
A More Vibrant Theology of Children

BY M A R C I A J . B U N G E

Within our churches and society are distorted and simplistic views of children. How can we correct the “market mentality” that sees them as commodities, consumers, or economic burdens? How can we see them as more than sinful creatures that are ‘not yet fully human’? The richer picture of childhood in Scripture and Christian tradition is a solid foundation for creative religious education, serious theological reflection on children, and renewed commitment to serving all children.

Many of us are expressing concerns about children today. 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 our children have faith? Will they live out that faith in service and compassion toward others?

While we express such concerns, our actions—not only in our society, but even in our churches—reveal a lack of commitment to children. Many countries fail to meet even the basic needs of children, and children around the world suffer hunger, poverty, abuse and neglect, and depression. In the United States, 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 programs, such as Head Start, lack full funding. Children are one of the last priorities in decisions about budget cuts on 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.

Churches have not been consistent public advocates for children. Main-

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line 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 and the family. These churches

sometimes focus so narrowly on the rights of parents to raise and educate their children without governmental intrusion, however, that they inadequately address the responsibilities of parents, church, and state to protect, educate, and support all children.

Even within our congregations, where we certainly care for children and have created beneficial programs for them, we often fail in our commitment to them. We witnessed this recently in the child sexual abuse cases within the Roman Catholic Church when financial concerns, careers of priests, and reputations of bishops or particular congregations came before the safety and needs of children. We exhibit lack of commitment to children in other, more subtle ways. For example, many congregations lack a strong religious education program for children: the lessons are theologically weak and uninteresting to children, and qualified teachers are not recruited and retained.

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 counselors and religious educators. Consequently, systematic theologians and Christian ethicists say little about children, and there is no well-developed teaching on the nature of children or why we should care about and for them.¹ 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 the nature of 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. Certainly, issues regarding children are addressed occasionally in theological reflection on the family. However, “For the most part, church teaching simply admonishes the parents to educate their children in the faith and for children to obey their parents.”²

Lurking behind our lack of commitment to children in the church and the wider culture are several simplistic views of children and our obligations to them. In a consumer culture, the “market mentality” molds our attitudes toward children as not having inherent worth, but as being commodities, consumers, or even economic burdens. Or, in another simplifying move, we 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 and 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 overly simple views diminish children’s complexity and intrinsic value, and thereby undermine our commitment and sense of obligation to them.

We can overcome these simplistic views by retrieving a richer picture of childhood from the Christian tradition. Although some theologians have expressed narrow and even destructive conceptions of children, there are six central ways of speaking about childhood that, when critically retrieved, can broaden our conception of children and strengthen our commitment to them. The Christian tradition represents children in complex, almost paradoxical ways, as *gifts of God and signs of God’s blessing*, though they are *sinful and selfish*; as *developing creatures in need of instruction and guidance*, yet as *fully human and made in the image of God*; and as *models of faith, sources of revelation, and representatives of Jesus*, though they be *orphans, neighbors, and strangers* who need to be treated with justice and integrity. These six central ways, taken together, present a complex picture of children that can provide a solid foundation for more creative religious education programs, more serious theological and ethical reflection on children, and renewed commitment to serving and protecting all children.

CHILDREN IN THE BIBLE AND CHRISTIAN TRADITION

The Bible often depicts children as *gifts of God and signs of God’s blessing*. Children are sources of joy and pleasure, who ultimately come from God and belong to God. The Psalmist says children are a “heritage” from the Lord and a “reward” (Psalm 127:3). Leah, Jacob’s first wife, speaks of her sixth son as a dowry, or wedding gift, presented by God (Genesis 30:20). 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.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.

Children, we should remember, are God's gifts not only to their parents, but also to the community. They will grow up to be not only sons and daughters but also husbands, wives, friends, neighbors, and citizens.

In addition to saying that children are gifts and signs of God's blessing, the Bible and the tradition speak of them as sources of joy and pleasure. Abraham and Sarah rejoice at the birth of their son, Isaac. Even in his terror and anguish, Jeremiah recalls the story that news of his own birth once made his father, Hilkiyah, "very glad" (Jeremiah 20:15). An angel promises Zechariah and Elizabeth that their child will bring them "joy and gladness" (Luke 1:14). "When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come," Jesus notes, "But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world" (John 16:20-21). Parents in the past perhaps wanted children for reasons we do not always emphasize today, to perpetuate the nation or to ensure someone would care for them in their old age. Nevertheless, there is a sense today and in the past that one of the great blessings of our interactions with children is simply the joy and pleasure we take in them.

Christian tradition often describes children as *sinful creatures and moral agents*. "The whole nature" of children, Calvin says, is a "seed of sin; thus it cannot be but hateful and abominable to God."⁴ Johann Arndt claims that within children lies hidden "an evil root" of a poisonous tree and "an evil seed of the serpent."⁵ Jonathan Edwards writes that as innocent as even infants appear to be, "if they are out of Christ, they are not so in God's sight, but are young vipers, and are infinitely more hateful than vipers."⁶

This view is based on several biblical texts. For example, we read that every inclination of the human heart is "evil from youth" (Genesis 8:21) and that folly is "bound up in the heart" of children (Proverbs 22:15). The Psalms declare that we are sinful at birth and that "the wicked go astray from the womb; they err from their birth" (Psalms 51:5; 58:3). All people are "under the power of sin," the Apostle Paul writes, so "there is no one who is righteous, not even one" (Romans 3:9-10; cf. 5:12).

On the surface, this way of thinking about children can seem negative and destructive. What good does it do to speak about children, especially infants, as sinful? Isn't this view of children hopelessly out of touch with contemporary psychological conceptions of children that emphasize their potential for development and need for loving nurture? Doesn't this 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 se-

vere 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 milder forms of physical punishment must be rejected, and although viewing them exclusively as sinful often has warped Christian approaches to children, the notion that children are sinful is worth revisiting and critically retrieving. There are three 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.

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-centered or to place inordinate importance on the approval of others.

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-centered 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 center our lives on the divine. Instead of being firmly grounded in the “infinite” that is greater than ourselves, our lives become centered 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 neighbors as ourselves and to act justly and fairly. This view of “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 do not need as much help to love God and the neighbor. They have not gotten into bad habits or developed negative thoughts and feelings that reinforce destructive behaviors. The positive way of expressing the same idea is that young people are more easily

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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.

A third central perspective within the tradition is

that children are *developing beings who need instruction and guidance*. Because children are “on their way” to becoming adults, they need nurture and guidance from adults to help them develop intellectually, morally, and spiritually. They need to learn the basic skills of reading, writing, and thinking critically. They also need to be taught what is right and just and to develop particular virtues and habits that enable them to behave properly, to develop friendships, and to contribute to the common good.

The Bible encourages adults to guide and nurture children. Adults are to “train children in the right way” (Proverbs 22:6) and bring up children “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4). Parents and caring adults should tell children about God’s faithfulness (Isaiah 38:19) and “the glorious deeds of the Lord” (Psalm 78:4b). They are to teach children the words of the law (Deuteronomy 11:18-19; 31:12-13), the love of God alone (Deuteronomy 6:7), and what is right, just, and fair (Genesis 18:19; Proverbs 2:9).

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

neighbor with justice and compassion.

Although children are developing, they are, at the same time, *whole and complete human beings made in the image of God*. This sometimes neglected theme within the Christian tradition helps to avoid mistreatment of children by reminding us they are worthy of respect and dignity. Because “Childhood is not merely the prelude to adulthood,” Herbert Anderson and Susan B. W. Johnson note, “the child already has the value and depth of full humanity.”⁷ Recognizing the full humanity of children is the first step toward treating all children with respect. The Bible teaches 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.

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 embracing children and 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).⁸

These perspectives on children 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.⁹ Even today, we rarely emphasize what adults can learn from children.

Finally, the many biblical passages that instruct us to treat *orphans, neighbors, and strangers* with justice and compassion throw a strong light on our responsibility to help all children in need, especially poor children who are among the most vulnerable members of society. Caring for these children surely is part of seeking justice and loving our neighbors.¹⁰

THE CHURCH’S COMMITMENT TO CHILDREN TODAY

Whenever we retreat from this rich, complex 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 our obligations to children. We risk treating them in inadequate and harmful ways.

Consider what happens when we view children only as gifts of God and as models of faith. Though we will enjoy children and learn from them, we may neglect their moral responsibilities and minimize the role that parents and other caring adults should play in a child’s moral develop-

ment. In the end, we may adopt a “hands off” approach to parenting that underestimates the responsibilities of both adults and children. Some Christians today emphasize the innocence and wisdom of children, but fail to articulate the full range of adult responsibilities to children, as well as a child’s own growing moral capacities.

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 will recognize a child’s own moral responsibilities. However, we may neglect to learn from children, delight in them, and be open to what God reveals to us through them. Furthermore, we may narrowly restrict our understanding of parenting to instruction, discipline, and punishment. This approach, which is found in milder and more extreme forms throughout church history, is in some parenting manuals written by Christians today. Some continue to reason that because children are sinful, parents should literally “beat the devil” out of them. Even when such books emphasize the kind treatment of children, their focus on a child’s sinful nature presents narrow views of children, child-parent relationships, and communal obligations toward children.

Let us avoid these kinds of inadequate approaches to children in the culture and the church by appropriating all six biblical perspectives of children. By keeping all six in mind, we are bound to strengthen our relationships to children, reflect more seriously on our obligations toward them, and develop a more meaningful commitment to them.

When we truly perceive children as gifts of God and sources of joy, then we will be more grateful for them and enjoy them. We will not see them as “belonging” to their parents, but rather as gifts to them and the whole community.

A view of children as sinful creatures and moral agents will help us to recognize and cultivate their growing moral capacities and responsibilities.

If we see children as developing beings in need of instruction, then we are bound to guide and teach them more intentionally. We will support full and whole educational opportunities for all children in the society. Further, we will develop more substantial religious educational materials and programs for children in the church.

When we view children as made in the image of God and as fully human, we will treat all of them, regardless of age, race, class, or gender, with more dignity and respect. As a society, we will provide the resources they need to thrive, including proper nutrition and adequate health care.

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 them and will learn from them. We will structure our religious education programs in ways that honor their questions and insights, and we will recognize the importance of children in the faith journey and spiritual maturation of adults.

Once we realize that children are among the orphans, neighbors, and strangers that the Bible commands us to love and care for, then we will work more diligently to protect and serve all children in need. We will become stronger and more creative advocates for children in our country and around the world.

In these and other ways, a complex and biblically-informed understanding of children combats simplistic and destructive conceptions of them. This more vibrant theology of children prompts us to take up more wholeheartedly and responsibly the Christian call to care for all children.

NOTES

1 See Todd David Whitmore with Tobias Winright, "Children: An Undeveloped Theme in Catholic Teaching," in *The Challenge of Global Stewardship*, ed. Maura A. Ryan and Todd David Whitmore (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 161-85. Whitmore's claims about the Catholic Church can be applied to Christian theology in general.

2 Whitmore, "Children," 162.

3 See, for example, Genesis 17:16, 28:3, and 49:25; Exodus 23:25-26; Deuteronomy 7:13-14, 28:11, and 30:9; Job 5:25; Psalm 127:3-5 and 128:3-4. See several other biblical references to children as "gifts" in Roy B. Zuck, *Precious in His Sight: Childhood and Children in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1996), 49.

4 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*, edited by Marcia Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 167.

5 Johann Arndt, *True Christianity*, trans. Peter Erb (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 34-35.

6 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.

7 Herbert Anderson and Susan B. W. Johnson, *Regarding Children: A New Respect for Childhood and Families* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 9.

8 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 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.

9 Gundry-Volf, "The Least and the Greatest," 39.

10 See, for example, Exodus 22:22-24, Deuteronomy 10:17-18 and 14:28-29.



MARCIA J. BUNGE

is Professor of Theology and Humanities at Christ College, the Honors College of Valparaiso University in Valparaiso, Indiana, and editor of *THE CHILD IN CHRISTIAN THOUGHT* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001).