

Theology and Children: what were we thinking?

This article was originally published in the Christian Teachers Journal, October 2010.

Twenty years ago I started a hobby: I decided to collect theological ideas about children. I was a music teacher, not a student of theology, so my main method consisted of accosting the random theologians and biblical scholars I encountered and asking them how their theologies worked in relation to children. Not a very sophisticated research methodology. The shameless girl that I was, I would often do this at the conclusion of a talk or a bible study or a devotion in which a poor unsuspecting speaker had just rolled out a fine bit of doctrine, and perhaps some hermeneutic suggestions, stepped back and asked for 'any questions'. At this point I would raise my hand and smile innocently, thank them for sharing their wisdom and ask for an example that included a child. The first time I did this I fully expected an answer. But time and time again, amongst world class scholars and renowned international bible teachers, the response was much the same:

"I've never thought of that..."

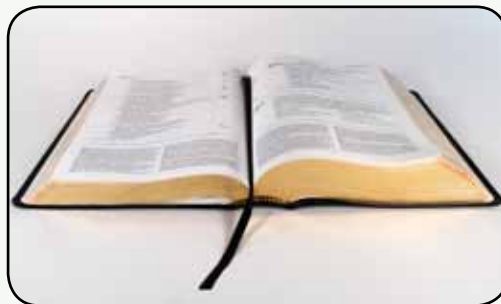
"Oooh, you've caught me on the back foot."

"I'm not sure what you mean...?"

I became dismayed, but also intrigued.

Surely, I thought, we have a theology that encompasses all of life – if it's a doctrine that is sound; it must 'work' across the board, mustn't it? But I discovered that theologians weren't confident this was the case. At the same time, all around me, there was burgeoning children's ministry; bigger and better, specialised programs and evangelism reaching children through holiday programs and beach missions. There was Christian Religious Education in state government schools. I even taught in a specifically Christian school. Clearly the church, parents and Christian educators had some robust expectations that children could engage with God, and it was a cause worth resourcing.

In that context I discovered some thinkers who had some specific ideas about children and faith development. Fowler and Westerhoff aptly describe some ways in which faith might parallel other aspects of human development. Still, there were more questions than before: Stages of Faith provided a taxonomic description, but offered no theological framework. It was essentially a sociological anthropology and focussed on humans, their decisions and actions, but said almost nothing about God. I was not content with a framework that left God silent and passive, so uncharacteristic of the Living God revealed in the Bible.



Leadership

Theology and Children: what were we thinking? continued...

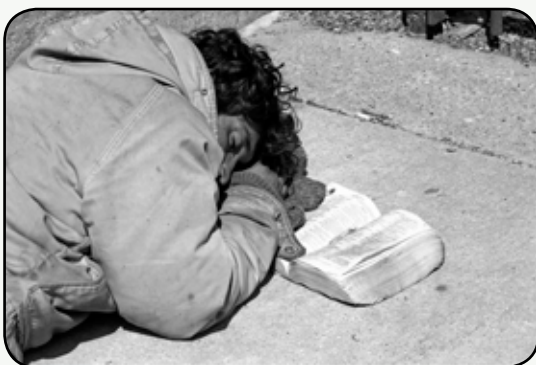
Digging around a little more I found that some of the historical heavy weights – Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin and Luther had some things to say about children. Augustine worked from his own imagined infant state and inscribed his experience with a selfishness that he interpreted as evidence of ‘original’ sin. Aquinas, Calvin and Luther, taking Augustine as a starting point concerned themselves more with how to raise children piously – a difficult task when taking their state as utterly sinful.

And here is where the cogs seemed to always grind. The doctrine of these theologians placed children among the sinful and unsaved, and yet the practice expected of these children under the theological regime was to pray, learn the scriptures, practice godliness and obedience, as if to *develop* some Christian attributes. Here my evangelical heritage is in crisis. Salvation is through grace! Faith is a gift of God! You can’t work or grow yourself into being saved – can you?

Our theological heritage has mostly taken as the ‘idealised’ person an adult male, generally educated (thus able to read the scriptures) of rational mind and free status (thus accountable for his own decisions) and able bodied (thus empowered to demonstrate service and piety). While much of our theology was carried out by candidates of this profile, we might be unsurprised that this became their normative sample.

But the way of Jesus is the way that thinks not only of oneself, but primarily of the other. And so it is not enough for our historical theologians to think only of like-kind.

If Christianity claims a universal truth, not just a subjectively private or parochial religion, we need to test its boundaries across all of the forms of life that we know. Through a range of new voices and perspectives in the past century – voices of women, of the poor, of the imprisoned, we have re-learnt much about the dimensions of God that had been marginalised. Rightly we ask the question, what aspects of our whole gospel for the whole world have been sidelined over the years through the centrality of adult forms of theology?



I am not alone in these questions, and across the past decade some excellent scholarship has developed asking our doctrinal questions all over again with the child in view.

Leadership

Theology and Children: what were we thinking? continued...

Some scholars have developed a theology of the child. Here the child is the point of focus; the object of inquiry. The child is taken as the normative sample. This is strong methodology, for not all of the planet's population, all of us creatures of the Most High God, will become adults. To survive to adulthood is indeed a privilege. Jesus, in fulfilling the law and the prophets (both witness to God's concern for the poor and the vulnerable) came to the lowly and the marginalised, as much as to those of privilege. This theology of child cannot rely on the child growing to an age of accountability, or learning to read, or even developing self-initiated mobility. So many children do not survive their first year, and whatever we think about God's action and initiative in relation to the human condition, it must take into account this most common human condition.

Drawing from the richness of Biblical witness, there are multiple images through which the child can be understood in relation to God. Assembled articulately by Marcia J. Bunge is the following collection of Biblical images of Child:

Sinful creatures and moral agents

Gifts of God and sources of joy

Developing beings who need instruction and guidance

Fully human and made in the image of God

Models of Faith and sources of revelation

Orphans, Neighbours and Strangers in need of Justice and Compassion

At the very least her summary chastens us to honour the complexity of Children's lives in community and in God. We see that asserting any one of these to the exclusion of the others fails to embrace the whole counsel of scripture.



Leadership

Theology and Children: what were we thinking? continued...

Other scholars resist the 'objectification' of children and place the child as subject. Shifting from developing a theology that is about children, this 'Child theology' seeks to see theology through the lens of the child – from the child's perspective. This is an exercise of imagination, which calls adult theologians to put aside their own world view and experience and take in the cosmos, God and all, as a child. While it is hard to assess how successfully we can do this, it does at least provide an other-centred discipline for our thinking. And it prompts us to consider which child's lens do we borrow? The western child, the child soldier or child prostitute, the refugee child, the gifted child, the aborted child, the autistic child... What eyes do they see our doctrines with?



Building on the child as subject, but moving a step further, a third way seeks the voice of the child. What do children say about God? What are their questions?

Amidst all of this thinking there are two themes that have begun to form an answer to my original hobby question: Community and Discipleship.

Community

Alongside our theoretical thinkers our biblical scholars have also been sitting up and paying attention to children. We are beginning to see children in scripture in places we hadn't noticed before. Children are everywhere, part of the whole multi-age community constantly addressed by God. How did we miss this?

One of the key insights emerging in the turning of the season as modernity passes is the extent to which we have individualised our construct of personhood, and our reading of scripture. The communal life is inherent in the whole of scripture, that God addresses families and tribes and clans and nations. God certainly apprehends individuals within these collectives, but always in relation to the community. Keeping the relational matrix of biblical texts, and developing our theology in faithfulness to that witness, resisting an atomised view of humanity makes a theological anthropology in which children can be viewed and validated.



Leadership

Theology and Children: what were we thinking? continued...

One of the great contributions of children in our midst is their dependence. They thwart our mythologies of independence and individualism, demonstrating powerfully through their weakness and vulnerability that our lives have essential contingency: We hang on another. If Christian doctrine is exclusively about the individual ego in relation to God, the child is lost, through no doing of its own. And even here we see the rhetorical conundrum – for how can a child be condemned for sin done by others, if it is purely individual in relation to God? A child encounters the reality of human sinfulness not initially on its own volition, but through communion with the ancient humans of Eden. Might it not be that they can be held in grace through just a communion with others – a community who are the body of Christ – the second Adam, as Paul would say.



Discipleship

The second idea that I have found helpful in framing thinking about children is the thoroughly Biblical idea of discipleship. Much of our difficulty in speaking intelligently about children in relation to God arises in the area of soteriology: Salvation. The imperative for a defining, identifiable, conscious, willed moment of salvation as the key criteria of our relationship with God has made salvation for many, created in the image of God, impossible. While salvation is a strong theme in scripture, it does not hold exclusive claim in terms of consciousness, or will. We must never lose sight that Salvation is an act of God. It is God who is mighty to save; Jesus is the saviour. Perhaps we have also been trying to use another (not particularly biblical term) conversion in relation to children. Other difficulties are attached to this term, as children are constantly changing. The process of ongoing formation is obvious, but makes a permanent, one time conversion somewhat unstable.

An alternative model for coming into relationship with God, no less dependent on Jesus than the salvation motif, but more widely appropriated across a diversity of ages and capacities is the model of disciple.

Take this little test:

Think about all the stories you know about Peter. When was Peter 'saved'?

Was it when he was called to follow?

When he identified Jesus as the Christ?

When he was forgiven after denying Jesus?

When he was filled with the Holy Spirit and preached with power on the day of Pentecost?

Leadership

Theology and Children: what were we thinking? continued...

You can see that I'm asking the wrong question of the biblical texts here – the gospels are not trying to tell me when Peter was 'saved'. The gospels are patterning discipleship. The important point about Peter is not that he was saved at one instant or at another, but that he followed Jesus. It would seem that Salvation occurred in that discipleship process: and in relationship with a God of eternity, we need to recognise the timing is more of a human hang up, and not a constraint on God at all.

The clincher for me, is at the end of Matthew's Gospel. I'm an evangelical. I love Jesus and I want everyone to know about him. I love talking to people about how great God is. And I have a special concern for kids – I want them to know Jesus too. So when I hear the great commission I get really excited! So am I listening? What does Jesus ask me to do?

Go and make.....

(fill in the gaps here – you know the answer.)

Disciples.

In the great commission Jesus says,

'Go and make disciples.'



So now is the time I get out my original hobby question – and dare to ask Jesus 'So does that Great Commission thing work for children?'

Calvin, Luther and Wesley were closer to this idea that we realise. They advocated the nurture and instruction of the child in the ways of discipleship. However there are two distinctives I would point out.

Firstly, they were nurturing what they understood to be an essentially corrupt human, in need of total renovation. The reformers' self-understanding was that they had been converted from that corrupt nature. So the discontinuity between the discipleship of the child and the discipleship of the teacher or parent was chasmic. However, the gospels narrate discipleship communities, a different emphasis to the intense individual agenda of the reformers. Children are disciples in community with other followers, and all in the community are followers of Jesus. There are not some who are 'graduates' and others still apprentices. Being a disciple does not require a child or an adult to be anything other than a sinful human being. The biblical discipleship model doesn't mean we necessarily protest a 'moral innocence' for children, and neither does it condemn them to total depravity. Without making light of sin, it makes something else – following Jesus - the higher call. Disciples regularly sin: children do and christian adults are especially good at it.

Leadership

Theology and Children: what were we thinking? continued...

Secondly, the process of following does not have an end point. And as discipleship is ongoing, so the distinction between child disciple and adult disciple does not need to be delineated in any terms. Paul divides his world into two groups: those who are (in the process of) being saved and those who are (in the process of) perishing (1 Corinthians 1:18; 2 Corinthians 2:15). The completion and fulfilment of salvation is God's task, and by the faithfulness of God's promise will be done. The process of perishing is surely tangible in many lives, but the deal there is not yet done, until God's fulfilment.



These two ideas re-energise my practice as a teacher. They place me as a disciple among other disciples, learning and following together. My thinking and my behaviour are held accountable, as one in community with those I teach. But I don't need to pretend to be perfect, or to try and convince my students to be either. We are able to take the sin that arises in community seriously without anyone losing their salvation or sight of the grace of God. Moving beyond the pre-occupation with sin, discipleship provides positive content with which to nurture and engage children and young people. There are ways to be followed, adventures of faith and hope to take with Jesus, risks of love and justice, challenges of compassion, gambles of forgiveness and grace.

