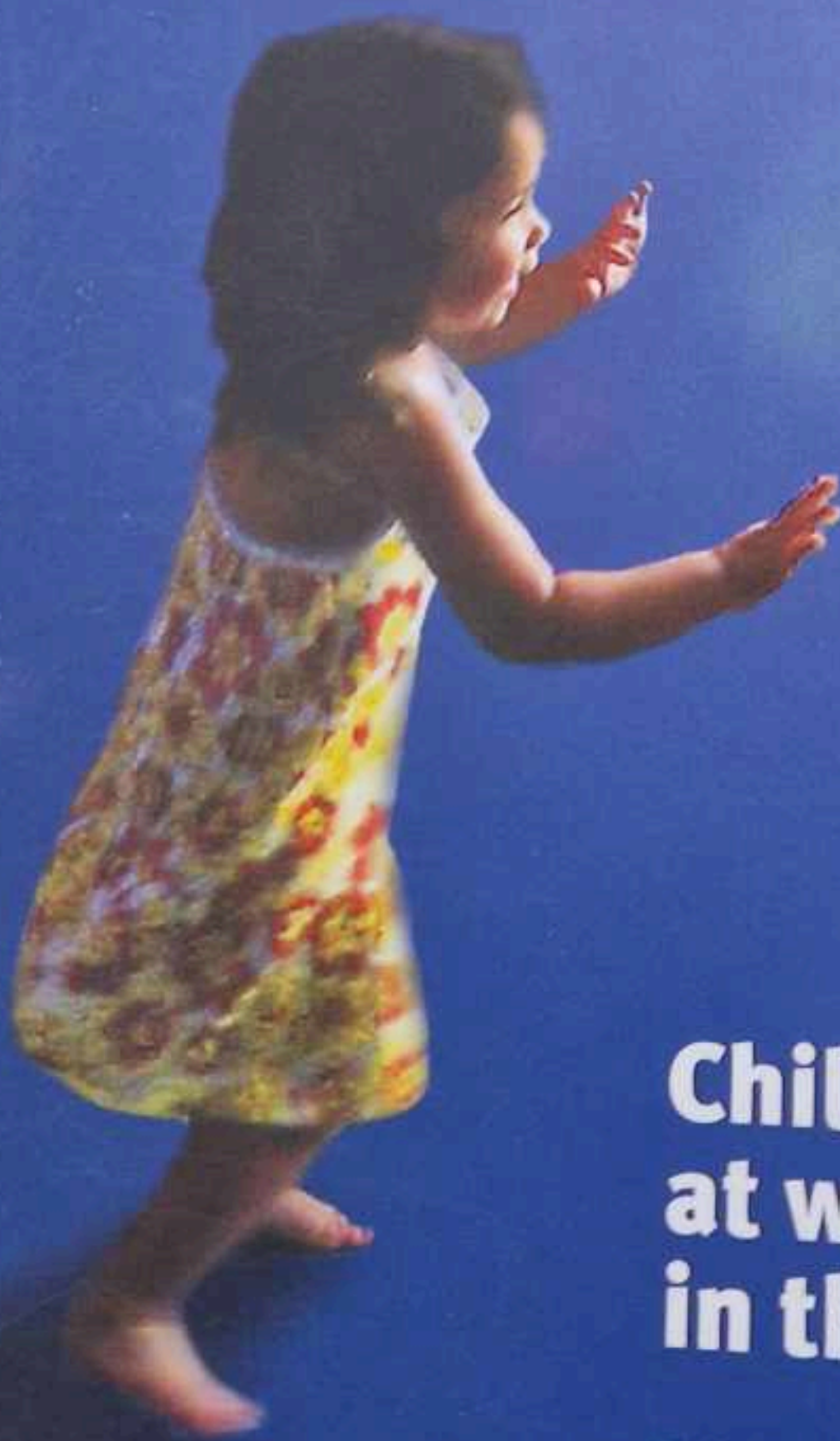




# Toddling to the Kingdom



**AS** JESUS DID SOMETHING HIGHLY SIGNIFICANT WITH A CHILD IN MATTHEW 18, **AS** CHILDREN MAKE UP ABOUT HALF THE WORLD'S POPULATION, **AS** THEY ARE THE MOST OPPRESSED SOCIAL GROUP, AND **AS** WE ALL ARE OR HAVE BEEN CHILDREN, **ISN'T IT TIME** THAT WE BROUGHT THIS PERSPECTIVE TO BEAR ON OUR UNDERSTANDING OF **WHAT IS MEANT** BY "THE KINGDOM OF GOD" AND **HOW** WE ARE TO LIVE IN IT?

**Child Theology  
at work  
in the church**

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# Historical Perspectives on Children in the Church<sup>12</sup>

MARCIA J. BUNGE

**MANY PEOPLE** today are concerned about the children in our midst and in our wider culture. We wonder:

- Are they being raised with love and affection?
- Are they receiving a good education?
- Are they safe in their homes and schools?
- Are they being exposed to good role models?
- Will they have a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives?
- Will they contribute in positive ways to society?
- In the church we also ask: will the children have faith?
- Will they live out that faith in service and compassion toward others?

Although we express these concerns, we find that many countries fail to meet even the basic needs of children and children around the world suffer hunger, poverty, abuse, neglect and depression. In the United States, for example, 16% of children live in poverty and approximately nine million children have no health insurance. Many children attend inadequate and dangerous schools and solid pre-school programmes, such as 'Head

start', lack full funding. Children are one of the last priorities in decisions about budget cuts at the state and federal level. Road maintenance and military budgets take precedence over our children, even though politicians pledge to "leave no child behind" in terms of health care or education.

Although those in the church certainly care for children and have created beneficial programmes for them, the church also often lacks a strong commitment to children and treats them as truly "*the least of these.*" We have witnessed this recently, for example, in the child sexual abuse cases within the Roman Catholic Church. We have been shocked not only by the abuse of children but also by the ways in which financial concerns, careers of priests and reputations of bishops or particular congregations came before the safety and needs of children. Yet the church exhibits a lack of commitment to children in other, more subtle, ways. Here are just four examples taken from our experience in the USA.

### **Poor quality faith development programmes**

First of all, many congregations offer weak religious education programmes and fail to emphasize the importance of parents in faith development. The curricula and lessons of many religious education programmes are theologically weak and uninteresting to children and qualified teachers are not recruited and retained. Furthermore, there is little coordinated effort between the church and the home in terms of a child's spiritual formation. Many parents don't even know what their children are learning in Sunday school and parents are also not given the sense that they themselves are primarily responsible for the faith formation of their children.

### **Failure of Parents to inculcate the faith**

As a result, we find, in the second place, that many parents within the church are neglecting to speak with their children about moral and spiritual matters and neglecting to integrate practices into their everyday lives that nurture faith.

This claim is confirmed by many of my college students. I have taught primarily at church-related colleges. My students are bright and articulate and most of them come from Lutheran or Catholic backgrounds, have

attended church and are confessing Christians. But they know very little about the Bible and their own faith traditions and they have difficulty speaking about relationships between their beliefs and their everyday lives and concerns. They also tell me that they rarely, if ever, have spoken to their parents about any issues of faith and they regret that they did not even pray together at home.

The experience of my students is confirmed by several recent studies of the Search Institute and Youth and Family Institute. For example, according to one study of 8,000 adolescents whose parents were members of congregations in eleven different Protestant and Catholic denominations, only 10% of these families discussed faith with any degree of regularity and in 43% of the families faith was *never* discussed.<sup>13</sup>

### **The spiritual formation of children is undervalued**

In the third place, many churches consider reflection on the moral and spiritual formation of children as 'beneath' the work of their theologians and as a fitting area of inquiry only for pastoral counsellors and religious educators. Consequently, systematic theologians and Christian ethicists say little about children and offer few well-developed teachings on the nature of children or our obligations to them.

Although churches have highly developed teachings on related issues such as abortion, human sexuality, gender relations, and contraception, they do not offer sustained reflection on children or our obligations toward them. Children also do not play a role in the way that systematic theologians think about central theological themes, such as the nature of faith, language about God and the task of the church.

### **Failure of churches to be public advocates for children**

In the fourth place, national churches have not been consistent public advocates for children. Mainline Protestant churches support legislation to protect children's health and safety, yet they hesitate to contribute significantly to public debates about strengthening families. Protestant evangelical and conservative churches, on the other hand, are more vocal in nationwide debates about marriage, divorce and the family, which has been positive. However, these churches sometimes focus so narrowly on

the rights of parents to raise and educate their own children without governmental intrusion that they inadequately address the responsibilities of parents, church and state to protect, educate and support all children.

### **Simplistic views of Children**

Related to the lack of commitment to children in the church are several simplistic views of children and our obligations to them. Many scholars have argued, for example, that in a consumer culture a 'market mentality' moulds even our attitudes toward children.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, instead of seeing children as having inherent worth, we tend to view them as being commodities, consumers or even economic burdens. The language of children as commodities is most blatant in discussions of reproductive technology, in which 'high quality' donor eggs from an Ivy League female cost more than 'regular' eggs. But we also speak of children as commodities in more subtle ways when we say that they 'belong' to us or view them more as expressions of ourselves than beings with intrinsic worth. In our culture, children are understood to be major consumers and we now market countless goods to children in TV shows, videos and fast-food restaurants. We also treat many children, especially the poor, as burdens and don't supply the resources they need to thrive.

Other scholars have noted that we tend to view children as either all good or all bad. For instance, popular magazines or newspapers tend to depict infants and young children as pure and innocent beings whom we adore but teenagers as hidden and dark creatures whom we must fear. In the Christian tradition, we have often focused on children merely as sinful or as creatures who are 'not yet fully human'.

These kinds of simplistic views diminish children's complexity and intrinsic value and thereby undermine our commitment and sense of obligation to them. These are just a few examples, but they show us how one-dimensional children often are to us.

### **The tradition teaches a broad and complex view of children**

We can do much to overcome these simplistic views of children and thereby strengthen the church's commitment to them by retrieving a broader, richer and more complex picture of children from the Bible and

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the Christian tradition. Although theologians within the Christian tradition have often expressed narrow and even destructive concepts of children and childhood, there are six central ways of speaking about the nature of children within the Christian tradition that, when critically retrieved and held in tension, can broaden our understanding of children and strengthen our commitment to them.

### 1) Gifts of God and Sources of Joy

The Bible and the Christian tradition often depict children as gifts of God who ultimately come from God, belong to God and are sources of joy and pleasure.

Many passages in the Bible speak of children as gifts of God or signs of God's blessing. For example, Leah, Jacob's first wife, speaks of her sixth son as a dowry, or wedding gift, presented by God (Genesis 30:20). Several biblical passages indicate that parents who receive these precious gifts are being "*remembered*" by God (Genesis 30:22; 1 Samuel 1:11,19) and given "*good fortune*" (Genesis 30:11). To be "*fruitful*" with children is to receive God's blessing. The Psalmist says children are a "*heritage*" from the Lord and a "*reward*" (Psalm 127:3).

All children, whether biological or adopted, are gifts to us. They are greater than our own making and they will develop in ways we cannot imagine or control. Scientists are still exploring the mysteries surrounding conception. Even with great advances in reproductive technology, we still do not understand and cannot control all of the factors that allow for conception and a full-term pregnancy. There is wonder and mystery, too, in the process of adoption. Adoptive parents often relate stories of the spiritual journey they underwent to adopt and they cannot understand or explain the miraculous 'fit' they sense between themselves and the new member of their family.

Children, we should remember, are God's gifts not only to their parents but also to the community. They are members of a community from the start and they play various and complex roles within it. In addition, they will grow up to be not only sons and daughters but also husbands, wives, friends, neighbours and citizens. Viewing children as gifts of God to the whole community radically challenges common assumptions of them as 'property' of parents or 'economic burdens' to the community.

Related to this notion that children are gifts and signs of God's blessing,

emphasis on sin lead automatically to the harsh and even brutal treatment of children?

Certainly, in some cases, viewing children as sinful has led to their severe treatment and even abuse. Recent studies of the religious roots of child abuse show how the view of children as sinful or depraved, particularly in some strains of European and American Protestantism, has led Christians to emphasize that parents need to "*break their wills*" at a very early age with harsh physical punishment. This kind of emphasis on the depravity of children has led, in some cases, to the physical abuse and even death of children, including infants.

Although this abuse and even mild forms of physical punishment must be rejected and, although viewing them exclusively as sinful often has warped Christian approaches to them, the notion that children are sinful is worth revisiting and critically retrieving.

There are four helpful aspects of the notion that children are sinful that we must keep in mind if we are going to avoid narrow and destructive views of children.

*Original sin*  
**First,** when we say children are sinful, we are saying that they are born into a 'state of sin', into a world that is not what it ought to be. Their parents are not perfectly loving and just. Social institutions that support them, such as schools and governments, are not free from corruption and communities in which they live, no matter how safe, have elements of injustice and violence. All levels of human relationships are not the way they ought to be.

Furthermore, in addition to the brokenness of relationships and institutions in which they are born, human beings find a certain kind of brokenness within themselves. As we grow, develop, and become more conscious of our actions, we see how easy it is for us either to be self-centred or to place inordinate importance on the approval of others.

**Second,** when we say children are sinful, we are also saying that they carry out 'actual sins', that they are moral agents who sometimes act in ways that are self-centred and harmful to themselves and others. We are taking into account a child's capacity to accept some degree of responsibility for harmful actions. These 'actual sins' (against others or oneself) have their root in the 'state of sin' and a failure to centre our lives on the



divine. Instead of being firmly grounded in the 'infinite' that is greater than ourselves, our lives become centred on finite goals and achievements, such as career success, material gain, our appearance or the approval of others around us. When this happens, it is easy for us to become excessively focused on ourselves; we lose the ability to love our neighbours as ourselves and to act justly and fairly.

This view of the 'actual sins' of children becomes distorted when theologians mistakenly equate a child's physical and emotional needs or early developmental stages with sin. However, when used cautiously and with attention to psychological insights into child development, it can also strengthen our awareness of a child's growing moral capacities and levels of accountability.

Although it is important to recognize that children are born in a state of sin and are moral beings capable of actual sins against God and others, a **third** important aspect of the notion that children are sinful, emphasized by many theologians in the tradition, is that infants and young children are not as sinful as adults and therefore need to be treated tenderly. They do not need as much help to love God and their neighbour. They have not developed bad habits or negative thoughts and feelings that reinforce destructive behaviours.

The positive way of expressing the same idea is that young people are more easily formed than adults and it is easier to nurture them and set them on a straight path. This is one reason that most theologians who have emphasized that children are sinful have never concluded that children should be physically punished or treated inhumanely. Rather, they view them as 'tender plants' that need gentle and loving guidance and care instead of harsh treatment. For example, A.H. Francke, an 18th century German Lutheran Pietist, claimed that treating children with "*gentleness and sweetness*" instead of "*strictness and harshness*" is the best way "*to present to them the love of God in Jesus Christ*" and thus "*to plant within their hearts a longing for and love of the Word of God,*" "*to awaken faith in them,*" and "*to bend their hearts toward the good.*"<sup>18</sup>

A **fourth** and final dimension of viewing children as sinful is that some theologians who have viewed children as sinful also view them as equals and they thereby have shattered barriers of gender, race, and class. For example, Francke responded to the needs of poor children in his commu-

faith.<sup>21</sup> In his popular book *Christian Nurture*, Horace Bushnell, the 19th century Congregational pastor and scholar, emphasized that parents are the primary agents of a child's spiritual formation, claiming that "Religion never penetrates life until it becomes domestic."<sup>22</sup>

We might say that adults are to attend to the 'whole being' of children and provide them with emotional, intellectual, moral, and spiritual guidance. Thus, in addition to providing children with a good education and teaching them skills that are necessary to earn a living and raise a family, adults are to instruct children about the faith and help them develop moral sensibilities, character, and virtue so that they can love God and love the neighbour with justice and compassion.

#### 4) Fully Human and Made in the Image of God

Although children are developing, they are, at the same time, whole and complete human beings made in the image of God. Thus, they are worthy of dignity and respect.

The basis of this claim is Genesis 1:27, which states that God made humankind in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Thus, all children, regardless of race, gender, or class, are fully human and worthy of respect. Although children are developing, they are, at the same time, whole and complete human beings.

This theme has often been neglected in the Christian tradition and we find in the tradition the language of children as 'almost human' or 'beasts' or 'on their way to becoming human'.

But there are some theologians who have emphasized the full humanity of children, such as the 20th century Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner. In contrast to those who claim that children are not quite fully human or are beings 'on the way' toward humanity, Rahner asserts that children have value and dignity in their own right and are fully human from the beginning. Thus, he believes that we are to respect children from the start. We need to see them as a 'sacred trust' to be nurtured and protected at every stage of their existence.<sup>23</sup>

#### 5) Models of Faith and Sources of Revelation

The New Testament depicts children in striking and even radical ways as moral witnesses, models of faith for adults, sources or vehicles of revelation and representatives of Jesus.

In the gospels we see Jesus blessing children, embracing them, rebuking those who would turn them away, healing them and even lifting them up as models of faith. He identifies himself with children and equates welcoming a little child in his name to welcoming himself and the one who sent him. *“Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven,”* Jesus warns. *“Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me”* (Matthew 18:2-5). He adds, *“Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs”* (Matthew 19:14).<sup>24</sup>

The perspectives on children found in the gospels continue to be as striking today as they were in Jesus’ time. In the first century, children occupied a low position in society, abandonment was not a crime and children were not put forward as models for adults. Even today, we rarely emphasize what adults can learn from children.

One of the theologians who did emphasize what adults can learn from children was Friederich Schleiermacher, the 19th century Protestant theologian. He emphasized that adults who want to enter the kingdom of God need to recover a childlike spirit. For him, this childlike spirit has many components that we can learn from children, such as *“living fully in the present moment”* or *being able to forgive others and be flexible*.<sup>25</sup>

#### 6) Orphans, Neighbours and Strangers in need of Justice and Compassion

Finally, there are many biblical passages and examples in the tradition that remind us that children are also orphans, neighbours and strangers who need to be treated with justice and compassion. For example, biblical passages explicitly command us to help widows and orphans – the most vulnerable in society.<sup>26</sup> These and other passages clearly show us that caring for children is part of seeking justice and loving the neighbour.

There are many examples within the Christian tradition of leaders who have taken seriously the situation of poor children. Martin Luther and Phillip Melancthon influenced positive policies and reforms in Germany for universal education that included girls and the poor. Francke, the 18th century Pietist, attended to poor children in his community and built hospitals, schools and orphanages to serve them and their families. Like Luther and Melancthon, he also influenced positive educational policies

and reforms in Germany so that all children could receive a good education.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, is another strong example of a theologian who attended to the poor in concrete ways, who inspired Methodists from his time to today to care for the poor and to establish institutions and initiatives to serve them.

### **Dangers when we retreat from the Bible and the Tradition**

Whenever we retreat from this rich, complex, and almost paradoxical view of children found in the Bible and Christian tradition and we focus instead on only one or two aspects of what children are, we risk falling into deficient understandings of children and our obligations to them and risk treating them in inadequate and harmful ways.

On the one hand, if we view children primarily as gifts of God and as models of faith, then we will enjoy them and be open to learning from them. However, we may neglect their moral responsibilities and minimize the role that parents and other caring adults should play in a child's moral development. In the end, we may adopt a 'hands off' approach to parenting or religious education that underestimates the responsibilities of both adults and children. We see the weaknesses of this approach to children in the past and still today. For example, contemporary Christians who emphasize the innocence or spiritual wisdom of children often fail to articulate the full range of adult responsibilities to children, as well as a child's own growing moral capacities. They also neglect building strong educational programmes for children or emphasizing the responsibilities of parents.

On the other hand, if we view children primarily as sinful and in need of instruction, then we will emphasize the role of parents and other caring adults in guiding and instructing children and we will recognize a child's own moral responsibilities. But we may neglect to learn from them, delight in them and be open to what God reveals to us through them. Furthermore, we may narrowly restrict our understanding of parenting and religious education to instruction, discipline, and punishment.

Focusing on children solely as sinful and in need of instruction also has real dangers, since it has often been easier for Christians who regard

children solely as sinful to brutally punish them or 'beat the devil' out of them. Even when Christian parenting manuals today emphasize that children are to be treated kindly but continue to speak of children primarily as sinful, they neglect other important lessons of the Bible and the tradition, such as enjoying children, treating them as fully human, listening to their questions and learning from them.

In order to avoid these and other dangers, a solid and biblically informed model of child-adult relationships must take into account all six perspectives on children outlined here. It must incorporate a complete view of the child that holds together the inherent tensions of being a child: fully human and made in the image of God yet still developing and in need of instruction and guidance; gifts of God and sources of joy yet also capable of selfish and sinful actions; metaphors for immature faith and childish behaviour and yet models of faith and sources of revelation.

### Implications

If we can avoid inadequate approaches to children in the culture and the church and if we can appropriate and hold in tension all six biblical perspectives of children, then we can strengthen our commitment to children in several ways.

For example, these six ways of speaking about children could strengthen spiritual formation and religious education programmes. If we see children as gifts of God and sources of joy, then we will include them in worship services as true participants and welcome them as full members of the church and we will incorporate more joy and laughter into religious education at home and at church.

Furthermore, if we see children as sinful and in need of instruction, then we will develop more substantial religious educational materials and programmes for children in the church and create Christian education programmes that emphasize the importance of the family in spiritual formation and faith development. We will more readily cultivate growing moral capacities and responsibilities of children, by introducing them to good examples, mentors, stories of service and compassion, etc. We will also include children in service projects, teach them financial responsibility, help them discern their vocations and explore how they can best use

their gifts and talents to contribute to the common good.

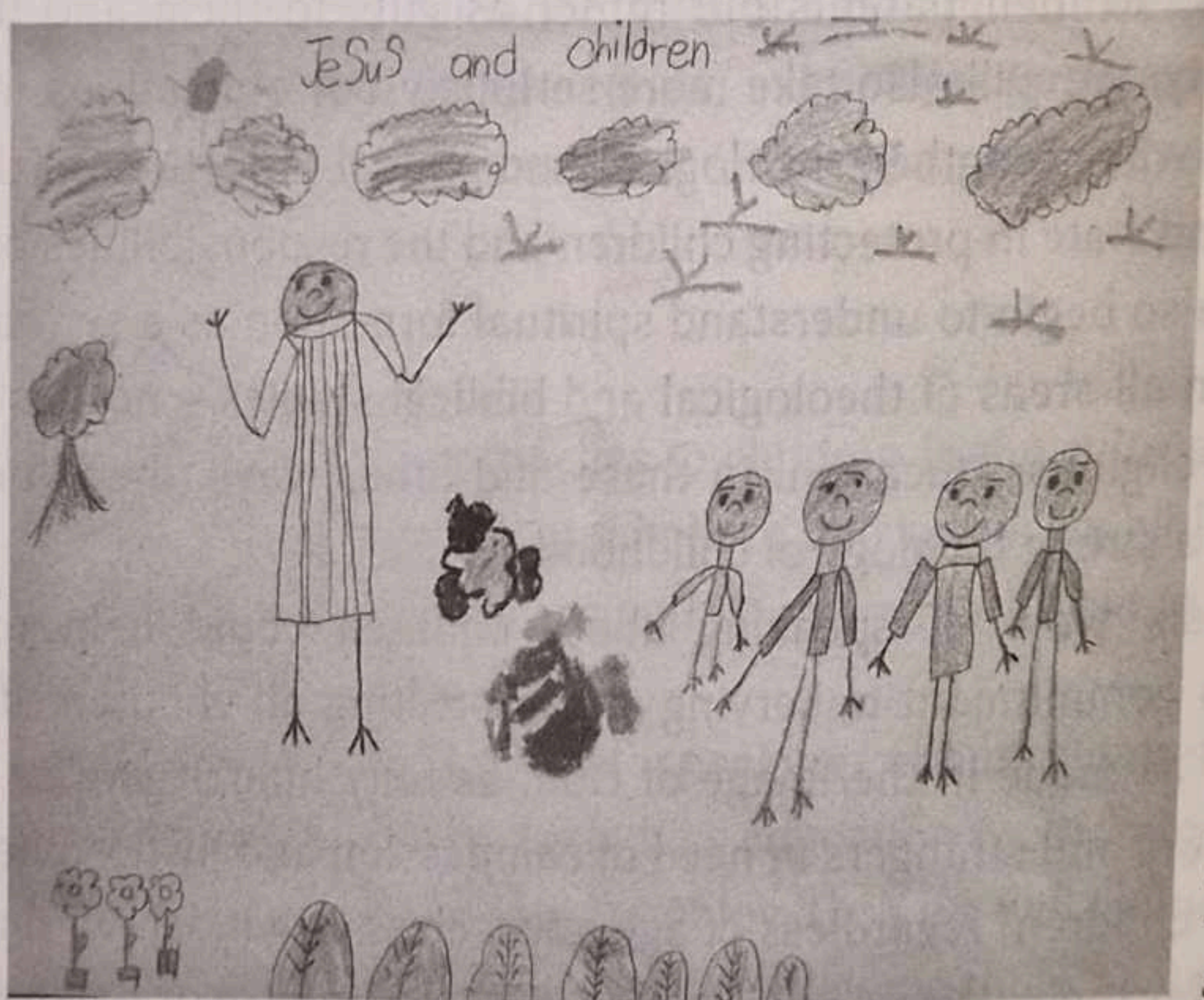
Finally, if we truly believe, as Jesus did, that children can teach adults and be moral witnesses, models of faith and sources of revelation, then we will listen more attentively to children and learn from them. We will structure our religious education programmes in ways that honour their questions and insights and we will recognize the importance of children in the faith journey and spiritual maturation of parents and other adults.

These six ways of speaking about children could also deepen theological and ethical reflection on children and inform a strong theology of childhood. For example, if we see children as gifts of God and developing beings in need of instruction, then we will no longer see children as 'belonging' to their parents but rather as gifts to them and the whole community. We will also take more seriously our obligations to all children. We will strengthen theological and ethical reflection on the role of church and state in protecting children and the responsibilities of parents. We will also begin to understand spiritual formation as a serious area of inquiry in all areas of theological and biblical studies – not just pastoral care or religious education. In these and other ways, the church could build up a strong theology of childhood.

The six ways of speaking about children could help renew the church's commitment to serving and protecting all children. If we view children as made in the image of God, as fully human and as orphans, neighbours and strangers in need of compassion and justice, then we will treat all children, regardless of age, race, class or gender, with more dignity and respect. We will no longer tolerate the abuse or harsh treatment of children and we will warn against equating 'discipline' with physical punishment.

Furthermore, we will support local, national and international legislation that addresses the needs of all children and families, such as fighting for a truly working wage, parental leave policies and strong educational programmes for all children. As a society, we will provide the resources they need to thrive, including proper nutrition and adequate health care. We will attend to the needs of poor children in our community and around the world, work more diligently to protect and serve all children in need and become stronger and more creative advocates for children in our countries and around the world.

There are many other implications of a complex and biblically informed understanding of children. A more vibrant view of children can combat simplistic and destructive conceptions of them and thereby strengthen our commitment to them in a number of areas. By appropriating a view of children that incorporates these six central perspectives of children found in the Bible and the tradition, all of us within the church can strengthen our efforts in spiritual formation and religious education; do what we can to facilitate a stronger theology of childhood in the church; and take up more wholeheartedly and responsibly the Christian call to love and care for all children.



Jesus and Children:  
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### CHAPTER NOTES

<sup>12</sup> This chapter builds on already published material by Marcia J. Bunge, including "A More Vibrant Theology of Children," in *Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics* (Summer 2003), pp. 11-19; and "The Child, Religion, and the Academy: Developing Robust Theological and Religious Understandings of Children and Childhood," in *The Journal of Religion* (October 2006), pp. 549-579.

<sup>13</sup> Merton P. Strommen and Richard Hardel, *Passing on the Faith: A Radical New Model*

for Youth and Family Ministry (Winona, MN: St. Mary's Press, 2000), 14.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Todd David Whitmore (with Tobias Winwright), "Children: An Undeveloped Theme in Catholic Teaching" in *The Challenge of Global Stewardship: Roman Catholic Responses*, ed. Maura A. Ryan and Todd David Whitmore (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1997), 161-85.

<sup>15</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: 1536 Edition*, translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids, MI:

- Eerdmans, 1975), 97. Quoted by Barbara Pitkin, "The Heritage of the Lord': Children in the Theology of John Calvin," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 167.
- <sup>16</sup> Johann Arndt, *True Christianity*, trans. Peter Erb (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 34-35
- <sup>17</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival (1742)*, in *The Great Awakening*, edited by C.C. Goen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 394. Quoted by Katherine Brekus, "Children of Wrath, Children of Grace: Jonathan Edwards and the Puritan Culture of Child Rearing," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, 303.
- <sup>18</sup> See his "Ordnung und Lehrart, wie selbige in denen zum Waisenhaus gehörigen Schulen eingeführet ist" (1702) in *Pädagogische Schriften*, ed. Gustav Kramer (Langensalza: Hermann Beyer, 1885), 162-163.
- <sup>19</sup> For an introduction to Francke, see Marcia Bunge, "Education and the Child in Eighteenth-Century German Pietism: Perspectives from the Work of A. H. Francke," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, 247-278.
- <sup>20</sup> Vigen Guroian, "The Ecclesial Family: John Chrysostom on Parenthood and Children," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, 64, 73.
- <sup>21</sup> For discussions of Luther and Calvin, see Jane Strohl, "The Child in Luther's Theology: 'For What Purpose Do We Older Folks Exist, Other Than to Care for ... The Young?'" and Barbara Pitkin, "The Heritage of the Lord': Children in the Theology of John Calvin," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, 134-193.
- <sup>22</sup> Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1861; reprint, Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1994), 63. For a full discussion of Bushnell, see Margaret Bendroth, "Horace Bushnell's Christian Nurture," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, 350-364.
- <sup>23</sup> See Rahner's "Gedanken zu einer theologie der Kindheit," in *Schriften zur Theologie*, 8 (Einsiedeln: Benziger Verlag, 1966), 313-29; translated into English by David Bourke as "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood," in *Theological Investigations*, 8 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1971), 33-50. For an excellent discussion of Rahner's views on children and childhood see Mary Ann Hinsdale, "Infinite Openness to the Infinite": Karl Rahner's Contribution to Modern Catholic Thought on the Child," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, 406-445.
- <sup>24</sup> Some of the most significant passages in the gospels are Mark 9:33-37, Luke 9:46-48, Matthew 18:1-5; Mark 10:13-16, Matthew 19:13-15, Luke 18:15-17; Matthew 11:25 and 21:14-16. For a discussion of these and other passages in the New Testament, see Judith Gundry-Volf, "The Least and the Greatest: Children in the New Testament" in *The Child in Christian Thought*, 29-60.
- <sup>25</sup> For an excellent discussion of Schleiermacher, see Dawn DeVries, "'Be Converted and Become as Little Children': Friedrich Schleiermacher on the Religious Significance of Childhood," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, 300-328.
- <sup>26</sup> See, for example, Exodus 22:22-24, Deuteronomy 10:17-18 and 14:28-29.