

Child Theology and the Reflective Practitioner: Is child theology relevant for missionaries?

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Contents

1.1 First some open questions:	1
1.2 Personal background and interest in the topic:	1
1.3 Developing networks and learning about Child Theology.....	2
1.4 What is Child Theology	2
1.4.1 A key text: ‘He placed a child in the midst’ (Matt. 18:1-6)	3
1.4.2 A ‘working definition’ of Child Theology	3
1.4.3 Concepts that are being explored in Child Theology.....	4
1.4.4 Some ideas we are exploring concerning children in crisis and theology.....	4
1.5 Time for a visual lesson – what about the human and eternal nature of children	5
1.6 Do you expect a ‘child in the midst’ to challenge your thinking about God?.....	5
1.7 Some practical applications of Child Theology for your consideration	6

When I was first asked to address ‘child theology’ at this conference, I worried that that such a topic would provoke glazed eyes and questions like, ‘and just how is this topic supposed to help me as a missionary or practitioner?’ What follows is a short reflection and outline drawn from personal experience in working with both Child Theology and missionary practice.

1.1 *First some open questions:*

How many of you have heard of Child Theology? Have you read anything? What do you think Child theology involves? Do you think this has relevance for academics, for practitioners – or both?

1.2 *Personal background and interest in the topic:*

Let me give some personal background on this topic. It may help you to know I was raised in Methodist children’s home in North Carolina. I can testify that this was not exactly a pleasant experience. My ministry with troubled youth began after coming to Christ in 1982. I worked with Teen Challenge in Los Angeles and later with Teen Challenge in Asia (Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia). After finishing an MA in missiology at Fuller, our family moved to Thailand in 1988 and then Cambodia in 1995. In those first two terms we worked with churches and community outreach and responded to the needs of children and families in the slums in Bangkok. We also began a ministry with children from the Hill Tribes in Northern Thailand who were ‘at-risk’ from sexual exploitation. Later we met thousands of children in Cambodia that had been ‘marginalized’ and abandoned after the end of the Khmer Rouge reign of terror. We served as the country directors with AGWM missionaries who were assisting about 4,000 children in a number of projects (including orphanages, schools, clinics, and community development).

It was in Cambodia that I first began to articulate theological questions about our work with children. A primary one which I would state today as: ‘how do we integrate our concerns for the physical and social needs of children with our concerns for the eternal needs of children?’ [I will speak on this a bit more later in the paper].

From 1998-2002, I was asked by my mentor and friend, Bob Houlihan to work with Mission of Mercy (MoM) in ‘international program development’. Bob asked me to evaluate a number of programs in Asia where MoM was assisting children. I looked at over 30 projects in the four years I was working with MoM. By the end of that time I had many more questions about children, mission, theology, missiology, and professional practice.

I observed that AGWM missionaries and many AG churches were excellent at getting close to children in need. However, I found that simply responding to the immediate perceived needs of children tended to control our actions and thinking. Thinking theologically about children and childcare were new areas for us. Byron Klaus, Doug Petersen, and other friends encouraged me to do additional work in holistic theology and integral mission at Oxford Centre for Mission Studies. I recently completed a 6 year (part-time) research project while working as a missionary in Romania. This study was an investigation of partnership between Faith-based Organizations (FBOs) and Evangelical/Pentecostal churches in reference to children and youth in crisis between 1990 and 2004. My research interests were focused on the factors that enabled or hindered FBO-church collaboration as both organizational entities responded to children who had been institutionalized by the state policies of Nicolae Ceausescu.

1.3 Developing networks and learning about Child Theology

In 1998, I was fortunate to learn of an organization in Oxford, UK called the *Viva Network* (see www.viva.org) and an international conference called '*International Cutting Edge*'. I attended my first ICE in 1999 and have served on the steering committee and board for this event the last 8 years. Some of you have attended these conferences and most of the conference documents can be accessed online: http://www.viva.org/?page_id=106. I encourage you browse these documents if you are interested in child-focused studies.

Through ICE, OCMS, reading, research, organizational networking, and natural curiosity I became involved in what is now known as the 'Child Theology Movement'. **Theology and reflection on God** offers the activist missionary an opportunity to ask questions such as: 'How and in what ways are my actions honoring Christ and His Kingdom? 'How does a child point our ministry towards the Kingdom?' [Which Jesus seems to suggest in Matt. 18: 1-2 that the disciples have yet to enter]. At the close of this talk, I will show you a Power Point presentation that frames what is meant by 'Child Theology'. First I will make some introductory remarks and ask that you grab a cup of coffee if your mind is still asleep.

1.4 What is Child Theology

Whatever we may say about 'Child Theology' it is 'theology' – it is important for to point out to practitioners that theology is not to be understood as primarily the domain of scholars and academics. We are all constantly talking and thinking (logos) *about* God (theos). The 'about' in this sentence can be troublesome as it may easily give the impression that 'that God is an inert object about which the theologian speaks' (Willmer, 2003:1).

A key question in Child Theology and for others who claim to 'speak for God' is 'are we speaking intelligently of God'? We ask additional questions like:

- What does God have to say to us about children?
- How have we heard the Word of God?
- What does our thinking and action suggest we have heard?
- Does what we seem to have heard and what we make of it in practice correspond faithfully to what God has said?

These can be searching theological questions we ask of ourselves, of our churches, and of our organizations.

God is not a blank sheet of paper on which we write our opinions. Christians can only be what they are because God is the 'prime theo-logian'. Also please remember that theology is not just what we say and think about God – it is also what we do in the name of God. In our everyday human living it is impossible to separate words from actions – they are logically integrated. I like to say 'no deeds without words and no words without deeds'. Theology is not just finding the best words to describe God, Christ, sin, redemption – it requires a conscious and serious engagement with the text and context, it requires a living faith demonstrated in concrete action.

I cite my good friend and UK supervisor Haddon Willmer who helped start the ‘child theology movement’.¹

God speaks himself, for himself, in all creation. The Word was God; the Word was made flesh (Jn 1). God speaks himself in Jesus Christ by the Spirit. Jesus the Word came proclaiming that the Kingdom of God is near and inviting us to get ready to enter. And at a critical point in his argumentative and creation-renewing ministry, Jesus took a child and set him or her in the midst, *a pointer* to the kingdom of God and a *point of entry* into the Kingdom. Jesus the Word makes the child one of God’s languages, a theological language (Willmer, 2004:2).

1.4.1 *A key text: ‘He placed a child in the midst’ (Matt. 18:1-6)*

A key text for Child Theology has been Matt. 18: 1-6 (cf. Mk. 9:33-37; Luke 9: 46-48 these texts are included at the end of this paper). Jesus sets a child in the midst of a theological argument. The disciples are arguing about ‘who will be greatest in the Kingdom’. Jesus is on his way to his final passion in Jerusalem, he has been teaching these disciples for three years about the Kingdom of God.

What is Jesus teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven? Greatness in His kingdom has nothing to do with status, power, strength, influence, wealth, or the normal assumptions in society. You need to change (to repent) to enter the kingdom. The Kingdom is in fact not like an earthly kingdom at all! It’s the opposite in every way. Upside down! Inside-out! The best way of describing it is not as a place or territory at all, but as "God’s way of doing things" (White, 2001:4) . That’s when all the stories of the kingdom fall into place.

We note that the Matt. 18 text concerning children appears in the final phase of Jesus ministry - between the confession of Peter that Jesus is the Christ (Matt. 16:13-20) the transfiguration (Matt. 17:1-11) and the triumphal entry – this is his final journey in Galilee. This placement of the narrative deserves more treatment that I can give it in this overview. For a helpful paper see Keith White’s ‘A Little Child will Lead Them: Rediscovering children at the heart of mission’ (http://www.viva.org/?page_id=296).

In Matt. 18: 1-5 Jesus turns the disciple’s theological quest for power on its head. He calls a child to stand beside him, he intentionally places a ‘child in their midst’. In this case he does not place the child here as *an object for mission* or care – he places a child in the midst to challenge their ideas of power and greatness. ‘You need to become like little children if you are to enter the kingdom of Heaven’. Welcoming a little child we welcome the Lord of the Kingdom! The Kingdom belongs to the childlike...

These and other insights were enlarged in a conversation and dialogue with missionaries, practitioners, and theologians in Penang, Malaysia in 2001 and continue with international forums around the world (see the Penang Report and other CT consultations I have made available on the book table). I return to Willmer’s comments:

But a child is not a language in the specific way that words – ‘vocables’ – are. Like the Word, this language is more than the arrangement of sounds. A child is a person who can be ignored, despised, made to stumble, ill-treated – respected and received as a pointer to the Kingdom of God. Jesus says that since the child is a pointer to the Kingdom of God, the child is a *point of entry* for us into the kingdom of God - he who receives a child in my name, receives me and the Father who sent me (2004:3).

1.4.2 *A ‘working definition’ of Child Theology*

‘Child Theology is an investigation that considers and evaluates central themes of theology – historical, biblical, and systematic- in light of the child standing beside Jesus in the midst of the disciples. *This child is like a lens through which some of aspects of God and his revelation can be seen more clearly.* Or if you like, the child is like a light that throws existing theology into new relief’ (Willmer & White, 2006:6)

¹ Haddon Willmer and Keith White, in working with Child Theology, have put forward the thesis: a ‘child in the midst’ acts as a theological clue about the nature of the kingdom of God. I have brought with me a small booklet ‘*An Introduction to Child Theology*’ that may be of help if you are interested in learning more about Child Theology. See also www.childtheology.org

1.4.3 *Concepts that are being explored in Child Theology*

- Children are a ‘language of God’ they may speak to us of God’s freedom, God’s mercy, God’s grace, *God’s willingness to receive*. For instance, what happens when we offer a hurting young child an embrace, rarely do young children refuse a loving embrace. God embraces us in Jesus Christ. Many metaphors are helpful in exploring the language of God through children: attentive, welcoming, openness – I am sure you can find others.
- Doesn’t the child open something in us, *a gift of love and giving?* God’s Word and life are a gift to us, they are never merely pieces of information about God – something to be possessed as if it is ours – God’s grace and life are a free gift of Himself they are contained in His Person, Life, and Word. The ‘fullness of life’ Zoe (life of the ages) that is promised by Jesus must be received and enjoyed; it must be shared with others. Like a child, we are invited into a new way of living, a new way of being and seeing.
- God’s Word to us is *always inviting* which is one of the reasons it is easy for the child to become a language that God speaks. The child presents herself to us as an invitation – such as the language Paul uses to talk of Papa (Abba God) or sometimes there is an urgent cry from children in crisis, or when the child gets into trouble and needs our support and guidance.
- Sometimes children are an invitation to simply *look and wonder at the mystery of their being*, even an invitation to try a new way of looking at ourselves, to become as a child. To *see things in a new way* – the word *repentance* comes to mind here – that we would change and see things from the beginning.
- Jesus is **not** telling these adult men to act and behave as little children – this is an invitation to become ‘true adults’ not to use the command to ‘become as little children’ as an excuse for running from being fathers and mothers and elders. God has built ‘growing up’ into children but he brings us to the stage in life where it is proper to live and act as adults. We have obligations to family, society, and community that are ‘signed’ by the child.
- Jesus is challenging these disciples to reframe their thinking – this sort of change is especially hard for religious adults who become concretized (or suffer from ‘hardening of the theological categories’). Becoming like a child does not mean ignorance; it means beginning again with openness to the Kingdom and its Lord.

1.4.4 *Some ideas we are exploring concerning children in crisis and theology*

I have developed the following ideas further in my own thinking and writing. Beyond vulnerability, humility, receiving, and giving we could explore other ways that children speak to us of God and His Kingdom.

- **Children who Surprise us with their wisdom and insights** – remember Art Linkletter’s ‘Kids say the most amazing things’. I have a lot of these examples stored in my files:

A kindergarten teacher was observing her classroom of children while they were drawing. She would occasionally walk around to see each child's work. As she got to one little girl who was working diligently, she asked what the drawing was.

The girl replied, "I'm drawing God."

The teacher paused and said, "But no one knows what God looks like."

Without missing a beat, or looking up from her drawing, the girl replied, "They will in a minute."

- **When children disturb us – what do we do when children challenge our assumptions and paradigms of suffering and pain?** Many of us have asked questions of God about the suffering of children that seems so senseless. My work with suffering children has deeply challenged my spiritual, practical, and academic journey as I seek to understand God and human pain. What about the questions that children ask of God in their pain, abuse, or abandonment. How carefully are we listening to their voices? Is our approach to children in evangelism and in our churches a realistic encounter with their psycho-social and emotional needs, their actual human condition? I argue that

children offer a theological clue for meaningful integration of the eternal and human nature we see in Jesus Christ.

- **When children challenge our assumptions and assurances of God’s ‘control’ in our lives and world.** I don’t want to open a Pandora’s box – but personally I am becoming less convinced of *categories of certainty* and more convinced of *categories of Fidelity* in my work with children, in writing, and in speaking about God and suffering children. Engaging with both children in crisis and theology has challenged me to ‘dig deeper’ in mission and ministry with children.

I am deeply committed to the good news of God in Christ. But, I have observed that we often present our views of Jesus and the Gospel with scant theological reflection on God’s covenant with humanity - demonstrated in Jesus as both God and man. Our call to serve children does not mean we can neglect our own study of the scripture or good childcare development practice. (See the CT Capetown Consultation for good insights on sin and ways that children are ‘sinned against’.)

- **Children who challenge our assumptions and expectations for specific outcomes.** Caring for traumatized children and those in deep emotional crisis requires that we embrace their reality and pain. We (missionaries, activists, faith-based organizations, churches) work hard to fix and alleviate problems with children. Theologically, we live in the time of the Kingdom which is ‘**already present**’ in Jesus. **Yet** we are living an unredeemed world - this is means we sometimes fail in our efforts. What about the child that refuses to be comforted or ‘fixed’?

How often do we stop to reflect on human freedom and God’s freedom in our work with children. Is God confined by our expectations? Do you make room in your work for the ‘disturbance of God’ when we are confronted with confusion, frustration, and disappointment? We believe that God is present and active in those ‘not yet’ circumstances when we are ‘in the valley of pain’ and we also know he is with us when we have ‘mountaintop’ experiences of joy and celebration.

1.5 Time for a visual lesson – what about the human and eternal nature of children

If you will indulge me for a minute I would like to demonstrate with what I call a **Quaker Power Point**. This illustrates a lesson I have learned in working with Child Theology. Remember what I said earlier about ‘meaningful integration of eternal concerns and human concerns for children’? Consider this as a visual illustration of Christology and an integration of what is ‘from above’ with what is ‘here below’.

You should all have a strip of paper in front of you. On one side please write the words: ‘God and eternity’, take about one minute to write words that come to mind to enlarge those ideas. Next, on the other side of the paper write ‘Humanity and the present’ and take a few minutes to write some words that enlarge those concepts (sin and pain come immediately to my mind). I will demonstrate how most of us go about thinking about these categories in our day-to-day ministries. There are other ways to see this set of categories, especially if you understand the full divinity and the full humanity of Jesus Christ. All it takes is a change in our way of ‘perceiving’ a change in our way of ‘seeing’.

1.6 Do you expect a ‘child in the midst’ to challenge your thinking about God?

If this sort of thinking is new to you, I know the feeling. In fact I would now describe my journey after the last 5 years as that of a ‘toddler’. I came to Child Theology as a pragmatist, activist and interventionist. I had never taken time for serious theological reflection with ‘children in the midst’. I had made children an object of mission and I was primarily concerned with teaching them, protecting them, rescuing them, sharing Christ with them. I still deeply care about these things but I am learning that God often speaks to us through the child about Himself, about His Kingdom, about His unlimited freedom, about His need to disturb us in our current ways of thinking that we might be open to receive new light and understanding.

We, like those disciples in Matt. 18, are continually invited to begin again, to learn what it means to enter the Kingdom – even after we have been following Jesus for several years.

God uses children as pointers to the Kingdom. For those of us concerned about children in crisis or those at-risk from sexual exploitation, trafficking, forced labor, HIV-AIDS, abandonment, life on the streets, or armed conflict – Child Theology may serve to remind us that we are invited first and foremost to honor God

and seek his Kingdom. I am hopeful that in our practice we can become better at theological reflection concerning children.

1.7 Some practical applications of Child Theology for your consideration

I have brought a number of copies of the book, Understanding God's Heart for Children which was an outcome of our International Cutting Edge in 2006. The book was edited by a team from Fuller School of Intercultural Studies. I include an overview of the Biblical Framework as an appendix to this paper with a further explanation of these seven conceptual categories with biblical references:

1. God creates every unique person as a child with dignity.
2. Children need parental love in a broken world.
3. God gives children as a gift to welcome and nurture.
4. Society has a God given responsibility for the well-being of children and families.
5. Children are a promise of hope for every generation.
6. God welcomes children fully into the family of faith.
7. Children are essential to the Kingdom of God.

I encourage you to take this 'Biblical Framework for Understanding God's Heart for Children' with you. I suggest you bring together your coworkers, your staff, possibly pastors and explore these seven frameworks together. This document has been enlarged and a facilitation pack (PDF) can be downloaded at:

http://www.viva.org/en/articles/gods_heart/facilitation_guidelines.pdf

My hope is that each of you would be willing to explore these areas where you feel you have the strongest interest. Most importantly expect God to speak to you in the process. Invite the children in your projects or churches to join you as you learn and explore. Record what you are learning; be willing to share your insights with others. As you look over the Framework can you identify areas that you need to be open to examining your assumptions or your confessional assurances?

I have covered enough ground in this presentation. In closing I want to show you a Power Point presentation and ask you to pay particular attention to the questions that have been raised in Child Theology meetings. Thanks for listening and reading.

Starting Texts for Child Theology

Matthew 18: 1-5 The Greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me.

Mark 9: 33-37 Who is Greatest?

They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all." He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, 37"Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."

Luke 9: 46-48 Who Will Be the Greatest

An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest. Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him stand beside him. Then he said to them, "Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For he who is least among you all—he is the greatest." "Master," said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us." "Do not stop him," Jesus said, "for whoever is not against you is for you."