

Children and Sin

extract from Proposition IV § iv

§ iv. I now come to the other part, *this evil seed is not attributed to children*,<sup>1</sup> until by transgression they actually join themselves to it. At the end of the thesis there is a reason for this, drawn from Ephesians 2. “These are by nature the children of wrath, who walk according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the children of disobedience.”<sup>2</sup> Here the apostle gives their evil conduct as the reason for their being the children of wrath, and not anything which is not expressed in action. This is in accordance with the whole of the Gospel, where no one is ever threatened or judged for crimes he has not actually done. As for those who continue in iniquity, and so agree with the sins of their fathers, God will punish the iniquity of the fathers upon the children.<sup>3</sup>

Is it not strange that people hold an opinion so absurd in itself, and so cruel and contrary to the nature of God’s mercy and justice, about which the Scripture is completely silent? It is obvious that man has invented this opinion out of self-love, and from that bitter root from which all errors spring. Most of the Protestants who have this opinion have, as they imagine, an absolute decree of election<sup>4</sup> to protect them and their children so that they cannot miss salvation, and so they have no great difficulty in sending all others, both old and young, to hell. Since self-love (which is always apt to believe what it desires) gives them a hope that their part is

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<sup>1</sup> In Barclay’s time the original word “infants” referred to children up to age 7.

<sup>2</sup> See Ephesians 2:2-3

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 34:7

<sup>4</sup> Latin adds: *ad vitam praeordinati*, “predestined to life”

secure,<sup>5</sup> they do not care how they leave their neighbors, the majority of humankind, in these inextricable difficulties. The Papist use this opinion as an artifice to increase the esteem<sup>6</sup> of their church and reverence of its sacraments, because they pretend that sin\* is washed away by baptism. In this they seem to be a little more merciful, because they do not send unbaptised infants to hell, but to something called *limbo*, concerning which the Scriptures are as silent as they are about the other case. Not only do the Scriptures give no authorization for this idea, but it is contrary to their clear testimony.\* The apostle says plainly (Romans 4:15) “Where there is no law, there is no transgression.” And again (5:13) “Sin is not charged against anyone where there is no law.” There is nothing more explicit than these two testimonies. For infants there is no law, because they are completely incapable of it; the law cannot reach anyone unless they have the exercise of their understanding, more or less, and infants don’t have it. From this I argue:

Sin is not charged against anyone where there is no law.

But to infants there is no law.

Therefore sin is not charged against them.

The major premise is the apostle’s own words; the minor premise is therefore proved.<sup>7</sup>

Those for whom it is physically impossible to hear, or know, or understand any law, if the impossibility is not due to any act of their own

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<sup>5</sup> Latin: *partes suas esse firmas, & extra periculum positas*, “that their part is stable and placed beyond danger”

<sup>6</sup> Latin: *autoritatem*, “authority”

<sup>7</sup> Original: “The proposition is the apostle’s own words; the assumption is thus proved.” This sentence seems to contain an error in both English and Latin: The three parts of a syllogism are: the major premise (proposition), the minor premise (assumption), and the conclusion (conclusion). The Latin terms are almost the same as the English. If the two premises are valid, the conclusion is proved.

but rather is according to the order of nature appointed by God — for such persons there is no law.

But infants have this physical impossibility.

Therefore, etc.

Also, what can be more positive than Ezekiel 18:20 “The soul that sins, it shall die; the son shall not bear the iniquity of the father.” The prophet first shows the cause of man’s eternal death, which he says is his sinning; and then, as if he intended to exclude such an opinion explicitly, he says, “The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father.” From this I argue:

If the son does not bear the iniquity of his father or of his immediate parents, far less shall he bear the iniquity of Adam.

But the son shall not bear the iniquity of his father.

Therefore, etc.

Sources: Robert Barclay, *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, Proposition IV § iv (Glenside PA: Quaker Heritage Press, 2002) pp. 92-93 and Roberti Barclaii, *Teologiae verè Christianae apologia*, facsimile (Amsterdam: Jacob Claus, 1676) pp. 59-60.