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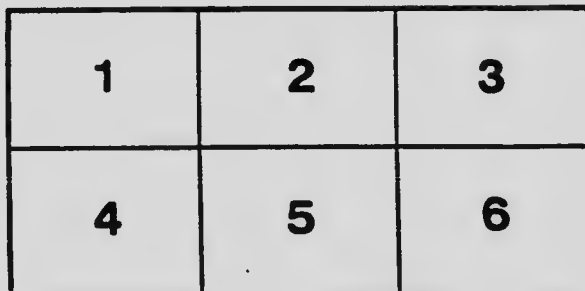
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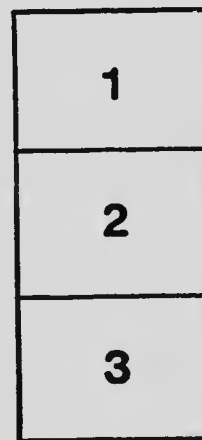
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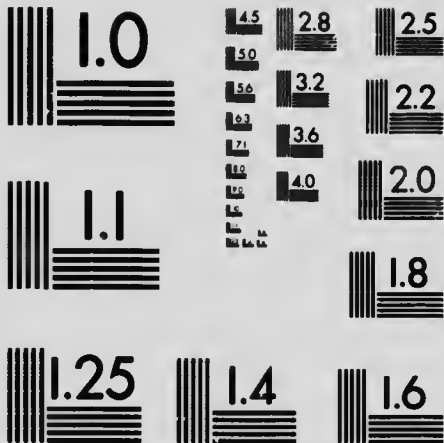
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**The Scriptural Relation  
of Children to the  
Church of Christ**

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By  
**REV. WILLIAM McDONAGH**  
METHODIST MINISTER

*Read before a Con-  
vention of Minis-  
ters, and requested  
by them to be pub-  
lished*

Toronto  
**WILLIAM BRIGGS**  
1906



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## THE SCRIPTURAL RELATION OF CHILDREN TO THE CHURCH OF CHRIST.

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In the discussion of the subject placed at the head of this paper, it seems necessary at once to take into account the scriptural statement of man's fallen condition morally on entrance into life in this world. The Word of God most clearly indicates that man is born into this world with certain moral disabilities and sinfulness. The Bible asserts that we are born in sin and shapen in iniquity, which no mere human contrivance can eradicate. This doctrine is accepted by all evangelical Christians as a fundamental teaching of the Word of God. The first dogma of the European socialists, communists and anarchists is that the nature of man is all right, and that his external condition is all wrong. Radical infidelity, no matter by what name it is known, denies the sinfulness of mankind, and tends to opposition to all law and

government. That the depravity of human nature is derived from a superhuman source and universal is clearly stated in such passage as Genesis 3 and Ps. 14:2, 3; 51:5; 53:1-3; Js. 53:6; Rom. 3:9-12; 2 Cor. 5:14; Eph. 2:2, 3; 1 John 5:19, and these are but a few of the passages from the Holy Scriptures to which we might refer in support of the doctrine of the original depravity of man. The universal experience of mankind but confirms this doctrine of the Word of God. That this evil or sinful condition of the human race does not arise primarily from any vicious environment, although sometimes strengthened by such social surroundings, is clearly proven by human experience. It therefore cannot be remedied by the mere force of personal choice and effort under right social influences. This statement is proved true by all experience and the contrary as false in theory as in practice. Sinfulness, as this depravity is everywhere termed in Scripture, is always represented to be the condition of our race apart from the change effected in the moral nature by the grace of God. But the question here arises, When does the grace of God, by the atonement of Jesus Christ, touch humanity and as efficient help be brought to bear on the whole race through this atonement? Through what channel does it come, and does it reach and bring spiritual life to the dead moral nature of men? Does it reach us through baptism or through any other merely human instrumentality or act? Is the contact direct and unconditional in its benefits to the children of our race

in a state of nature? Are children represented as outside the Church of God and belonging to the world and sin until by repentance and faith in Christ they are rescued and saved? Or are they reckoned in Scripture as a part of the Kingdom of Christ on earth and in His Church in their infancy? Are they not spoken of as alive to Christ and partakers in covenant relation with God's people in His Church? Or are they counted as unfit for such privileges?

These are important enquiries and demand from us as Christians the most serious examination. In looking over these questions, we are compelled by the force of truth to accept the doctrine as clearly taught in Scripture, that children even before their birth belong to Christ and are born in a state of salvation. As soon as life and distinct entity comes as human beings, so soon does the exercise of redeeming grace reach them in salvation. Says the Psalmist: "Thou didst make me to hope on my mother's breast," "Thou art my God from before the birth." If by breach of law through the first Adam sin passed over on the children of our race, by so much more does grace pass over on them by the second Adam to salvation and justification of life. And as sin passed over on our children unconditionally and without free choice on their part, so does the merit of the atonement reach them unconditionally to salvation through the second Adam, the Lord Jesus Christ. The very existence of childhood, and, by consequence, of the race, is due to the atonement of Jesus Christ. It is

only necessary, without tracing the connection, to assert that, as the Apostle most distinctly affirms, sin became a curse to the whole of mankind by the transgression of the first man of our race. But Paul, also, asserts that the saving benefits of the atonement of Jesus Christ are as broad as the ruin wrought. If original sinfulness of nature affects the infants of our race, much more the saving benefits of salvation pass over to the infants of the race. See Romans 5:12-21 for the argument of the Apostle on this question. Such also are the resurrection privileges broadly stated by Paul to belong to humanity, and by consequence to the infants of our race who may have passed away out of this life in the early morning of their existence here. See 1 Cor. 15:45. No other application of the Apostle's argument seems to us at all admissible.

It must be borne in mind, however, that we are here speaking of the unconditional bestowments of the blessing of the atonement as they reach the child and affect it prior to the time of accountability. We are not here speaking of those who have sinned by the exercise of free choice and free will; such can only be saved conditionally by repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Our present argument is to show what we consider to be the unconditional effects of gospel grace on the infant and irresponsible portion of our race. Again we refer the candid reader to the 5th chapter of Romans for the whole Apostolic argument on this most interesting, and to us most important,

teaching on the subject of infant salvation. We would also refer even to higher authority on the teaching of this subject—we refer to the teaching of the Saviour Himself in the 18th chapter of Matthew, from the first to the end of the fourteenth verse, where infants are presented to us as the best samples of what the Christian life should be here on earth before the world. The uniform use of the word “child,” and also of the qualifying word in Greek, “*mickron*,” is decisive proof that in the passage referred to our Lord meant to teach the saved relation of children to Himself. Steir, in his great work on the words of the Lord Jesus in the passage referred to, says, that where the Lord speaks of receiving such little children in His name, He means admitting them to the membership of His Church and the brotherhood of believers. And if not, how is the receiving of them to be understood? In verse 6 of this same 18th chapter of Matthew, we are most earnestly warned against offending one of these little ones, and in the 10th verse our Lord declares that it is not the will of God that one of these little ones should perish. Also in the nineteenth chapter and fourteenth verse again the Saviour says, “Suffer the little children, and forbid them not to come unto me, for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven.” Children, infants in a state of acceptance regenerated and saved, let them belong to My body, which is the Church, our Lord Himself using the word *Church* and the phrase Kingdom of Heaven interchangeably in the 16th chapter of Matthew.

May we ask, then, what is the spiritual state of children as taught in the Word of God?

1. It is declared they are justified. See Rom. 5: 16, 17, 18.

2. They are declared partakers of the grace of God and the gifts of righteousness. See Rom. 5: 15, 17.

3. They are declared righteous through the merits of Christ the Restorer. See Rom. 5: 19.

4. Partakers of the life of justification or that life that comes with justification. See the same reference.

5. They belong to the Kingdom of Heaven. Matt. 19: 14.

6. Children are to be received in Christ's name. See Matt. 18: 5.

7. It is not God's will that one of these little ones should perish, and the Church is warned not to set lightly by them. Matt. 18: 10.

8. By the same Scriptures they are declared to be special objects of Divine care and regard. "Their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in Heaven."

It seems to have been Mr. Wesley's doctrine that infants born into this world are regenerated by the grace and Spirit of God. In his sermon on the "new birth" he says a man may be born of water and not be born of the Spirit; there may be the outward sign where there is not the inward grace. "I do not now," he says, "speak of infants. . . . It is certain," he says, "our Church" (meaning, of course, the Church of

England) “regards all children that are baptized in a state of grace or regeneration.” That we cannot comprehend how this work of grace is wrought in the infant nature is no valid objection to the doctrine, for neither can we comprehend how it is wrought in persons of riper years. The entrance of the redemptive power within the soul is termed “being born again,” or being born from above, a quickening or rising of a new life in the soul by direct origination of the Divine Spirit—a new creation of life within the heart which was spiritually dead. It follows, then, that in the act of regenerating the subject is passive in the change wrought, and even it may be at the time unconscious of the implantation of this new life until it is manifest by action on its surroundings. The word used by our Lord in John 3:3 and succeeding verses in describing the new birth is a word literally expressive of the *beginnings of life*, or being brought into life. All spiritual salvation is of this nature. It is the renewing of life by the power of the Holy Ghost. The word “life” itself is often used in the Scripture to denote the great spiritual fitness for meeting God and obtaining heaven which it was the end of Christ’s death and mediation to accomplish in the human soul. See 1 John 5:12 and 3:14, also Gospel by John 5:24.

Here we would protest against the word *regeneration* being confounded with baptism; the two words are neither synonymously employed in the Bible, nor do they imply one and the same experience in the

heart. Man may administer such a rite as baptism by water, but it has no efficacy in regenerating the soul or imparting new spiritual life. Neither the doctrine of the disciples nor the baptismal regeneration of parties in the Church of England can for a moment be sustained by the word of God in the Scriptures. Such is the work of the Divine Spirit alone, and does not depend on any ceremonials of man for its impartation. The child in a state of salvation is not in such state because of innocency or freedom from actual sin wilfully committed against law of God, but because, inheriting depravity, it has been redeemed from that curse of the fall by the merit and saving efficacy of the atonement by the death of Christ, this salvation reaching it by the power of the Holy Ghost in life-giving energy.

The phrase, "new creature," too, is of the same moral significance as the word *regeneration*, and how aptly does it include infants! "If any man be in Christ he is a new creature," 2 Cor. 5:17. Are children in Christ, as the Scriptures teach they are, then the point is settled, they are new creatures. Why then dispute about words? Their spiritual nature being morally dead, by reason of the fall of man, all saving grace to them must be of the nature of the impartation of spiritual life, a restoring, a renewing and a creating anew in Christ Jesus. It is true that in the adult, who wilfully and voluntarily chooses to break the law of God, this change must come by repentance and faith, as we have taught above, and this



repentance and faith are wrought in him by the Word of God. "Of his own will begat he us by the word of God." 1 Peter 1:23. Paul says to the believing Corinthians, "I have begotten you through the gospel." See 1 Cor. 4:15. Here is a new birth belonging to and being wrought in the adults, and it is shown in the moral dispositions and character in such a form as infants are incapable of manifesting. But does this fact prove that in infants there cannot, and does not, exist a principle of Divine life imparted to the child graciously begotten within him by the Holy Ghost? A renewing power of the same quality and nature as in the adult, and, as we have shown, from the same source of life, differing, it may be, in extent and force, but not in essence or efficacy if they are called out of time by death. If then, the grace that prepares a dying child for heaven, as it does, amounts to regeneration, which we believe it does, there is no proof that the grace which quickens the living child can be any less than moral and spiritual life also. From this state of grace, then, we argue, arises the true relation of the child to the Church as a member of the Church of Christ. The Church of Christ on earth is a Divine provision and organization for the preservation, encouragement, and extension of piety in the earth. It is morally and organically different from all other communities of men, as none but such as are in a state of salvation or adults seeking this salvation are of right its lawful members. So all, without distinction of age or sex, who are in this state of grace be-

long really to the Church of Christ or should be admitted to its privileges as they are fitted for or are capable of enjoying them. Wherever there is saving grace to be preserved, souls in a penitent state to be watched over and led to Christ, the Church has a duty to perform, and her lines should extend to take all such, young and old. The Church is simply the visible form, or as one has it, the militant form of God's great family on the earth. And to say that no children should be admitted into His household is to violate almost every precept and example he has left for our guidance in His Word. The design of God we take from His Word to be in accordance with the constitution of His Church, viz., that children are lawful members of it unless you can prove that infants stand in no saved relation to Jesus Christ. All who are in Christ have a real and spiritual connection with His body, which is the Church. See Eph. 1:22, and 4:15 and 16; also 5:23 and 24; Coll. 1:18. This doctrine runs all through the New Testament. Those who are fit for heaven and belong to Christ in a spiritual sense belong to His body, which Paul declares to be made up of such as have their names enrolled in the book of life.

The Christian church at Jerusalem certainly held to infant Church membership, and this is fully proved by the fact that they practised circumcision until about the year seventy of the Christian era; and this Jerusalem church was held as a model church up to the time of the destruction of the city in the year 70.

The Jewish converts were never required to exclude their infant children from the privileges of the Christian Church and covenant. Hence no controversy was in any way started in the early age of the Church calling in question the Church membership of the infant children of Christian families. When the first intimations of controversy arose at the close of the 2nd century, Tertullian never once hinted that the Church membership of children was not scriptural or right, or had not Apostolic authority. His whole opposition arose from the heretical notion which began to pervade the Church in that early day, namely, that baptism by water washed away sins, and that, therefore, it might be better to defer baptism until later on in life, when passion and appetite had died out of the person in a great measure, so that they might not again fall away from the grace of the baptismal rite conferred. We believe it to be the cause of great mistakes and stumbling in the bringing up of households and faith in the work of the Christian Church the lack of clear views of duty and of the nature and force of Scripture teaching in relation to the Church membership of infant children. The doctrine comes up now and then merely for a passing notice, and admitted by some as important, and then is swept aside again as an investigation not worth the trouble of research or examination. Then there comes in the hobby of denominational prejudice, with all its sharpness and touchiness, to bar a positive statement of doctrine on the subject. The result is that in some Churches chil-

dren are not instructed by their parents as they should be that they are members of Christ's Church on earth by covenant right, nor are they taught by parents and the Church in the knowledge of the duties involved in such relation to God and His Church. Infant children are related to Christ and His Church virtually, vitally, and really, by the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. But an impression seems to prevail that the Church membership of children differs some way and in some manner essentially from that of an adult member; that after reaching responsibility in years the believing disciple, who was baptized in infancy, still requires another process in order to admission into the Church of God.

In reference to the subject under discussion we are compelled to say, in the language of a late writer on Church creeds and symbols of faith, or forms of Church ritual, as special covenant obligations in order to membership in denominations, such as the branches of the Church catholic may adopt, are only their views of Bible doctrine on this subject and can be only applied as prudential tests of fitness for adult membership. They do not admit to a new Church different from that to which the infant child is admitted by baptism, and, as to the adult, are only supposed to be tests of the condition of personal responsibility to which the individual may have attained. The child which has been admitted to the same Church with the adult believer is entitled to all the rights and privileges of such membership which the age and capacity

of the child may warrant and require to aid and develop its religious life. It may be well upon reaching years of responsibility for itself, *pro forma*, to take upon itself, under proper regulations, before the Church the obligations which such membership may involve to the adult in the changed condition of its responsibility. The only difference, then, we can see between children and adult membership in the Church lies in the circumstances of their life, as to age, and not in the nature or validity of their Church relation. Nor is there any absurdity in this doctrine owing to the incapacity of the child to understand and perform the adult duties of such membership, any more than that its incapacity to perform family adult duties should be a bar to its membership in the family long before it is able to understand and perform household duties. The same is true in regard to its citizenship. The child has an admitted claim before the law to protection even before its birth, and afterwards to life and property long before it is capable of understanding any of those privileges, or of assuming the responsibilities or duties of citizenship. The real character of a citizen does not imply the full and complete exercise of all responsible rights as such, but only in measure as the wants of the child and nature of the case may demand.

The analogy is complete and full. The child is a citizen of the New Jerusalem by authority of Jesus Christ, and as such has its inalienable rights of membership in the Church of God. The learned editor of

Calmet's Dictionary of the Bible, a standard authority, tells us that children were acknowledged members of the Jewish Church. None, we presume, with the history of that Church before them, will have the temerity to deny this fact. In that Church children at an early age, say, three years, were admitted to the Temple worship. See 1 Samuel 1:28; 2 Tim. 3:15. Timothy, from a child, knew the Scriptures, which were able to make him wise unto salvation. We think Paul would not have withheld baptism from Timothy because of childish age, but would have at once acknowledged the grace of God in him and given Timothy the outward sign of that inward grace which God had given the child, which at once would have admitted him into the Church of God. In the Apostolic Church, men, however, and children, who were members of the Christian Church, had special appellations given them signifying such membership. They were termed holy persons. St. Paul confessed that before his conversion, "many of the holy persons he had shut up in prison." See Acts 26:10. He afterwards speaks of such with great respect. "I go to minister in Jerusalem to the holy persons," he says. See Rom. 15:25. In dedicating his letters, he says, "To the holy persons in Ephesus," "To the holy persons in Colosse," "To all the holy persons in Philippi." Thus he gives them an appellation which we are most surely informed was alone given to members of the Church. This appellation was given to children as members, as well as to the adults, in Paul's day, as they were

reckoned members with their parents. See 1 Cor. 7: 14. "Now are your children holy." The ancient Father Tertullian declares that the children of Christian parents are "holy," that is, were accounted members of the Christian Church, too. The fact is indisputable that the above appellation was given to children as baptized members of the primitive Church. This fact is proved beyond question by the following inscriptions from ancient authorities and from the catacombs of Rome. A few extracts out of many we might give will be found sufficient.

Maurentias. Son of Maurentia, a most pleasing child, who lived five years, eleven months and two days, worthy to repose among the "holy persons" in peace.

Sacred to the great God. Leopardus rests here in peace with the "Holy Spirits." Having received baptism, he went to the blessed innocents.

Julia reposes in peace among the "holy persons," the appellation proving, by the terms "in peace" and "holy," that she had been a member of the Christian Church, as these terms were used and understood by St. Paul.

The appellation "faithful" was given as denoting membership in the Apostolic Church. This name for a member of the Church was more extensively and permanently used than the other. The term was applied to individuals in the singular—to Timothy, to Onesimus, to Silvanus and probably to others. See 1 Cor. 4:17; Eph. 4:21; Col. 4:9; 1 Pet. 5:12.

The mother of Timothy is called a "faithful." Acts 16: 1, *pistes*, not an adjective, but an appellative noun.

What concord hath Christ with Belial, what part hath a "faithful" with a non-faithful, or as we would say, what part hath a member with a non-member? 2 Cor. 6: 15. "If any faithful man, or faithful woman, *pistos* or *piste* have widows, let such receive them, that the Church be not charged." 1 Tim. 5: 16.

It is also applied in the plural. They of the circumcision "faithfuls," *pistoi*, who came with Peter were astonished. Acts 10: 45. *Again*. Those servants who have masters that are "faithful," *pistous*, despise them not, because they are brethren. 1 Tim. 6: 2. *Again*. Let no man despise thy youth, but be thou an example to the "faithfuls," that is to the members of the Church. See 1 Tim. 4: 12. *Again*. The things thou hast heard of me commit thou to "faithful" men. 2 Tim. 2: 2. *Again*. He is Lord of lords and King of kings, and they who are with Him are called and chosen and "faithfuls." See Rev. 17: 14.

The Apostle Paul used this appellation to churches. See Eph. 1: 1. Paul to the holy persons who are at Ephesus and to the "faithfuls," *pistois*, in Christ Jesus.

Paul to the "holy persons in Collose and to the 'faithfuls,' *pistois*, in Christ."

A most remarkable instance is that of Lydia in her address to Paul and Silas at Philippi: "She besought us saying, since you have adjudged me to be a 'faith-



ful,' *pistin*, come into my house and abide." In this passage the appellation "faithful" is so strongly connected with the term baptism as even to be interchangeable with it, for the sense would be the same if you substituted the word *baptism* for the word "faithful." It amounts to just the same in meaning.

This appellation was used in Scripture to children who were baptized and members of the Church. Describing the character of a bishop, says Paul to Titus, "He must be the husband of one wife, having children who are faithfuls." See Titus 1: 6. This passage is decisive. The word here for children is *tekna*, and signifies a child or children—minors in all stages from infancy all through minority in all stages.

Another form of this word comes in another way in the Word of God. Whole families are termed "faithfuls." The church which was in the house of Priscilla and Aquila were "baptized" or "faithful," for they had become a church of Christ. See Rom. 16: 3-5. The Greek socialists and the learned Gratius say that the term "church" here signifies the whole family had become members of the Church and therefore had the term applied to them.

Again, the following inscriptions from ancient Christian tombs will illustrate the practice and belief of the primitive Church better than any further statement I can make.

Cyriacus.—A "faithful," died at eight days less than three years old.

Eustaffia.—The mother places this in commemora-

tion of her son Polichrohia, a "faithful" who lived three years.

Urcia Foentina, a "faithful," rests here in peace. She lived five years, eight months and eight days.

The sepulchre of the twin brothers, Aleihous and Alexander, their cousin, three "faithfuls," of twelve years old, erected by their mother Premissa, with the Fishes.

By the name *Fishes* the most ancient Christians were accustomed to express the name of Christ the Lord. This is according to the testimony of Augustine—Prosper-Optatus,—Milvianns and others.

One inscription more will prove that the term "faithful" was continued and applied to children for several centuries:

"Here lies the body of Maria, daughter of John, who was of the Tower of Nicerata. She lived three years, three months and a half a "faithful." She died in the fourth day of the month Zantieus under the consulship of the Princes Honorius the eleventh and Constantius the second."

This term "faithful" continued to denote Church membership from Apostolic days, and it denoted clearness from the censure of the world, and that as members of the Church, children as such, men or women, were worthy of the appellation "faithful."

Another term used very much among the primitive Christians for children as members of the Church was *neophytos*, that is, one newly planted. See 1 Tim. 3:6. In this translation the word *novice* is

used, but in the original Scriptures the word signifying *new planted* is employed. To be termed a "neo-phite" was to imply that a person or child was recently baptized and admitted as a member of the church. That children were thus planted early or baptized we read from the inscriptions on their tombs.

Rufillon.—New baptized, who lived two years and forty days.

Quintilion.—The father inscribes this to the memory of his son, who sleeps in peace in Christ.

To Damitius.—An innocent, new baptized, who lived three years and thirty days.

We have now in this paper illustrated the work and faith of the first Christian or Apostolic churches in regard to the membership of children in the Church of the first centuries. And we have submitted these with the hope that in the discussion of this subject we might be able to draw attention to the great fact and importance of the doctrine of childhood salvation and Church membership so little studied by the modern Churches of Christ, and by some theorists disputed for denominational ends and purposes. The salvation and Church membership of children as taught in the Scriptures and practised by the primitive Church is a doctrine of far-reaching importance to the welfare and prosperity of our Methodist families and Church.

We cannot extend this already too lengthy paper in order to discuss the methods which we think God in His Church has made available to the children of our people as members of the Church of Christ. Such

methods are worthy of the most careful thought and attention by both ministers and people. We trust and hope that the commission of our Lord to Peter, renewed once more to His ministers and pastors, "Feed My lambs," will be more earnestly heeded. This was put designedly in the possessive case by Christ; they were already His lambs. John, the beloved disciple, does not leave us to infer how he esteemed children in the Church of God, nor does he leave us to infer what he thought of their spiritual condition, but tells us in one of his letters that he wrote to little children because their sins were forgiven them for Christ's sake.

Thus it appears to us from every source of information from which we can find the mind of God and His Church on this subject, that it is the duty of the Church to recognize the covenant relation of children to the Church, to co-operate with Christian parents in our Church in teaching their children that they belong to Christ, that they belong to the Church, and show them their obligation to God and His cause throughout the world, through the atonement which Christ made on Calvary for them.

Hoping that the attention of our people may be drawn to this subject, we have brought these thoughts before you. May the great Head of His Church lead His people aright on this subject.



