

CHAPTER 6

A DEBTOR TO COVENANT RELATIONSHIPS

WIMBERLY JOHNSON

When our son, Kevin, was born, the pediatrician told Charlie and me, “He has some features that often indicate a genetic disorder.” With that conversation, our world came crashing down, and we were terrified. In the months that followed, our church family rallied around us as we received diagnoses and learned more about Kevin’s medical needs. There were so many people praying for us, bringing our names before the Throne, and claiming truth for us when we couldn’t see past our fear and exhaustion. I am truly a debtor to these covenant relationships.

The more I’ve pondered this, I’ve realized that my debt goes back long before Kevin was born. It goes all the way back to my baptism into the covenant community in which I grew up, to men and women who said “we will” to assisting my parents in my Christian nurture. This meant telling me all that my baptism signified, that all the promises of God were mine by faith in Jesus. So, it was Sunday school teachers, children’s ministry and youth volunteers, and countless others who simply chose to be present and invest in me, who told me over and over that God is good and trustworthy and that I belong to Him, that He loves and delights in me, that He is for me and He is with me.

So, when suffering came, God in His grace had given me a foundation in His Word and character to fall on and be carried by. I knew how to understand my story in light of God’s bigger story of creation and the redemption of all things. I knew how to pray and dig deeply

into God's Word and rely on God's people because that had been modeled for me many times before. I knew He had not stopped being good to me, and more than that, would not stop being good to our children, even in their suffering. I have had these truths to cling to because God in His grace placed me in a covenant community who taught me and showed me how to do that.

God has been kind to give Kevin to our family and to show us more of Himself through his life, but kinder still in uniting us to Himself and to His people who show us His love and care daily. What riches are ours in Christ!

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HOME AND CHURCH

And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

– GENESIS 17:7

Wimberly's story is what we want for our covenant children, but often we are shocked when children in our family and church leave home and leave church. No matter how many new converts we bring in the front door, if we lose our children out the back door, we are missing the starting point of Covenant theology. Kevin DeYoung writes,

In simplest terms, a covenant is a contract, an agreement between two or more parties. Marriage is the most familiar example in our culture, but almost anything that requires two signatures can be considered a kind of covenant. . . . Whenever we have legally binding agreements, we have covenants.

Covenants in the Bible, however, are about more than contracts. They are about people. *A covenant is a commitment that establishes a relationship between two or more persons.*

Covenant theology means that God has entered into a relationship with you and with your children. God does not deal with us only as individuals; our God is a God of families. . . . Covenant theology reminds us that God wants to see faith in

you and in your children. There is more to the covenant than external privileges and legal obligations. The things signified should become, by faith, the things internalized.¹

We are not the authors of the story God is writing in our children's lives, but we can be diligent in praying and trusting God's promises.

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The world cannot offer the inheritance we have to give to our children. The world holds out a lie. We have truth. The world cannot deliver on its promises. Our God is a promise-keeper. The world cannot offer the love and security of a worshiping, joyful, prayerful, intergenerational covenant community where our children are known, loved,

and continually assured they belong. The world cannot offer discipleship that shows and tells them how to think biblically and live covenantally as they navigate the realities of living in a fallen world.

The balance between home and church is delicate. It's easy to lose our equilibrium. Some drift toward a casual approach to church attendance. This is heard in comments such as "We missed church Sunday because we needed a family outing. It was a beautiful day, so we went on a picnic," or "We haven't found a church we like, and anyway our family prefers watching a worship service online and then going out for brunch," or "Our Sunday schedule is busy, so we have our own church service on the way to the ballfield."

This approach seems to forget God's command to "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy" (Ex. 20:8). It forgets His promise that "If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you

1 Kevin DeYoung, "Afterword: Why Covenant Theology?" in *Covenant Theology: Biblical, Theological, and Historical Perspectives*, eds. Guy Prentiss Waters, J. Nicholas Reid, and John R. Muether (Crossway, 2020), 589, 598 (emphasis his).

please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the LORD's holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride in triumph on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob" (Isa. 58:13-14 NIV). Families worshiping and serving the God of glory together is the most joyful and exhilarating experience we can give our children.

On the other end of the spectrum are congregations who have an unwritten but well-known list of child-rearing rules and methods they believe everyone in the community must follow. An environment develops where everyone has the same dress code, follows the same dietary regimen, educates their children the same way, and assumes those who make other choices are not spiritual. Oppressive uniformity is not unity.

Maintaining family/church balance is not a one-time decision. It is the ongoing process of sanctification. We will make huge blunders along the way, but we must continually pray for wisdom to understand our covenant privileges and responsibilities before God and to one another.

A COVENANT CHILD

The Westminster Larger Catechism:

Q. 166. Unto whom is baptism to be administered?

A. Baptism is not to be administered to any that are out of the visible church, and so strangers from the covenant of promise, till they profess their faith in Christ, and obedience to him; but infants descending from parents, either both or but one of them, professing faith in Christ, and obedience to him, are in that respect within the covenant, and to be baptized.

Charles Hodge wrote,

In the sight of God parents and children are one. The former are the authorized representatives of the latter; they act for them; they contract obligations in their name. In all cases, therefore, where parents enter into covenant with God, they bring their children with them. . . . And so when a believer adopts the covenant of grace, he brings his children within that covenant, in the sense that God promises to give them, in his own good time, all the benefits of redemption, provided they do not willingly renounce their baptismal engagements.²

Covenant children are entitled to the benefits of hearing God's Word in the context of loving relationships in the home and church, prayer, and the blessed privilege of growing up as a part of the community of faith as they participate in church life from infancy.

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Pastor Robert S. Rayburn wrote,

I recently attended a church growth seminar. Listed as topics for possible consideration were more than a dozen subjects bearing on ways and means to enlarge the church. Conspicuous by its absence was any mention of anything having to do with the birth and subsequent nurture of the church's children, even though it is easy to prove that since the church's beginning in Eden and still today the primary instrument of her growth has been that of covenant succession. . . .

2 Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Eerdmans, 1991), 555.

Everywhere in the Bible the Lord declares it to be his purpose that Christian marriages produce a holy seed (Mal. 2:15). One of the primary features of the covenant the Lord established with his people is that it embraces families and has always in view the continuation of its saving blessing for generations to come. . . .

It must be plainly stated that the promise made to the children of the covenant is not that of a special status of privilege but is precisely the promise of the gospel, eternal life in heaven. . . . The covenant which thus embraces the children with their believing parents is the covenant of grace.

That the Lord should so direct his saving love down the lines of generations is only to be expected of a Father who knows what it is to love a son and to suffer a son to fall under the divine wrath and who teaches his own children that “everyone who loves the father loves his child as well” (1 John 5:1). It is only to love his people genuinely and deeply that the Father should also love their children . . . Christian parents do not imagine themselves to be populating hell when they bring sons and daughters into the world! Their hope and expectation are otherwise (Ps. 90:16). It is a true Father and a perfect fatherly love that made and then so often repeated the promise to be God to his people and to their children.³

The promises are undeniable.

Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations (Deut. 7:9).

³ Robert S. Rayburn, “The Doctrines of Covenant Children, Covenant Nurture, and Covenant Succession,” *Presbyterian: Covenant Seminary Review*, Vol. 22, no. 2 (Fall 1996), 76-108.

For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations (Ps. 100:5).

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

The responsibilities are also undeniable.

“Only take care, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. Make them known to your children and your children’s children” (Deut. 4:9).

One generation shall commend your works to another and shall declare your mighty acts (Ps. 145:4).

Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph. 6:4).

Baptism does not guarantee salvation. Each child must ratify the covenant by trusting Jesus as his/her Savior. There may not be a specific event the child can recall as the moment of conversion. A “Timothy testimony” of knowing the Scriptures from infancy (2 Tim. 3:14) is normative for a covenant child. But it must be personal.

In my church, when children are baptized, our pastor personalizes the questions rather than asking us to simply answer “I do.”

Do you as a congregation undertake the responsibility of assisting _____ and _____ in the Christian nurture of their child?

_____ and _____, we promise to help you raise your child in the fear and admonition of the Lord.

These vows run deep. This is what it looks like for one young family in our church:

The baptismal promise to help one another raise our children “in the fear and admonition of the Lord” was an inconceivable concept for me. Honestly, I assumed it was more of a pleasantry—something people say but never actually do.

Our five-year old son Levi is a brilliant child who has ADHD and struggles with emotional regulation. Some days he becomes so dysregulated that one issue can cause a multi-hour episode. We usually want to hide on those days. I’m the Music Director at our church and need to be there early on Sundays, so my husband brings the children. One Sunday I received a text from him. It was one of those days. He didn’t want to come. Frustrated, I sought out Kris, one of my spiritual mothers, and explained the situation. It would have been easy for her to say encouraging words and move on, but she responded, “Bring him to me.” My husband arrived, took Levi to Kris, and the service started. I was thankful but unprepared for what God was about to allow me to witness.

Just before playing the offertory, I looked up from the piano and saw my son sitting between Kris and her husband. He was calm, but that was not what struck me. I saw Kris and Keith looking down at Levi smiling. They loved him. I saw the baptismal promise being kept. These two older church members stepped in for exasperated parents and a struggling little boy. They didn’t just encourage us to push through; they stepped in and carried us.⁴

4 Used with permission from Christian and Rebecca Michelson, Grace Covenant PCA, Dallas, GA.

TIMOTHY'S STORY

Timothy was a covenant child. His father was not a Christian, but remarkably his mother and grandmother were believers who taught him God's Word from childhood (2 Tim. 3:14-15). When Paul visited Lystra and Iconium, Timothy was "well-spoken of by the brothers" (Acts 16:2), and Paul invited him to join their missionary team. It's intriguing that they recommended the young man to the great apostle. Obviously, they knew him well. My imagination is stoked.

Was there an elder who had taken Timothy along when he visited the sick and explained that the covenant community is compassionate because Jesus is compassionate?

Was there a deacon who had asked Timothy to help him when he visited a widow and did repairs on her home, and asked the woman to pray for Timothy?

Was there a Christian dad who had included Timothy when he took his sons fishing and taught them God's design and calling for men?

Was there a group of older women who had prayed for the children and youth of their church family?

We don't know, but we do know that soon Paul also spoke well of Timothy. He referred to him as "my true child in the faith" (1 Tim. 1:2), "my beloved child" (2 Tim. 1:2), "my fellow worker" (Rom. 16:21), and "our brother" (Heb. 13:23). And consider what Paul wrote to the Philippians:

I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel (Phil. 2:19-22).

Timothy is genuinely concerned for your welfare . . . Others seek their own interests. Self-centeredness is not new to our time in history. It is the inclination of the human heart. The contrast clearly reveals the reference point, authority, and purpose of Timothy's life, but the looming question is—where had Timothy learned to be genuinely concerned for the welfare of others? Surely the people who told him the gospel also showed him the gospel.

FAMILY RESPONSIBILITY TO THE CHURCH

In this discussion I defer to two godly pastors.

J. C. Ryle, an Anglican bishop of the nineteenth century, in a little booklet entitled *The Duties of Parents*, wrote:

Tell [your children] of the duty and privilege of going to the house of God and joining in the prayers of the congregation. Tell them that wherever the Lord's people are gathered together, there the Lord Jesus is present in an especial manner, and that those who absent themselves must expect, like the Apostle Thomas, to miss a blessing. Tell them of the importance of hearing the Word preached, and that it is God's ordinance for converting, sanctifying, and building up the souls of men. . . .

Do not allow them to grow up with a habit of making vain excuses for not coming. Give them plainly to understand, that so long as they are under your roof, it is the rule of your house for everyone in health to honour the Lord's house upon the Lord's Day, and that you reckon the Sabbath-breaker to be a murderer of his own soul.⁵

5 J. C. Ryle, *The Duties of Parents*. First printed by Wm. Hunt & Co., 1888. (Triangle Press, 1993), 14-15.

Dr. George Grant writes,

Our children depend not only on good marriages and caring homes for their health and well-being, but on sound churches as well. Our cultural agenda must not simply be one more conservative, deregulated, traditional-virtues, and community-based program. It must be forthrightly biblical. It must be rooted, not simply in family values, but in kingdom values. Children need good news. They need the Good News. . . .

We must immerse them in the life of the community of faith. We must provide them with all the blessings of the covenant. And that is a task that transcends mere hearth and home.

The church has the keys to the kingdom (Matt. 16:19), the power to bind and loose (Matt. 18:18). It will prevail over the very gates of hell (Matt. 16:18). It offers the Waters of Life (Rev. 22:17), the Bread of Life (John 6:35), and the Word of Life (John 1:1), because its Head is the Author of Life (Acts 17:25).

Our children need kingdom values no less than family values. And to that end, in the good providence of God, the church is Plan A. There is no Plan B.⁶

THE CHURCH'S RESPONSIBILITY TO FAMILIES

A word of caution: None of us should look at our church and say, "They don't do that." *We* are *they*. Every suggestion should cause us to examine our own heart and our participation in our church, not to see things someone else should do. If there are ideas that may be helpful, pray and ask the Lord to guide you.

⁶ George Grant, *Tabletalk*. (March 1996), 58-59.

Some Questions for a Church to Ask

- Is there ongoing prayer and discussion to intentionally consider if a culture is being cultivated where everyone—the single person, the child who is not from a Christian home, the youngest and the oldest, the active and the homebound—knows the goodness and beauty of belonging?
- Does the preaching and teaching ministry continually teach the theological reason for *why* we do *what* we do?
- Do the relationships of church leaders model servant leadership and covenant life?

Some Ideas to Discuss

Serve the LORD with gladness! . . . Enter His gates with thanksgiving . . . For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations (Ps. 100:2, 4-5).

Covenant community life begins with glad and grateful worship. When I was a little girl, the pastor and elders of our church entered the sanctuary from a door behind the pulpit. They looked very serious. To my child's eyes they looked angry. I did not know what they had been doing before they walked out, but I was afraid of them. Now I realize they had been praying, but I still wish they had looked at us and smiled so I would have known they were glad I was there. I'm happy that in my church now, before the children leave for children's church, our pastor calls them to the front, tells them God loves them and we love them, and prays for them. His delight in the children instructs our hearts, and as they walk down the center aisle everyone is smiling at them. These children are not afraid of the adults in our church.

In addition to Sabbath worship, providing resources for family worship that reinforce what is being taught at church equips parents to disciple their children at home.

Pray for one another (James 5:16).

Living covenantally flows from and should be protected by fervent prayer. Prayers from the pulpit for needs of the congregation, inter-generational opportunities for people to be matched to pray for one another, families praying for church members during family worship, and then prayers of thanksgiving for answered prayer, teach covenant children to depend on the Lord and to pray for their covenant family.

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive (Col. 3:12-13).

When repentance and forgiveness are taught and modeled by church leadership, it prepares people to handle conflicts, crises and disappointments biblically. Regular contact with an elder or deacon gives an opportunity to ask questions and to feel heard, seen, and included.

. . . through love serve one another (Gal. 5:13).

It is not enough to tell God's people to love each other. Discipleship includes providing opportunities for them to learn how to love and serve. Mobilizing children and adults to do yardwork for the elderly or for single moms, making birthday cards to send to children of missionaries supported by your church, volunteering to serve together at a community food ministry help cultivate a culture of serving in the church.

Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor . . . Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep (Rom. 12:10, 15).

When there are opportunities to provide meals for those who grieve and to celebrate weddings, new babies, graduations and 50th wedding anniversaries (perhaps with testimonies of the blessings of a long marriage), love is expressed and experienced. Baptisms and covenant children confirming the baptismal vows made by their parents by making their public profession of faith are joyful events to be celebrated by the covenant family.

Celebrations of God's covenant faithfulness to families are precious, but they are painful for Christian parents whose children are indifferent or rebellious toward

God. Christian parents and congregations must tenaciously hold onto God's promises and continue in prayer for the prodigal. Church must be a safe and caring place for parents of prodigals. This is what one young, single woman did to make it so in her church:

It is not enough to tell God's people to love each other. Discipleship includes providing opportunities for them to learn how to love and serve.

Most deep gospel connections begin with a "you too?!" As I wrestled with my sister's decision to live in an identity that was not endowed by her Creator, the Lord started bringing saints into my life who felt just as helpless. We wanted to *do* something to bring our loved ones back. We wanted the right words and loving actions to woo them to saving faith. All our *doing* only led to frustration and weariness. Our groanings were too deep for words. We began to gather as heartsick parents, siblings, singles, young adults, and teens to pray. We invited our congregation to submit the names of their prodigals in a prayer box. Every month, our Prodigal Prayer

Group meets to pray for each by name. After four years, we pray for over sixty names. Some come with dramatic stories. One card simply says, “my son,” vividly conveying the anguish of a parent’s heart. And so, we pray. We pray to the only One who has the power to do anything. We pray to our loving heavenly Father who is more eager than we are to pull out a robe of righteousness and a ring of redemption to welcome our wandering prodigals home.⁷

Church must also be a welcoming place for those not yet within the covenant circle. Remember, God said to Abraham, “I will bless you . . . so that you will be a blessing” (Gen. 12:2). And Jesus told His church, “Go . . . make disciples . . . baptizing them . . . teaching them” (Matt. 28:19-20). Not only are we to welcome them, but we are also to go find them. And when God saves a sinner, we celebrate them as an heir of the covenant, a child of the covenant.

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A covenantal church-growth strategy works from the *inside out*. It begins with a conviction that we are commanded to teach the next generation, and it translates into a substantive discipleship ministry and robust covenant life. It moves beyond trying to find warm bodies to keep the nursery to energized, covenant people traditionalizing covenant life to the next generation. When unbelievers visit, they experience the reality of God’s presence with His people. They may not be able to

explain it, but it is palpable, and they cannot deny it. They will see God’s covenant people “Day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with

7 Used with permission from Amy Shore, Parish Presbyterian Church, Franklin TN.

glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:46-47).

CULTIVATING AN INTERGENERATIONAL DISCIPLESHIP CULTURE

REFLECTIONS FOR CHURCH LEADERS

STEPHEN ESTOCK

In Ephesians 3, Paul describes how the heavenly Father defines the character of “every family in heaven and on earth” (v.15). Since creation, the basic covenant community is a husband and wife. The community widens to include children. Family units come together to form church congregations. Congregations incorporate others beyond nuclear families (e.g., unmarried, widowed). These congregations are united by the Spirit to form the visible church. In each expression, God’s gracious character defines the context. He works in and through homes and churches. That reality shapes how leaders guide the community they serve.

In Romans 8:2-8, Paul describes how the flesh acts contrary to the Spirit. Bad models and sinful natures lead us to place less importance on the family. In the face of these challenges, church leaders persevere to promote family and community life. Some families will simply embrace cultural norms. Others will tend toward an unhealthy overcorrection where the family unit (father, mother, child[ren]) is viewed independent of a church family. Leaders rely on God’s Word and consistent living to encourage parents in the high calling of raising the next generation.

- Discuss ways your congregation intentionally encourages members to develop life patterns and relationships that honor God’s Word and celebrate family and church community.

- When recruiting people to serve, do you ask them to “fill open positions” or “invest in the lives of others”?
- In what ways do your leaders, especially elders and deacons, model servant leadership? What avenues exist for all generations to see the leaders as warm and welcoming?
- Discuss ways your leaders promote an atmosphere where *every* person knows the goodness of belonging to the congregation.

REFLECTIONS FOR INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES

KAREN HODGE

We all long to belong. Yet we live in a world where the US Surgeon General has declared an epidemic of loneliness. This insidious isolation is fueled by hyper-individualism. It is living our lives in a highly individualistic way without regarding others. The world applauds *self*-orientation: *self*-reliance, *self*-promotion, and *self*-centered behavior. In our sin, we prioritize “me” before “we.” The world offers “thin” versions of community online or around affinities that rarely go the distance. The only “not good” thing in the Garden was man’s being alone (Gen. 2:18), but this is not the covenant way! We were created for and crave to belong to “thick” or robust community. And here is good news the world is dying to hear: “God sets the lonely in families” (Ps. 68:6 NIV). Our biological and spiritual families are the spaces where “together with all the Lord’s holy people, [we] grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ” (Eph. 3:18 NIV).

- Discuss words or phrases that describe the feeling of being lonely.
- How have you seen consumerism—“what’s in it for me?”—infiltrate your heart, family or church?
- Consider gospel “one another” verses from this chapter or the New Testament. Pick a verse that will form a prayer and action

step for this week. Discuss practical ways you can embody these verses.

- Love one another (John 13:34)
- Live in harmony with one another (Rom. 12:16)
- Build up one another (Rom. 14:19; 1 Thess. 5:11)
- Care for one another (1 Cor. 12:25)
- Serve one another (Gal. 5:13)
- Bear one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2)
- Be patient with one another (Eph. 4:2; Col. 3:13)
- Forgive one another (Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13)
- Encourage one another (1 Thess. 5:11)
- Stir up one another to love and good works (Heb. 10:24)
- Show hospitality to one another (1 Pet. 4:9)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Read "A Debtor to Covenant Relationships" at the beginning of this chapter again. How does it stretch your imagination about the beauty and blessings of thinking biblically and living covenantally?
- Select one characteristic of the covenant that you see in this chapter.
 - What will it mean for you to reflect this characteristic in your life?
 - How do you see this characteristic reflected in the life and ministries of your church?
- What is one take-away from this chapter that was helpful to you?