the covenant is relational and brings blessing.

3. Children are included in the promise of blessing.
4. Jesus is the one who blesses all nations, or all whom the Lord will call.
5. Once again God reaffirms the significance and goodness of family in his redemptive plan.

The blessing for all nations promised to Abraham and from Abraham finds its fulfilment in the person of Jesus who has secured the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise is, as with Genesis 17:7, not simply for the recipients of the promise but also for their children.

“The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off — for all whom the Lord our God will call.” (Acts 2:39)

“I will make my covenant with you. It will last forever. It will be between me and you and your children after you for all time to come. I will be your God...” (Gen. 17:7)

Just as the members of Israel under the Old Covenant understood that it is God’s promise that constitutes and establishes a people who are set apart as his, so God’s promise given through Jesus constitutes and establishes the New Covenant people set apart by the blood of Christ. Similarly just as under the Old Covenant the children of Israel are included in the promise *and the sign of the promise* as well as the full blessings and contained therein, so also under the New Covenant the promise extends to the children of believers.

Within the defining context of the Abrahamic covenant, the first Jewish Christians would have required a *strong and unambiguous theological rationale* to become convinced that God no longer works in and through family. Not only do we find no mandate for such a radical break with the pattern established in the covenants of Abraham and Moses, but rather at Pentecost we find clear and wonderful affirmation that under the New Covenant this grace *still* extends to the children of God’s people.

3.3 Circumcision and baptism: two signs, one reality

In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. (Col. 2:11-13)

The strong continuity of the covenant is affirmed by the close symbolic association of circumcision and baptism. There is nowhere in the New Testament that clearly teaches that baptism under the New Covenant replaces circumcision under the old. In part this is because, as the New Covenant is the fulfilment of the old, rather than a replacement, baptism is better understood as the fulfilment of circumcision. In this way, a Jewish Christian could be both circumcised and baptised. This was, in fact, the case in the majority of the examples of baptism we have in Scripture!

There are a number of differences between the signs of circumcision and baptism, such as the extension of the covenant sign to women, the covenant expanding to include people from all nations and the gift of the Spirit. However Colossians 2:11-13 affirms that both circumcision and baptism testify to the same central truth, namely, the death of the old person/nature and the birth of the new person/nature.

If those things symbolised in circumcision were applied to infants, how much more ought they to be applied to children under the New Covenant. To argue otherwise is to appeal to one of two arguments.

- a. Circumcision was rightly given to children under the Old Covenant but the realities signified therein did not apply to the recipient of the sign.
- b. Circumcision and the realities were rightly applied to children under the Old Covenant however they are withheld from children under the New Covenant.

Neither argument is convincing and presents God as either misleading the people through the giving of a sign representing an unreality or as withholding from Christians a blessing that was extended to believers under the Old Covenant. Far better to conclude that the same reality and sign given to God's people before Christ actually grows and abounds through Christ, for Christians receive the additional promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit for our children.

4. Objections to a covenantal theological understanding of children and baptism

There are a number of criticisms raised against a covenantal-theological understanding of children and baptism. Such concerns include:

1. The focus of covenantal theology is so firmly set on the *objective promise* of God that we diminish the significance of *the subjective response of faith*.
2. The covenantal model excludes other interpretive models.
3. The covenantal model diminishes the role of child faith.

Whilst we hold to the essential theological soundness of the covenantal approach, these concerns are not entirely without merit. We shall discuss each in turn.

4.1 Faith in the promise: the Anglican ceremony of baptism

Whilst we want to avoid the dangers of thinking of faith as our contribution to salvation, and so to fall into the errors of Arminianism or semi-pelagianism, we also wish to avoid such an emphasis on the corporate nature of salvation that we lose sight of God's grace given *to each of us*. Our Anglican heritage serves us well in this regard for *An Australian Prayer Book* (1978) reminds us that faith is crucial but that such faith is only generated by the work of the Holy Spirit.

The faith of the infant or child finds expression in the testimony of the community of faith *with* the infant and *on behalf of* the infant. The parents/godparents are asked, “I now ask you to answer in the name of this child. Do you profess this [the Creedal] faith? Do you ask for baptism in this faith? Will you with God’s help, strive to keep his holy will and commandments and serve him faithfully throughout your life?”⁴⁰

In keeping with the plain reading of the text, “the profession of the godparents [and parents] signifies that of the candidate, and in this respect could be properly said to be a vicarious act.”⁴¹ This ought not to surprise us as all of our decisions on behalf of our children affect their wellbeing for good or for ill; from where they live, to what they eat and how they spend their time, parents take responsibility for their children.

This can also be clearly inferred from the testimony of the Bible: the significance of headship in family, church and national Israel but also in representative heads such as Adam or Christ. Job makes sacrifices on behalf of his children (Job 1) and presumably many sacrifices, such as the Passover, were made on behalf of families. Jesus responds to the faith of those (plural) who brought the paralytic (Mark 1) before forgiving and healing the man (singular). The entire tenor of the Scriptures teaches us that individuals are designed for community, to depend on one another, to encourage, build and bear one another. That infants rely more heavily on the community of faith than adults should humble us and make us thankful that there are those who support us. It also provides a clear reminder that we are all entirely dependent upon God and are saved by his grace alone.

Nor are we to think of answering for infants as a relatively modern novelty. We have records of liturgy written by Hippolytus in the Roman Church in the early 3rd Century that reads:

And first the little children are to be baptized; and if he is able to speak for himself, he is to speak; and if they are not able, their parents are to speak on their behalf.⁴²

To speak for our children is a profound and sobering privilege. However the emphasis of Anglican theology is on the faith of the parents, godparents and community *in the promise of God* to grant the Holy Spirit to the child. God’s people pray for the child:

We thank you that you delivered your people from slavery and led them through the water of the Red Sea to freedom in the promised land... hear now the prayers of your faithful people, sanctify this water for the mystical washing away of sin, that your servant who is to be baptised in it may be made one with Christ in his death and in his resurrection; *send*

⁴⁰ *An Australian Prayer Book*, Baptism for Infants Service 2nd Order. 1978.

⁴¹ Gordon P. Jeanes in *Signs of God’s Promise, Thomas Cranmer’s Sacramental Theology and the Book of Common Prayer*.

⁴² Hippolytus in ‘The Apostolic Tradition’ quoted in *Baptism: Three Views*

*your Holy Spirit upon him to bring him to new birth in the family of your Church.*⁴³

Most noteworthy in this prayer is appeal for God to wash the child, to unite the child with Christ and to give the Holy Spirit to the child. The faith of the community is in the promise of God that he will give his Spirit for it is only by the Spirit that the child will receive the gift of faith. The community entrusts the child to God.

Reflecting once more on Peter's words in Acts 2:38-39, we have confidence that the promises of God are not simply given to us, but to our children as well. We pray that God would pour out the Holy Spirit upon our children to generate and strengthen their faith in Christ. Such a prayer is neither presumptuous, taking God's grace for granted, nor a vain hope, as though God is indifferent towards his promise, but, rather, reflects a sure confidence in God's faithfulness. Such a prayer is analogous to the prayer of confession: When we pray with a penitent heart that God would forgive our sins, we expect God to do as he has promised. God answers prayer, yet he is not bound to the prayers of the saints. He is, however, faithful to his promises. This is the basis of our confidence. When a prayer is both offered in faith and reflects a promise given then we can be sure that God will answer the prayer according to his word.

When parents have faith in this promise [that God will be the God of his people to a thousand generations] God causes them to believe even as he has promised. Thus the children receive salvation, but only by the gift of God and by the merit and work of Christ alone, but all of this is given to the faith of the parents. (Cranmer, *Quid De Baptismate*)⁴⁴

4.2 Other theological models

A second criticism of the covenantal-theological model is that it overlooks other biblical motifs. We shall now explore two such motifs.

Adoption

Adoption is closely linked with covenant and is seen in God's description of Israel as his firstborn son (Exod. 4:22), however it is not a strong feature of covenantal theology. The significance of adoption as a metaphor is affirmed and developed in the New Testament (Rom. 8:15, 2 Cor. 6:18, Eph. 1:4-6, Gal. 4:4-6). The importance of adoption language finds further support in prominent complementary themes such as the family of God and being born again.

⁴³ *An Australian Prayer Book*, Baptism for Infants Service 2nd Order. 1978.

We may note that Cranmer, appealing to 1 Cor. 10, recalls the baptism of the Israelites through the Red Sea. Here we are reminded that God saves in community. One cannot imagine the infants and children being excluded on the basis of being too young to rationalise or articulate faith. The children are saved by the grace of God and with the help of their parents and the community.

⁴⁴ Gordon P. Jeanes in *Signs of God's Promise, Thomas Cranmer's Sacramental Theology and the Book of Common Prayer*, 168.

The choice of adoption as a metaphor for God's relationship with his people is notable for, as with the covenant, the weight of stress that falls upon the benevolent inclination of the adoptive parent(s) and not on the will of the child. Whilst we must be cautious not to allegorise the metaphor, the *symbolic inclusion of children* must surely allow for the *actual inclusion of children* for the power of the metaphor is located in the corresponding reality.

For this reason Calvin describes the baptism of infants as "the symbol of their adoption [even] before they were old enough to recognize him as Father".⁴⁵

Kingdom of God

As we have explored in the previous paper, Jesus' interactions highlight clearly that the key to entering the Kingdom of God is not through a rational assent and by strength of personal conviction, but rather by becoming like a little child (Matt. 18:2-5). By highlighting the specific child in his midst Jesus affirms that he is not merely appealing to the principle of childlikeness but presumably includes the actual child to whom he points as a prime example.

Whilst adults often emphasise power, ambition and status, children are relatively weak, modest and anonymous. All of these qualities are expressions of childlike vulnerability and manifest themselves in a childlike dependence upon others for provision, protection and advocacy. Such is the attitude that receives the Kingdom in faith, recognising our own limitations and depending wholly upon God in everything. The Kingdom of God welcomes children.

4.2 A little faith

We now pause to consider child faith. Developing, though at times critical of, the psychological and pedagogical work of Piaget, Westerhoff explores the various developmental stages of child faith. Westerhoff observed four stages of faith: experienced, affiliative, searching and owned faith.

Of particular relevance to the present discussion is experienced faith. In the experienced faith stage, "the child explores and tests, imagines and creates, observes, copies, experiences and reacts. Experiences of trust, love, and acceptance are important to Christian faith and, regardless of age, the need is always present for experiences consistent with the meanings we attribute to words. Not only children live by experienced faith, of course, and, while this style of faith represents the earliest style, its characteristics are important and foundational to persons throughout their lives. A person first learns Christ not as a theological affirmation but as an affective experience."⁴⁶

Though not without faults, there are many strengths to Westerhoff's work on faith development. Of greatest significance for our present discussion is Westerhoff's contention that faith can be pre-rational, intuitive and affective. Westerhoff articulates

⁴⁵ Calvin, *Institutes* 4:16:31

⁴⁶ Westerhoff, *Will our Children Have Faith?* Revised, 2000, 89-90

for us that though faith changes and develops with age, even the youngest of children is nevertheless a genuine and valuable expression of faith. To suggest otherwise is to disappoint the Holy Spirit who, as recorded in Luke 1, fills John the Baptist from birth, conceives the Lord and prompts John the Baptist to leap in the womb upon hearing the voice of Mary.

Poythress writes that “faith is primarily trust... not articulation of trust.”⁴⁷ If faith is synonymous with trust or reliance upon another person or thing, might it not be that children express faith more clearly than adults? The promise is for our children and so we express faith for our child, we pray for our child, and we look, in keeping with the promise, for our children to grow in faith.

5. Jesus and children

As we continue to reflect on the significance of Jesus’ ministry to children we shall focus our reflection on one key verse.

And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them. (Mark 10:16)

Jesus welcomes children. And whilst Jesus does not baptise children it is important to note that Jesus baptises no one for he himself has not yet been baptised in his death (Mark 10:38). There is no greater endorsement that Jesus can give other than to bless those who come to him. It is a symbol of God’s inclusion of a person or people and of his commitment to seek such a person’s wellbeing.

The distinguished theologian Vern Poythress cuts through what he describes as “extended intellectual debate, dissection and the play of logical analysis” to ask simply, “What would you do if Jesus passed through your town or neighbourhood? Would you want to take your children to Jesus as well as to go yourself? ... Would you like to bring your children to Jesus so that he could pray for them and bless them?”⁴⁸

This question, whilst framed as an emotive appeal, cuts to the heart of the issue: Do we believe that our children are acceptable to Christ? Do we believe that Jesus would welcome and bless our children? The gospels demonstrate unambiguously that Jesus *does* welcome children and “if he embraces them, we must also. They must be received as members of our Christian fellowship in no less a sense than all our brothers and sisters.”⁴⁹

6. Objections to infant baptism

The Baptist movement first objected to the baptism of infants in the Reformation and rightly opposed the baptism of all subjects of a “Christian State” as well as the Roman doctrine of baptism as effective in and of itself regardless of the faith of the

⁴⁷ Poythress, *Linking Small Children with Infants in the Theology of Baptizing*, 144

⁴⁸ Poythress, 147, 157

⁴⁹ Poythress, 151

recipient. However three strands of thinking in credo-baptist theology owe more to the prevailing attitudes of Reformation Europe than to the Scriptures.

Individualism

In reacting against the church and the state with which the church collaborated in corruption and political expediency, the culture of Reformation Europe reacted strongly against community and gave unprecedented power to the individual.

Tarnas comments that “the new value placed on individualism reinforced a ... personal sense of worth which rested on individual capacity. The medieval Christian ideal in which personal identity was largely absorbed in the collective Christian body faded.”⁵⁰

In the tradition of Thomistic thought a person’s value was found in their individual capacity. From such a perspective, a pre-rational and pre-articulate person is of diminished value within the community.

Within this context, a new and unfamiliar emphasis was placed on the importance of the individual’s experience of faith independent of community. The idea that one’s faith might rest on another was rejected. The possibility that an infant, who could not articulate faith without the assistance of others, might be baptised was considered either Roman superstition or vain hope.

Arminianism

Secondly, many in the credo-baptist movement have been influenced by Arminian theology. Influenced by the humanist movement which held to a high view of the human moral capacity, Arminius taught that humanity retained the power to choose whether to believe in Christ. In this way, God chooses none, but merely foresees those who will choose him. On this basis, the emphasis in baptism is firmly on the faith of the individual, or is shared between Christ’s work and that the work of the believer's faith.

Arminianism is also evident in the common claim of credo-baptists that baptising adult believers is better because they are more likely to be regenerate and to persevere. The underlying assumption is that an adult is more *able* to persevere. Of course, the perseverance of the saints, whether child or adult, rests entirely upon the grace of God at work in the person’s life and not in the strength of the baptismal confession.

On this basis a child, though old enough to be chosen, is not yet able to choose faith and so is excluded. Many within the Baptist church have rejected Arminianism for a more Reformed theology; however, the emphasis on the faith of the believer in baptism reflects the humanist tradition.

⁵⁰ Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind*, 227.

Experientialism

The Renaissance led to a renewed emphasis on experience. According to this perspective, an adult baptism in which the participant rationalises the experience is far preferable to the baptism of a child who cannot remember their baptism. The experience of the community is subordinated to that of the individual.

6.1 Modern credo-baptist theology

Even a cursory survey of modern credo-baptist theology and practice reveals the influence of Individualism, Arminianism and Experientialism:

Since by nature infants cannot have come to understand or embrace the reality of their own sin, or of the gracious redemptive work done in Christ, or of the necessity of faith apart from works to receive God's free gift of eternal life, that is, since infants cannot have any of this understanding or experience of regeneration or new life in Christ, they simply cannot be those for whom the reality of union with Christ is true. Baptism... must only be performed on those who have personally acknowledged their own sin and confessed personal faith in God.⁵¹

Credo-baptism... provides a young Christian a wonderful and sacred opportunity to certify personally and testify publicly of his own identity, now, as a follower of Christ. How rich and meaningful a believer's baptism is!⁵²

7. Why does the place of children matter?

One might ask whether it matters whether Christian children are baptised or not. A similar position argues that regardless of whether we raise our children as Christians or not, we still tell them about Jesus.

Firstly, it matters because it says something about God. As BB Warfield put it: "God established His Church in the days of Abraham and put children into it. They must remain there until he puts them out. He has nowhere put them out."⁵³

If God, by his promise, has placed children in his church and family, who are we to put them out? And on what basis? Is God not able to save children? Is God not willing to save children? That God is both able, willing and, indeed, promises to do so, says something wonderful about the grace of our God. It is to God's glory that he saves the smallest and most vulnerable of people. The place of children in the church matters because the glory of God matters. It matters because the Kingdom of God belongs to children.

Secondly it matters, because it says something about our children. If we teach our children that they are not, or only provisionally, part of God's redeemed people, we

⁵¹ Bruce A. Ware, *Baptism: 3 Views*, 1595-1607

⁵² Bruce A. Ware, *Baptism: 3 Views*, 640-50

⁵³ B. B. Warfield in *Baptism: 3 Views* 1432-43

communicate something detrimental to our children. Furthermore it shapes the way our children understand God.

To exclude any child by communicating that, “you are part of our family, but until you are old enough to talk and eat like an adult, you’re not allowed to eat with the rest of the family” or, “you are part of our family but you cannot bear the family name until you are old enough to understand the family history and can articulate your desire to bear the name” would be to do great harm to that child.

To exclude children from the Christian church, primarily expressed in withholding baptism and the Lord’s Supper from children, is to communicate something harmful and unbiblical. Only the cultural influences of Individualism, Arminianism and Experientialism challenge the consistent biblical testimony of including and valuing children.

Children are not provisional or partial members of God’s family, or worse outsiders until they are old enough to rationalise and articulate faith. They are co-heirs of the gracious and life giving promises of God. As such they are to be welcomed in baptism, included at the Lord’s table and are to participate fully in the life of the Christian family.

8. Pastoral conclusions

Firstly, we should continue to pray for the children of our church. If it is only by the grace of God and his faithfulness that our children are part of His family, let us not presume upon his grace. Pray that the Holy Spirit would continue to work in their hearts that they might grow in their knowledge and love of the Lord.

Secondly, we should seek to include our children in the life of the church. For instance, in addition to Baptism, children ought to be included in family devotions and parents ought to take the initiative in both reading the Scriptures their children, even from infancy, as well as praying with and on behalf of the whole family. Children ought also be included, as is the case at St Barnabas Anglican Church, Broadway, in participating with their biological and spiritual family in the sacramental Supper. As one might expect with any family meal, there are both necessary rules governing the behaviour of the children, but also the community extends grace and patience whilst the little ones grow in manners and maturity. We often exclude the youngest members of the church, such as those in crèche, from participating in the life of the church *because they are too young to understand*. However our strengthened understanding of community and sharing faith allows us to see the value for the children and the church of including even infants. Every member of the church depends upon God and one another.

Thirdly, we need to teach our children. Under the Old Covenant children who were circumcised and participated fully in the Passover were expected to ask the meaning of the meal (Exod. 12:26). Similarly the parents were to teach the children what it means to live as a member of God’s people (Deut. 4:9-10, 11:19). Paul continues this expectation in Ephesians 6:1-4. Our whole family has graciously received the promises of God; we are called to grow together.

Finally, let us rejoice that the Lord takes great pleasure in welcoming children into the family of God. And perhaps our searching questions should be directed at those who provide wise and learned arguments for questioning the place of children in Christ's church.

At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. (Luke 10:21)