

**Paper to HCD Summit  
Chiang Mai 13<sup>th</sup> May 2007**

**The Contribution of Child Theology to the HCD Course and  
Beyond**

**Abstract**

*My intention is to describe what Child Theology is and what it offers to the whole of the HCD course and to participating seminaries.*

*It represents a unifying framework and foundation for HCD with contributions and challenges to each module.*

*It also welcomes the contributions and challenges from the real life situations of students and the rest of the course: the “wisdom of experience”.*

**Introduction**

It is one thing to ponder what came first, the chicken or the egg, but quite another to ask what is the chicken and what is the egg when two things are closely linked. It so happens that HCD and Child Theology have grown together from the start like the two species that make up lichen. They are not the same thing, but they have contributed to each other's life and growth.

Compassion International has been a sponsor of both and this is greatly to its credit, not least because Child Theology is working for a long-term paradigmatic shift, and is not amenable to the usual forms and statement of learning objectives and outcomes. The booklets and Child Theology reports that you have are partly the result of Compassion thinking and resources.

What I want to do in this paper is to sketch out:

- (1) what CT is about (and what it is not);**
- (2) what is the content and process of the HCD theological foundations**
- (3) some of the contributions and challenges that CT brings to the whole of the HCD course;**
- (4) some of the contributions and challenges it brings to seminaries and other bodies**

Because Child Theology seeks to be a servant and serving ministry please think hard about how it can serve HCD, the faculty, students, seminary and partner organisations more effectively. What I have in front of me is a reasonably substantive paper, but this is perhaps neither the time nor the place for such an offering. It is available should you

wish to ponder it at your leisure. What I would prefer to do is to give you a flavour of what is in it, and to stir some questions and conversation.

## **(1) What is Child Theology?**

### *A Problem*

Traditional theology in seminaries is usually done without serious or sustained reference to children. So if you have a theological component of any course relating to children there is a serious gap between the theology and the subject. Normally the lecturer, the textbooks, the journals and the content will have little connection with the real world in which children and families live and with which they wrestle. So how should we begin to bridge this gap? Child Theology is a serious response to this challenge.

### *What is Child Theology?*

Thankfully there are now booklets in the CTM series that help to answer this question, notably one from an Asian perspective. CTM is grateful to Compassion for both the original idea and the sponsorship of this series.

A working definition of Child Theology goes something like this:

A process of theological reflection starting with the question: “What does it mean for us today to respond to the teaching and example of Jesus when he placed a little child in the midst of his disciples so that they could be encouraged to become like little children in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven?”

It is essential to notice that the focus and method of Child Theology as it grapples with this question is deliberate and concentrated theological activity. There are a range of other possible responses to the question but Child Theology is theology which is overtly criticised, reshaped and deployed in church and mission under the impact of the child placed in the midst by Jesus. It starts with Jesus Christ. He is the Alpha and He will be the Omega of Child Theology. It takes him very seriously. Ultimately it is about Him and the Father who sent Him: not about a child or children.

The child placed by Jesus is beside him as a sign of the Kingdom of Heaven, and only the object of attention, care or veneration insofar as that is inherent in being a sign of the kingdom of God. Child Theology starts with Jesus and asks what light children throw on God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and His way of doing things in His world (that is, the Kingdom of Heaven). This light immediately exposes the way the disciples are thinking and behaving, and their fundamental misjudgement of Jesus and the kingdom.

Child Theology seeks always to have the child placed by Jesus in the midst of conversations and reflections, but it is concerned with every aspect of God’s mission, and involves the whole community of God. It will lead us all to see that in welcoming children we welcome Jesus, and the One who sent him.

### *What Child Theology is Not*

Others could give a valid answer to the question without so much theological concentration. For example some might respond to teaching of Jesus by *caring for the child at risk* set in the midst by Jesus. They see the child as given to them to care for, and going about this care in such a way that they become like children, because they are really with children, and so enter the kingdom of God. There might be implicit, or incipient, or potential theology somewhere in the process, but there may not be what Child Theology aims at and judges itself by: the achievement of plausible explicit theology which meets the criterion set by the idea of Child Theology.

Whereas *theologies of childhood* and *biblical frameworks for children's ministry* start with children and ask what theology and/or the Bible has to teach us about children; and *spiritualities of childhood* ask what children have to teach us and how we can nurture them.

Child Theology depends upon and welcomes conversation with related disciplines and studies. It invites the critiques and challenges of other disciplines and studies with the view to arriving at new places for all.

### *Theology*

In uncompromisingly affirming that whatever else it is: it is theology. In saying this we are aware that this is for some a rather tarnished word: they prefer to use the term biblical studies. Theology is for specialists and seems to involve lots of liberals! For others it verges on a waste of time. They reason that the needs of children are so desperate that there is no justification for spending valuable time debating what seem like arcane issues. What matters is a basic biblical understanding, framework or commission. The rest we can leave in God's hands. However laudable this may seem (and we do well to ponder the fact that the Good Samaritan did not engage in much theological reflection in the story Jesus told!) this is not responsible. It starts with theological ignorance and possibly caricature, and is liable to continue with unfounded confidence and assurance

As one who lives daily with children at risk of depression, bullying and harm, I fully understand this latter point of view. For the avoidance of doubt I am a practitioner, having lived in community with hurting children and young people virtually all my life. I understand the pain and the urgency of responding. But it will not do to dismiss theology in such a terse way. All Christians are theologians in that we talk (and/or sing) about God in one way or another. We speak and think (*logos*) about, from, to, with, for God (*theos*) The only question is what sort of theologians we are: good or bad.

Child Theology is tenacious in the angle of its approach and the specification of outcomes. This approach is as already said, respects the experience and voice of the subject by letting the child speak, not to do something to or for the child; and the outcome is somehow theological. The outcomes will be fresh and more accurate readings of the Scriptures, a reformation of systematic theology with a child in the midst, new readings of the history of church and theology (as for example in M. Bunge, *The Child in*

*Christian Thought*), and new understandings of church and mission, and new operative theology (that is theology in action in our daily lives, individuals and corporate).

### *Child Theology and Biblical Studies*

So what is the relationship between theology and biblical study? They are different but related – so they can talk to each other, help each other, or fight each other. One close form of relating positively is when theology depends on and derives from the biblical studies, or the Bible, read with the help of various aids. What it does then is to establish patterns of understanding built up from the whole corpus of Scripture and in the light of various historical and social contexts. Thus we can begin to talk of what we mean by God, Jesus Christ, Creation, sin, salvation, church and eschatology. We cannot derive God from a single verse or book of the Bible. There has to be sustained and informed reflection on the whole counsel of God: Old Testament and New, and involving the whole community of faith around the world and through history.

Another way of relating theology and biblical studies is for theology to have the initiative. It takes the theme of God as found in the life of the church and the world, to discern and order the questions and visions that are found through this practice and to attempt to think them through in ways that are worthy of God. This kind of theology may be carried on with varying degrees of attention to the Bible. Sometimes it goes directly to the Bible to find what the Bible says on specific issues; sometimes it is nourished by a general, maybe very serious, regular and devout reading of the Bible, which then influences theology as it is mediated through the sensibilities, imagination and practice of individuals and communities.

Whatever way is taken, it should be agreed, in the light of centuries of experience, that theology and biblical studies cannot be defined and managed according to any rigid recipe. Freedom and elasticity of thought is essential in both theology and biblical studies. Conservative biblical Christians sometimes make the mistake of thinking freedom and elasticity is the property of those they reject as liberals – but they then fail to recognise the truth about their own good practice. Conservative biblical Christianity is selective in its reading of the Bible, and often inventive, imaginative, sometimes fantastic – for good and ill. Elasticity is inevitable and imagination desirable.

Selecting and interpreting Scripture is theological activity. We have to be asking ourselves all the time: Is this reading of the Bible worthy of God? What God does it witness to? Christian faith implies that we read the Bible as witness to Christ and in the spirit of Christ, not any other spirit. But what exactly is that spirit? So theological investigation and discernment is essential to the plainest of Bible reader – if the Bible reader will not engage in thinking theologically he does not treat the Bible in a way that is worthy of God in Christ by the Spirit. He is no better than the man who supposed God would guide him if he opened the Bible at random and put his finger on a text. He lighted upon the verse: Judas went out and hanged himself. Perturbed he tried again. This time he arrived at the words: Go thou and do likewise. God does not bless those who prefer gambling to reasoning.

I cannot deny that the way much theology is done in seminaries communicates to ordinary Christians that it is a discipline for the few, and that it tends to be more concerned with words and formulations than with action. However we cannot allow it to be falsely defined in this way. It reflects western philosophical traditions and it understandably a problem to ordinary Christians seeking faithfully to live out their faith in the real world. Part of what I have been trying to do is to establish a process that dispels the myths surrounding theology and the theological process, and modelling a fresh, but convincing and valid method.

## **(2) What is the Content and Process of Child Theology in HCD?**

Let me share with you what we actually cover on the HCD course. I hope by now you realise that the process and content have required much careful deliberation!

### *Process*

I begin with the process.

Here is a slide show combining photos from different courses on two continents.

Let me share with you some student reactions as we watch some slides of the classes that may surprise us about the processes used:

*The roots in Asian theology and experience struck many chords:*

“Tears rolled down my cheeks as I listened to Ramabai’s story: she is symbol of strength to all women...the unreached in India.”

“Today as we took off our shoes in the classroom for worship I was challenged to feel the presence of God...it taught me to hold on to the Indian culture. It is one of the best ways to reach India.”

*The method of teaching stirred hearts as well as minds:*

“Psalm 8 reminds me of my recent trip to Mt Kinabalu. If ever I go there again I will stand at the summit and read aloud the whole Psalm to let the people know how majestic is our Lord’s name in all the earth!”

“I never thought studying theology could be so much fun! I never saw “Child Theology” before. I feel kind of excited as if I discovered something brand new. I feel as if I want to do something and to tell many people about Child Theology...I hope soon many churches, Christians and those who are key people will realise the children’s part in healing and restoring Indonesia.”

“What has impressed me is the way that you taught us: you didn’t want to describe Child Theology to us but to encourage us to find the definition for ourselves.”

“It’s a great method (using pictures and telling stories) that I love and also hope the children will love this method too.”

“I love Ramabai’s kindergarten method and really want to try it in the place where I live...If God uses children to elaborate the idea of entering the Kingdom of Heaven...the kindergarten role model should be the answer to the churches and Christians ministries...I am very excited by this idea.”

“After this week of Child theology I am more convinced that God has placed this burden for me to hold the hand of the child and walk with them.”

“Our process of learning was a refreshing change...your process of teaching was entirely new: it was fun and exciting. One wants to learn more, read more...Last week was really a learning experience. It was life changing. It made me think of my priorities.”

*Comments on the whole course:*

“Putting the child in the midst is the key to the Kingdom. This Kingdom is the key to how we live. It’s God’s way of living, God’s way of doing things. A child should influence the way we do theology. When you are a Christian you are a theologian. We are part of God’s mission to change the world... It might be to plant a mustard seed in one child or to allow a child to plant one seed in me. This is God’s way of doing things. While I am on earth I am a Child Theologian.

And I have learned so much, possibly more than any of the students as we have been in conversation. My understanding of Asian cultures, of families, of God and of children has deepened. What a privilege!

*Summary of the Course Content*

We move now to the content of the course. For five or so years I have taught the “theological foundations” (that is what it was called when I was approached to teach it) course of HCD, and only recently have I begun to get a sense of what I ought to be doing. The foundation is in five parts and spans the traditional breadth of theology.

*Operative Theology*

We begin with what might be called the Text of Life. It is a surprise to most students that we take a shared understanding of our current situation, life and work (the text of our lives) in the light of God’s word so seriously. You could call this contextualisation if you like. But it is possibly more fundamental and essential than this. We start where we are, and scrutinise what we are doing and why. We try to find out where we got our theology from and how. (Hymns and songs play the most important role in this for many. For others it is the Bible stories that they were told as children.) It is right to start where we are for if we believe in God’s providence, we are where He has placed us, until he chooses to move us on! This is the first stage of the hermeneutical circle. We will return

to the place where we started at the end of the course, but by then things will have changed! We return to operative theology at the end of the course, in the hope that by means of our study, prayer and conversations it may have been reformed with the help of God's Spirit.

This approach is to be contrasted with professed or conventional theology where people may point to what others say, believe, or confess. We are not starting with what we ought to believe, but with what we actually believe on the basis of our current lives and priorities. It is not easy to do this, and needs a trusting context. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his "Outline for a Book", in *Letters and Papers from Prison* set an uncompromising example in this. Like his brother the Apostle Paul, he wrote in prison and under the shadow of death. What people really believe is found in what they do, and how they live, as much if not more than what they will say, if you ask them what they really believe. So Jesus told his disciples that it was their love for one another that would demonstrate to others that they were his true followers (not their statement of faith).

A British nineteenth century theologian, F. D. Maurice, argued that many Christians in his day were practical atheists, although they were orthodox and pious in word and church practice. He said they were practical atheists because they had been squeezed into the contemporary world's mould and way of thinking. Their social practice in early capitalism in no way showed they thought that God was the one Father in heaven which meant all people were brothers and sisters. This is a besetting sin for all Christians everywhere and throughout time: if we do not realise it, it is because we are drifting with the flow rather than fighting our way against the stream and the tide.

The second part is called *Historical Theology*. This is the study of how church, denominations and doctrines developed around the world, and where we sit on the Tree of Christianity. We seek to discover how biblical studies and theology developed historically and why. What did Christians before us believe and why? What was the church like, how did its mission develop? What are the sources of denominationalism? So we trace the sources of what we believe. And in doing this we discover what other Christians have believed around the world. How universal or culturally specific is theology around the world? What is available to us now in terms of theological resources, guides and suggestions? What problems are bequeathed to us that we must tackle and what problems have been shown by history to be not worth bothering with?

Thirdly, and centrally we come to *Biblical Theology*. Here we seek to find ways of doing justice to our reading and interpretation of Scripture as well as our knowledge about it. We study the Scriptures in order to understand God's will, nature and saving actions. This is reading Scriptures theologically, (the categories of God's will, nature and saving actions constitute a theme, which can be the focus for a system, so this is a way of doing systematic theology with the Bible) and thus to work towards a practical and ethical theology. In doing all this, we somehow have to weed out what is not God's will in Scripture.

But there is something else quite different: We might also read Scriptures without that kind of managerial systematic question. We might read the text with a more passive openness to the whole of it, to open ourselves to all sides of it, in its strangeness, and to feel our way into it. Bonhoeffer insisted his students meditated on the Bible, and differentiated it sharply from all work with commentaries, preparations for sermons and systematising theology (see *Life Together*). This kind of reading lets the Bible go free from our control, including whatever systematising theology we espouse, so that we are taken into 'the strange new world in the Bible' (Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*).

As Evangelicals we may like to think they read the Bible like this, but mostly we don't: we are scared lest our orthodoxy is disturbed, and some of us are so concerned that the Bible will support and not upset the teaching we want to give children that we bowdlerise not so much the narratives as the theology in the Bible

Then fourthly we explore *Systematic Theology*: the great doctrines that are at the heart of a Christian understanding of God, the world and Jesus Christ. These usually include: the nature of the triune God; Creation; Sin; Redemption; anthropology; church; mission; eschatology; and so on. Here we have a real challenge because of the absence of children in nearly everything we read. We draw from core writers and texts, and constantly find we are placing the child into questions and situations where mentors have neglected her.

Finally we come full circle and work towards *Practical or Applied Theology*. We spend roughly one fifth of our time seeking to establish God's will and vision for those who we serve, and begin to establish priorities and tasks that bring our life and work more closely into line with His will, and the prophetic visions in the Scriptures. As noted earlier it is our hope and intention that the *Operative Theology* of the students (as well as the faculty) will be challenged, refined, extended and enriched during the module.

All the time we are asking how the child placed by Jesus in the midst of the disciples throws light on every aspect of theology. So for example what difference does it make if we have a child in the middle of our thinking about sin? Because the Child Theology that has been done over the generations has not been part of the mainstream of theology there is much work to be done in reforming understandings and conclusions.

This framework for doing theology is not new, but it does offer a simple way of working whether students have a prior knowledge of theology or not. The youngest student so far is ten years' old and he seemed to grasp much of what was going on! So we might ask of the students, what is current, unquestioned and implicit *Operative Theology* as you go about your daily life and work, and how have you derived it? Where do you sit on the *Tree of Christianity*? Why is that so? Are you sitting on a western or an Asian branch? Does it matter? What have you to learn from other Christian traditions? What is the quantity and quality of your *biblical theology*? What are the principles of interpretation that you use? Have people of all cultures, men and women and children, lay and ordained been involved in this work? Next, what is your *Systematic Theology*? Who are

those you look to for your major bearings and categories? And finally how do you go about establishing *practical theology* in line with the needs of the world and God's will?

We set about the task as groups that we call churches and as a community. Much theology is second hand and borrowed. Asians, Africans and others outside of Europe and North America are asking why they cannot derive local theologies without depending of Western formulations and gate-keeping. I try to ensure that at least 50 per cent of our reading and teaching material is by Asians when teaching in Penang.

*A Working Example: The Doctrine of God*

Child Theology is so new that it is needing to try many experiments to work out how to proceed. It is making discoveries and mistakes. Like a little toddler it often falls over. But toddling is a good time for such spills, because you can always get up and try again comparatively unscathed. In the consultation reports you can read of some of these experiments in different contexts. One we have tried recently in Quito, Ecuador concerned the doctrine of God.

Let me be frank with you about the doctrine of God: many Christian sermons, books and hymns and songs celebrate the Almighty God, who reigns in majesty, and is Lord of all. Praise God we can do this. But this is only part of what the Bible reveals to us of God. He is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In the Son he is despised and rejected. In the world he is weak.

A simple image I have used for much of my ministry imagines for a moment God as headmaster and the world as a school. Each room is a different nation or people group. We look round the rooms and find blood spattered on many walls; death; suffering; hunger and thirst; bullying of the weak by the strong; girls undervalued and marginalised. We could go on. We go the headmaster's study and he tells us that he is in complete control: simply trust him. It will all turn out when the new school is built and the old has been done away with.

What do we say in response? Surely we cannot accept this explanation. The headmaster is not in control whatever he might say and however much we would like to believe him. And thus it is with the world. Compassion knows this to be true, if any organisation does. Millions of children suffer. No doubt dear Patrick will be sharing with you more up to date statistics of how desperate the situation is. This is not God's will; this is not His way. Whatever we may mean by God being in control, it is not how it is in the sin-racked world we know.

And we have to have a strong theology of God; a real, robust theology that is able to grapple with the realities of the world where He is weak. It will be a theology of the Cross, not simply of power and authority of the sort we know from earthly kings and emperors. The Kingdom of Heaven is in earthly terms upside down, inside out and back to front.

He is a God who suffers; whose heart is broken. But he persists in his grace and mercy to do something effective in and for this world. It seems to us that this is not enough or is still unfinished. Believing he has called us to be partners in his redeeming mission the predominant question is: How can we live with God in the real world? For many it is virtually impossible. Atheists and Buddhists and many in the Chinese and Japanese traditions largely dispense with God, or find incredible the Semitic (Jewish, Christian, Muslim) profession of faith in an historically active God. They fail to see how he holds all things together in his order, which is ultimately morally satisfying and happy. Hindus hold on to God in the plenitude of gods and goddesses many, so that divinity reflects the multiplicity of life and not its happy resolution; and in the end for them, salvation is release from being not the achievement of the meaning of being, which is the christian hope.

Any follower of Jesus Christ in Asia is bound to confront this choice and tension, along with others. It is not an easy one, for the traditional Asian ways which are profoundly different from what is on offer in the biblical history of God are not mere ideas, but are lived and transmitted in powerfully embracing ancient and living persisting cultures. Many in Asia make much use of Fate, acceptance, and luck, as well as confinement to this world, than the Bible does. Early Christians attacked features of ancient Greek religious culture, sometimes as it appeared in Gnosticism, because they would not accept Fate or the stars as a help to solving the human problem – and some think these traditions were western forms of Eastern wisdom.

We know that millions of children are suffering in the world right now. What we are doing may sound impressive but it is a drop in the ocean. We proclaim God as Almighty Lord, but where is the convincing evidence of this in the real world today? Perhaps we survive theologically by keeping things in separate compartments. And if so we must not let this happen in a holistic child development course of all things.

Child Theology wrestles with this. It does not have easy or ready answers. We will not let go of God on the one hand, and the real world on the other.

I hope this has given you a flavour of the theological foundations part of the HCD course. Now we move to see how it relates to the rest of HCD.

### **(3) Some of the contributions and challenges of Child Theology to the HCD course**

Can I begin by saying that I believe in a community of scholars, and that HCD should model conversation between students and also lecturers? The Child Theology component draws from questions, experiences of children, cultures, understandings and constructions of childhood. It begins with seeking to understand operative theology and ends with practical and applied theology.

I can put this another way by saying that it is not in some Ivory Tower where the ghosts of Augustine, Luther and Calvin provide ready-made courses for Asian twenty-first century students. It is a living course, not a one-way delivery of received wisdom.

What is the challenge of Child Theology to the other parts of the course? What is its confession or profession of faith? Child Theology does not intend to challenge in a negative, provocative criticism, but represents rather a way of presenting the faith that encourages and invites contributions and reflections from a variety of perspectives. It invites students and faculty to bring their cultures and insights of children to theology and the Bible.

The questions of Cutting Edge practitioners continue to resonate with the participants. I keep the originals asked at the Cutting Edge conference in De Bron in 2000 by my side, and students are asked to underline individually and then to discuss in groups which are the questions that go to the heart of things from their experience and point of view. The process depends on the openness of students and teachers to the real world of children including not only the beauty of their beings and swiftness of their growth, but also the abuse, neglect, illness and poverty which are, sadly the anguished lot of so many.

So what about the challenges that it has to offer? Let's look at the three core components of the course through a theological lens.

### *Holistic*

An attractive word but what does it mean? How would we know if the course was holistic? Do we mean a mosaic of modules that in some way cover every aspect of childhood? Or do we have in mind an integrated whole where every part contributes to an embracing vision and model? If the latter, what is the organising principle? Is it a psychological theory of child development? Perhaps we mean a sociology of childhood? Or is it a theory of leadership or management?

Many people who have secular humanist view of human wholeness see the individual human being as the measure of all things.

I put it to you that the organising principle is that the course is Christian and what makes it a whole is a theological understanding of children in God's sight (i.e. theology of childhood as key): as part of God's mission, creatures of His creation, living in a fallen world, loved by God in Christ Jesus and signs of His Kingdom.

We rightly speak of theological foundations, for these provide the shape and support for the whole edifice. In this we seek to understand not only children in a fully rounded way, inspired by the Scriptures and the teaching and example of Jesus, but also church and mission. This is where Child Theology builds on and expands the work of theologies of childhood.

Christian holism has to be theological because in Christian faith things only come together in God. If we can grasp or even glimpse this we will see that it makes it possible for preachers and activists to be unwhole, or imperfect, but still to have worth. We should never despair of our significance.

So what do we mean by holism? Simply to adopt secular disciplines doesn't do this. Is this the way to achieve a genuinely Christian holism. Not adding things up to make a mosaic. If so, Theology is but one part of the mosaic, and the key to the whole is somewhere else. Colossians 1 is a useful model for clues about the nature of Christian holism. One God, who enters history in Christ, brings all things together. Not just the nice things. But sin and suffering. His mission produces the kind of holism which is not fully realised on earth. Meanwhile we must wrestle to take every thought captive and make it obedient to Christ (II Corinthians 10: 5).

### *Child*

Such a simple word, but what do we mean by it? Perhaps we follow child development theory and see it as describing the period in a person's life before adulthood, whenever that is deemed to begin. So childhood is a time of vulnerability, learning, training, care in preparation for independence. Education is a key in such an understanding for it helps the process of moving from childhood to adulthood. And church will be seen as mainly for adults, where children are church members in waiting!

But however popular this view is, it is not how God sees children and childhood. Rather than adulthood being the goal of education and the norm of human life, God sees us all as children. Jesus teaches us to pray "Our Father". It is not that God does anything but rejoice when there is maturity and growth, but that this does not change the fundamental Father-child relationship.

So as students and teachers of HCD we are not learning about "others" but also about ourselves. And as we live alongside and seek to help children it may well be that they have much to teach us of God's ways and His kingdom. Children are God's language, signs of the Kingdom of heaven. They must never be seen simply as objects of our attention, care and love, however much they need such love.

There is a global market that sees all children as potential consumers, and key agents in the consumption patterns of their families. We must be fully alert to this: as wise as serpents. A theological understanding of children and childhood will provide a base for the critique of this massive and growing predator.

Theology is a vital aid in keeping a biblical perspective on children and childhood.

### *Development*

The word development is confident, rational, managerial, industrial, scientific, and technological. It has enormous power and we all benefit from it. But what do we mean by the word? What is the relation between development on the one hand and accidents and mistakes on the other? Accident is major part of life all through childhood. Development assumes intentionality, order, progressive stages, and building. But the reality of life has a strong element of falling over, crashing, spontaneous, unplanned, disconcerting, what seems people backwards, and regression. Is falling in love, for example, a phase of development or a blowing apart, what the Bible terms a "new creation"?

Whereas arranged marriages, are a social device that many cultures think wise, not least because they save people from disastrous accidents of falling in love and thinking love is more important than order, respect for the child means being open to letting accidents happen – the rights of the child are not to protect the child from the disasters of life but to ensure it has the space to live as a human being - (This of course is not what is generally thought to be the meaning of rights, for they impose on others to ensure that the enrighted person runs into no kind of danger.) Education and general mass management of children needs order, frameworks, stated outcomes, assessment and progression. You can't have *Emile* on a mass scale. There is validity in order. But it is insufficient. The intelligent child, including street children, sees that it doesn't all add up. What eludes the grasp of development theory? To what extent should students of HCD be concerned with that which lies outside this neat theory?

In a forthcoming book, *The Growth of Love* I join many others in probing and questioning much of development theory. We must be particularly careful because we have the word in our course title! Let me share with you a very simple, but dramatic example from the work of James Loder. Most child development theory starts in the womb and concludes somewhere undefined between say 16 and 25. It starts with embryos and ends with what are hoped to be mature adults, citizens and potential parents. The theory is about helping children to progress in maturity of every sort.

So far so good. We all hope that children will develop. But what about the really important things like love, spirituality, loss, imagination, sisterhood, and the questions about the meaning of life, and of death? If we see life as starting somewhere after “little infinity” and ending at the threshold of “big infinity” what does cognitive development as helpfully described by Piaget, contribute to the process of connecting with God's grace in Jesus? At best what we proudly parade as development is revealed to be almost exclusively about personal and social human functioning. It has avoided the really important questions, and always tends to prefer reason to love. In short it is, on the theological diagram, at best going round in circles.

Psalm 8, is a telling cornerstone in Child Theology because it is quoted by Jesus to affirm that the cries of children (actually of all ages) have validity and strength, irrespective of cognitive ability and learning. Spiritual truths of the Kingdom are revealed to babes and sucklings: that is the Father's pleasure. What is more the Father has hidden these truths from the wise and learned. (Matthew 11: 25-26) So we must be careful in our course not to assume that child development is about helping children to become wise and learned in human terms while not addressing their spiritual gifts. (I say gifts because it reminds us that we have much to learn from them as well as to teach them.)

*Three Principles the Child Theology offers to the HCD Course*

*(1) Taking Thoughts captive for Christ*

If the course is Christian, and praise God, it is then every part of the course must be taken captive to Jesus Christ. We must be grateful for the insights of those many wise non-Christians who have contributed so much to our understanding of children, but we must never be deluded into thinking that they can do our work for us. Theology demands that we still have work to do in testing every part of the course theologically, as well as the links between the different modules, and then seeing that the whole course genuinely merits its title.

### *(2) Child in the Midst*

I think by now that many of you know that Child Theology has its roots in Jesus placing the child in the midst. What if other people whose main occupation is doing something else started to think about what they do with the child in the midst? Other members of the faculty are feeding into bits of the course don't do much theology. So what would happen if they did thinking with a child in the midst? Invitation to colleagues to develop own work and see what happens.

So Child Theology offers this model to all parts of the course: listening carefully to Jesus as he places the child in our midst. Aim to do something very important and valuable. Persuasive substance to what contribution of Child Theology might be in this context. On the whole we haven't got much beyond asserting significance of Child Theology. We haven't demonstrated on the whole its relevance in practical and particular situations, their work in holistic child development and responding to children in need.

### *(3) Reformation*

"Semper reformanda" is part of our western protestant heritage. It means that we have never arrived with the final word.

Child Theology constitutes a process that is beginning to reform parts of theology and church.

Let me give an example. In the letter of Paul to the Colossians, which we noted earlier, is so important for our understanding of the nature of God in Christ and the purposes of God in the world, but Paul refers little if at all to children.

So we must ask the question: if the whole is only realised in God/Christological/Trinitarian way, is it enough simply to say we have Colossians pattern for holistic Christian theology. Is it the last word?

What Paul doesn't do in that text, is to put the child in the midst of his theology. This is what Child Theology suggests is a pressing task. What difference might this make?

One of the dangers of Colossians is that it is rather other-worldly: seek those things that are above etc. Children on the other hand are very down to earth. Colossians is quoted often for a kind of theology of God as Creator who brings everything together. The vulnerability and uncertainty represented by the child is marginalised if not erased.

So every part of our theology, psychology, theory, management, must be open to disturbance, shaking by the realities of the lives of children. If ever we get to the stage when we think we can do without the child in the midst we have for sure erred and strayed from the way of the Cross.

#### **(4) Some of the contributions and challenges of Child Theology to seminaries and Christian organisations**

Seminaries have a vital and formational role in shaping and informing church. Most Christian leaders pass through seminaries for good or ill! And HCD should come to any participating seminary with a health warning: this may seriously damage the way you do things! It will not leave you unchanged and unscathed! You may think that it is another specialist subject to be tacked on to your child ministry department, but be warned: it goes right to the heart of your enterprise.

Jesus seeks to place a child right in the midst of your seminary. And he does this not to provide a comforting object of admiration and comfort, but to challenge what you stand for: your priorities, and to shed light on all that you are doing in his name. The principal of a theological seminary in the Philippines put it crisply to me: you are offering the child as a new hermeneutic. I reminded him that in fact Jesus had offered the child as this over 2000 years ago, and all that we were doing was trying to follow his lead!

In time every part of what you do will be reformed. That includes the way you do things (the process) and the content, including your historical, biblical, systematic, and practical theology. And Jesus is longing for you to do this. And the church and children are waiting.

And we can ask this of every part of Compassion International too. Do not think that Child Theology is simply a tool, and part of a course. It will shine light on every part of your endeavours. Much of this light will make the way clearer, but some of it will be like a searching beam revealing that which must be rethought and changed. All the time Child Theology is asking whether we have made the question posed at the outset central to all our study and work: What does it mean for us to change and become like little children in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven? That ray of light: that searchlight beam must be thrown on every aspect of our study and work.

And if we really hear the question it is radical and subversive. Just pause for a moment: is it really possible that we (yes, us) are outside the Kingdom of Heaven? The disciples balked at this, and we will do the same. This was the starting point for me. I revisited the foot of the cross, and Jesus reminded me that I brought nothing but my sin and empty basket. I thought I was bringing a lot more, but in the Kingdom everything is by God's grace. There is nothing hoarded on earth, nothing gained.

A long term objective of Child Theology is to sow seeds that will germinate in every part of the world and the church so that in time the whole of the Christian understanding of God, his Word, His church, His mission, will be reformed. Children will no longer be marginalised, but at the heart of its life and worship beside Jesus.

### **Conclusion**

Initiatives whether Christian or secular to help children in the world, including rescue, community development, education, evangelism and so on, have developed largely in the absence of sustained theological reflection. There are some exceptions, for example the work that Scripture Union has done relating to sin, the gospel and salvation and evidenced in statements and literature.

A major reason for this absence is the fact that very little sustained Child Theology has been done. Where it exists it has been done largely by individuals and has not reached the mainstream of theological education and church. Whereas the influences of theologies of the poor, women and indigenous peoples on mainstream theology are there for all to see, we cannot yet say the same for Child Theology.

So let us assume that Child Theology in various ways, including through students of HCD finds its way from the margins to the mainstream, what contributions might it make to the world of children?

- (1) Rethinking education
- (2) Reconfiguring “parenting” and “care”
- (3) Reconsidering rights
- (4) Rediscovering key doctrines of Creation and Sin and Salvation and offering them to the world that is trying to make sense of realities without them
- (5) Politics moving from short term expediency to longer term visions considering children and children’s children
- (6) Seeing children as partners in God’s mission in reconciling the world to himself.

By God’s grace and in His time we have an HCD course and programme of which Child Theology is a core and non-negotiable component. It is not special pleading to argue that this is a jewel in the crown of the course and that it gives it foundations, coherence and an organising principle. HCD began in a theological seminary and is part of a theology degree. That is appropriate and will remain so for the reasons given. As such it has no desire to dominate or control, but to serve.

This paper is offered in that light and that spirit. To do anything else would be to remain deaf to the teaching of Jesus, and blind to his action of placing a child in the midst of his disciples as a sign of the Kingdom of Heaven.

## Appendices

### *Biblical theology*

Biblical theology to a large degree is simply a special case of historical theology – the Bible requires to be read like any other book, or any other piece of history – and certainly this is good practice in Biblical theology. But the Bible is close to the authoritative revelation – and Christians attend to the Bible with more respect than to most of what they find in historical theology. Some simply identify the Bible with the word of God, but this is problematic – are the genocides of Joshua to be followed, because the story says God ordered them? That is one question. Another sort of question is what it means that the living God, who is beyond all human grasp, speaks in a standing human word. It is worth remembering Barth's insistence that the Bible is not the word of God as a holy Scripture, but only as God speaks it by the Spirit – God's voice is always a living voice; God's word is always what God speaks here and now – we cannot simply treat words spoken in the past as God's word, but must wait for God to speak them now. God's word is in Christ, living, then in Bible, and in preaching (in broadest sense)

### *Indigenous theologies*

Does this solve the problem? Even if all the theology in Penang were Asian in one of the possible senses of that word, would it not still be secondhand and borrowed for most if not all its practitioners? What is the real objection to being indebted for our theologies or to agreeing with other people? In this globalised mixed up world, more and more things are hybrid – as christian theology has always been, except when people like the German Christians have tried to eliminate the Jewish element in it or the Hebraists try to get rid of the Greek components. Undoubtedly everyone needs to be persuaded in his own mind, and in that way authentic, but that is different from subsuming ourselves into some vague collective concept like being English or being Asian.

### *Cutting Edge Questions*

How are these questions dealt with in the course? What summary and process is used? Does not this paper need to have a reminder of them and some more explanation about their use? My view is that they have faded into the past in the CT constituency generally – my memory is that those about child suffering and abuse were strong, but far from novel, and we are addressing them in the book's final chapter. But there were also questions about whether children could be received at communion, or had to wait till the proper time, - which is a question we leave aside as tribal. We did analyse them at Penang ?II? but never came out with a workable agreed synopsis of the issues, and we have not worked at them effectively. I do not doubt they resonate with you, but not with CT consciousness generally

The church is thoroughly ambiguous in this setting because a large part of church is a form of development (baptism, sacrament, Christians en masse, production line...). But the church is there to speak for God. The understanding and practice of church has to live with this ambiguity and to allow the disturbance of God to break through. It doesn't seek to preserve its order and form. It is open to disturbance.