



Some Notes Towards a Theology of Childhood

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Until relatively recently children and childhood were much neglected areas of study by theologians. Having taught in two Anglican theological colleges and visited many others across the world, I found it unusual to find a theological study of childhood on the curriculum for the training of clergy. Over the past two decades that has changed, and this would now be expected in many departments as well as in vocational courses for Christian youth workers and pioneer ministers.

Christian theological insights can be put alongside thoughtful analyses in other areas of study, especially child psychology. Themes such as the importance of good nurturing in early childhood, the formation of boundaries and the need for safeguarding and protection are echoed in both. Christian theology also offers some challenges to contemporary ideas with regard to children, not least to the emphasis on individualism, and the consumerist targeting of marketing towards the child. Christianity differs also in that it develops from a belief system which places God at the centre of creation and human flourishing.

A theology of childhood operates at a number of different levels. Most fundamentally it answers the question of what it is to be a child (often referred to as 'ontology'). It also notes the impact of the sins of other people on the lives of children, the crucial importance of stable early parenting and guidance, to creativity and receptivity of a child to spiritual experiences and the values that undergird the process of maturation to adulthood. Possibly unique to Christianity are the insights about the importance and status of children as role models for the adult world. One issue which we encounter is that even where scholars in psychology or child development might agree with many of the perspectives in theology, the wider culture may put up many barriers to what they together see as important.

People less familiar with the texts of the Bible are often surprised to see the strong focus on children which occurs in some of the biblical books. This certainly comes out in its stories of individual children, for example Isaac, Ishmael, Miriam, Moses, Samuel, Daniel in the Hebrew Scriptures, and numerous children in the New Testament who encountered Jesus and were welcomed, blessed and healed by him. But the same focus is also evident in the teaching offered by the scriptural authors. We find many comments in the prophets, Psalms, Proverbs, as well as the gospel writers and in the Acts and letters to the early church which turn our minds to the significance of children.

Who are children?

We might cluster together some of these teachings under a number of headings, starting perhaps with the one first listed above – the question of who we are as human persons. The fundamental theological concept that our created humanness reflects God our creator (often referred to as the *imago dei*) has been developed by theologians for centuries. From a Christian point of view it defines the meaning of who we are and applies to all human



persons, irrespective of age, background, gender, ability, belief or culture. You don't have to believe in God to be God's image and share some of the key characteristics which apply to God. Human persons are, like God, relational, creative, loving, compassionate, and belong not just to time, but eternity, Of course human persons have other characteristics which grow out of the brokenness of the world we live in. And so the tussle between our createdness and human sin begins very early in life. Nevertheless, it is important to realize that children are the image of God from the very beginning of their lives. They do not 'grow' into it for it is the product of being human, not of being mature.

Just as our uniqueness as persons before God characterises our identity, so does our relationality. We are persons in relationship, and those relationships are diverse and multi-faceted. Beyond the family children relate to people in neighbourhoods, school, churches and religious communities, sports activities, music, shops and in hundreds of casual encounters. They also relate to each other across ethnic and class divides. Some biblical authors pay a lot of attention to orphans, strangers and aliens and ask for relationships with them to be characterised by respect by the host community (Israel). We can take the principle underlying this into many areas of our national lives today.

Childhood is seen in Christian theology as a significant period of life. This contrasts with many cultures throughout history which have given little attention and few resources to raising children. A child is not expected to have adult minds or physical capacity and honour is paid to their lack of maturation. St Paul famously pointed out that when he was a child he thought of a child, understood as a child, and it was not until he became an adult that he put away childish things. Children should be allowed to be children, and indeed their lack of maturation should be honoured.

Many of the biblical authors also talk about a child's relationship with God as on a par with adult spiritual relationships. One particular example in the Hebrew Scriptures indicates that when children are encouraged to develop and grow in response to God, they can recognize God's presence and respond to God's call. The boy Samuel hears God calling him very specifically by name and is confused at first. When Eli, his mentor tells him it is God, he listens and learns what God wants him to do. The task is for him to carry a message to Eli which will deeply affect his future work and relationships. God's knowledge of children and God's access to their understanding is something acknowledged through scripture. And in our culture too, we need to acknowledge and protect children's spiritual awareness and capacity, Although they learn from those who are wise, children relate to God in their own right, and not simply through those who parent or teach them.

Children as heritage

Some insights in scripture relate more to the patriarchal structures of the societies in which the biblical text was given. Children were seen, for example as part of the heritage which God had given Israel. That heritage was linked to the recognition of God's people of their responsibilities before God; his continued blessing came through their faithful children. These blessings were practical and economic as well as spiritual and religious. They fed into the structure of extended kinship life and enriched the sense of belonging. Although we do



not want to argue for a patriarchal structure for families and structure simply because it provides the backcloth of the scriptural context, we can learn much from these examples. Not least we note, even today, the importance of an extended family structure and its contribution both to identity and to the gift economy. We can also learn how respect within the family, for both the elderly and the young, enriches family life and deepens the potential for the persons within the family to experience fulfilment and joy. The Hebrew Scriptures see God's blessing as extending through the generations when the love that God endows us with is passed down in the structure of a family.

Sin and trauma in childhood

Another area is the impact of sin on children and the resulting trauma which it can leave on their psychic development. We find from many biblical narratives that when families fracture or are at war with each other, children suffer, not least because of their increased vulnerability. This comes out in the examples of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, where Ishmael is at enormous risk in the wilderness because of the actions of adults. It is God's intervention which gives the child, Ishmael protection and care, even when his mother is unable to do anything to save his life. The same dangers arise when when societies become oppressive and the most vulnerable, especially children, become targets for brutality. We find examples of this in the story of Moses and the infanticides in Egypt, and the culling of babies by Herod in the gospels.

A dramatic example of the potential impact of sin on children is a story about two women arguing about who is the mother of a living child. The heart of the story is the tragedy of a dead baby. Solomon is brought in to judge, and he orders the death of the living child, prompting his real mother to sacrifice her claim in order to save him, thus identifying her as the true mother. The story tells us more of God's desire for the preservation and the salvation of children, keeping them in whole life and placing them in the care of loving parents.

The impact of sin, whether in society, families or individual persons affects children. In the New Testament Jesus warns people vehemently against violating or harming children, and the context seems to include harm to their belief in God. Children who have been sexually or emotionally abused by the adult who should have loved them may suffer the aftermath for many years to come. Fewer examples of judgement against sin can match how Jesus illustrates the gravity of this sin. The image of a millstone round the neck of someone thrown into the water conveys something of the responsibility God has placed on adult shoulders for their care of children.

When children today suffer abuse, neglect, or their lives are damaged by famine, war or disease, these things cut across the way God calls them into fullness of their humanity. When I was President of Tearfund I saw so many children in cultures riddled with armed conflict who had witnessed the murder of their father or rape, and disfiguring of mother or sisters. The trauma was still etched on their young faces long after the event. As we respond as adults to God's continuing vocation to be human, God lays on all of us, irrespective of class, ethnicity, education or belief, the charge to make a world fit for our children to grow.



Christian theology shares with areas of psychiatry, psychology and counselling the recognition that specialised help must be made more widely available to all children who are victims of traumatic experiences.

Parenting and guidance

Other areas of biblical teaching focus on parenting, and the idea of being *in loco parentis* (in the place of parental responsibility). This relates not simply to those in the wider family or society who take on a parenting role for children, but it also reflects the way that parents themselves are *in loco parentis* in relation to God. We who are parents hold that role under trust from God. Christian theology helps us to understand that ‘parents do not own children, nor do they have the right to enslave them, but they are entrusted with them. The identity of each child is found in their relationship with God, and not simply with the parents.’¹ Parents are thus guardians reflecting to children the love of the divine parent who has entrusted us with this responsibility. We are called to pass on good values for living, to establish boundaries and discipline children in appropriate ways. The sensitive upbringing of children and the task of education are integral issues to a theology of childhood

Children also have responsibilities to accept wise parental guidance. Both the Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament make obedience to parents a pre-requisite for children. This of, course, implies that the advice and guidance given by parents is sound and loving. Fathers, in particular are singled out not to be harsh with their children or exasperate them. So sensitive, responsive relationships are indicative of those within the family context even at this stage.

It is likely that childhood in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament extended for a shorter period than we see it today. Much emphasis is placed on inculcating good values and patterns of life in the younger years, to provide a grounding and a ‘givenness’ which will keep the child in good stead in adulthood. So obedience to parents would not be a lifetime requirement. The idea of parents requiring adult children to ask permission before they make decisions is not part of a theological mindset. It is more often an imposition driven by money and the provision of financial support. Nevertheless, Christian theology does see the relationship between parents and offspring extending beyond the childhood period. Whereas the necessity for obedience ends, the necessity for respect does not. The fifth commandment, to honour father and mother stays as an imperative of family life.

Children and the Kingdom of God

One huge contrast between our culture today (and indeed of any day) and that is offered to us in the New Testament is the vision of the Kingdom of God. The Gospel of Matthew spells this out in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount and especially where he looks at what constitutes human happiness and flourishing (in eight ‘Beatitudes’) Even a brief reading of these shows how much they undermine the values held as a priority in our culture today.

¹ Alan Storkey: ‘Thinking Christianly about Childhood.’ Occasional Papers, Oak Hill College



Jesus says, ‘You want to be happy? Well, listen carefully, here’s how.’ And he goes on to show us what confers real blessings on our lives and what kind of ‘happy people’ we can become.

We soon realise that in each of them Jesus completely undermines normal conceptions of what happiness is. He challenges his own culture, and ours by taking those deemed to be at the bottom of the happiness pile and declares the true state to be different. What really makes people happy turns out to be not what we think; we’re not made happy through wealth, status or power. Happiness isn’t conferred by opulent living, accumulation or being more successful than others. By contrast, yearning after these things brings insatiability, rather than completeness and can take its toll in peoples’ lives. One of the world’s richest billionaires was once asked how much money he needed to be truly happy. His answer? ‘Just a little bit more.’ The kingdom of heaven is not an obscure, distant, otherworldly concept, it is living in the world around us, but with the values which are offered us in this integrated spiritual view of life. Its values are those which need to be communicated to children in as many contexts as possible.

In the New Testament, both the gospel writers and Paul in his letters to the early church, outline an understanding of the kingdom of God. Children play a pivotal part in our understanding of the kingdom. In several passages, children are held up as role models and exhibit the characteristics to be treasured in citizens of the kingdom. The trust, vulnerability, teachability, humility, interdependence, and directness of children are to be modelled by adults also. These are the characteristics that help us to hear one another, to encourage one another and work together to create a mutually upbuilding society.

One other feature of a theology of childhood is the way in which the concept of being children is also applied to spiritually mature adults. The epistles regularly identify those who follow Christ as ‘children of God,’ and ‘children of light.’ As children we adults too share the positive qualities prized in a biblical concept of childhood, and are also drawn into the legacy that children share. Once again, being a child is heralded as the highest quality that we might exhibit.

Some biblical examples

Imago Dei: Children as created and known by God

- **Genesis 1:26** Let us make humankind in our image, in our likeness
- So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.
- **Jeremiah 1:5** Before I formed you in the womb I knew and before you were born I consecrated you.
- **Psalms 139 15-16** My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my



unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

- **1 Samuel 3:4** Then the Lord called Samuel. Samuel answered, “Here I am.”
- **Matthew 18:10** See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.

Children in the extended family and as inheritance

- **Genesis 33:5** Then Esau looked up and saw the women and children. “Who are these with you?” he asked. Jacob answered, “They are the children God has graciously given your servant.
- **Deuteronomy 5:29** Oh that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever
- **Psalms 103 16-18** The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more. But from everlasting to everlasting the Lord’s love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children’s children- with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts.
- **Psalms 127 3-5** Children are a heritage from the LORD, offspring a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are children born in one’s youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them.
- **Proverbs 17. 6** Children’s children are a crown to the aged and parents are the pride of their children.

Attitudes towards children and safeguarding

- **Matthew 2:16-18; Jeremiah 31:15** When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: ‘A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.’
- **Mark 9:36-37** He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.
- **Matthew 18:6** If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

A child’s need for guidance and instruction

- **Deuteronomy 6:6-7** These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.
- **Proverbs 1:8-9** Here, my son your father’s instruction and do not ignore your mother’s teaching for they are a graceful garland for your head and pendants for your neck.



- **Proverbs 22:6** Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it.
- **Isaiah 54:13** All your children shall be taught by the Lord and great shall be the peace of your children.
- **Ephesians 6:1-3** Children, obey your parents because you belong to the Lord for this is the right thing to do. 'Honour your father and mother.' This is the first commandment with a promise. If you honour your father and mother, 'things will go well for you and you will have a long life on the earth.'
- **Ephesians 6:4** Fathers do not provoke your children to anger (exasperate) by the way you treat them. Rather bring them up with the discipline and instruction that comes from the lord.
- **Colossians 3:21** Fathers, do not embitter your children or they will become discouraged.

Children as role-models in the kingdom

- **Matthew 18:2-5** At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked 'who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.
- **Mark 10:15-16** 'I tell you the truth. Anyone who doesn't receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.' Then he took the children in his arms and placed his hands on their heads and blessed them.

Adults as children

- **Matthew 5:9** Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God
- **Romans 8:14** For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God.
- **Romans 8:16** The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.
- **Romans 8:17** Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.
- **Galatians 3:26** So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.
- **Ephesians 5:8** For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light.
- **1 John 3:2-3** Dear friends, now we are children of God and what we will be has not yet been known.