

Child Theology as a Seed¹

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Introduction

One way of describing Child Theology, as understood by the Child Theology Movement is as the rediscovery of a theological seed and the planting and replanting of it in different soils and environments around the world. The seed is so seemingly insignificant that it has been overlooked for the most part for two thousand years. But on closer inspection it has within it the potential to change everything. This paper explores just a few of the ways in which it might do this.

And what is the seed? A little child placed by Jesus in the midst of his disciples as a sign of:

Jesus himself
God (“the One who sent Jesus”)
The Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew’s version of the Kingdom of God)
Humility;
Entering the Kingdom of Heaven.

This seems a remarkable amount to be contained in the DNA of a single seed! Yet just as we ponder the babe in the manger in our imaginations and wonder how the glory of God could possibly be contained within such a tiny form, so it is with this seed. The Incarnation should have prepared us for such marvels of contraction:

“God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him” (Colossians 1: 19).

So I invite you to think of this afternoon in such a context, as seed sowing. This evokes the image of the sower, beloved of Jesus. The fullest description of the seed of Child Theology is to be found in Matthew 18 verses 1-14. It is important to note that the seed is best seen as theological (rather than say educational or sociological). The disciples were engaged in a theological discussion (or argument), and this was the way that Jesus responded. It is a core element of his teaching about the Kingdom, and of the nature of his kingship.

By definition therefore this seed relates to everything in some way whether directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, for God in Christ and the Kingdom of Heaven relate to all things visible and invisible.

But the teaching of Jesus does not spell out a doctrine or program in relation to discourses or institutions. This is for us to work on, as with so much of the life and teaching of Jesus. Paul’s letters are the foremost example of this process at work. I do not intend to give you a curriculum or method, but rather to ask you to receive this seed deep into your hearts, minds and souls so that it might take root, grow and bear fruit.

So when we think of education, whether religious or secular, we know there will be implications as the seed is allowed to germinate, but the learning outcomes are not specified!

I would like to share with you some reflections and ideas that represent work in progress about this relationship. They are largely intuitive and may be treated as hypotheses: I invite your responses to them.

Given that today’s audience is primarily involved in religious education we will seek to explore some of the implications of this theological seed for such activity. My assumption is that Jesus is teaching the disciples all through his ministry, and that this is a vital part of their education, induction. So we can justifiably make connections with our own situations and settings.

The starting point is one that gives us a different, perhaps broader perspective than usual, and it may help us see the wood when we have been used to dealing with the trees.

(1) The Whole Child

The text that contains the seed (in context, of course) is found in all three synoptic gospels. I have over recent years focused on the narrative of Matthew while drawing from the insights of the others, as well as the rest of the Bible.

The child in Matthew’s Gospel is anonymous. (S)he could have been anyone’s child, perhaps best thought of as a younger equivalent of the “unknown soldier”. The child stands for any and for all children. And Jesus

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does not select the child because of specific features or qualities (we must be careful in our exegesis here). All we know is that the child was marginal to the discussion: lacking status or “clout”. “Humility” in this context refers to lack of social position and influence not a personal quality or moral virtue. The disciples were likely to see only one aspect of the child: her lowly status. She does not rank at all in their idea of the Kingdom of Heaven. Nothing merited. Not even worth considering as an entrant! No value in the trading game that they have in mind.

So we know virtually nothing about the child except that he or she is little (*paidion*), and the child as a whole is the chosen sign that Jesus gives. Thus if we are going to make links with education (or with any other discipline) we can do no other than apply everything to the whole child.

This doesn't seem controversial in education: do we not all agree with the premise that we seek to engage with the whole child, and to allow the whole child to develop in and through the learning process?

Let us assume we can get beyond this (but it is closer to current reality than we may care to imagine!) how do we engage the whole child? This is where the philosophies and models of Froebel, Montessori, Cavaletti and Berryman (Godly Play) are particularly instructive. Everything that happens in the learning environment is intended to resonate and connect with the whole child. Mind, body and spirit are not seen as separate entities or categories, and subjects are not conceived as self-contained.

Surely this is one of the guiding principles of religious education: spirituality has to do with the whole child. And so every method will be employed to connect with the imagination, soul, and heart of the child.

(2) The Whole Learning Process

I have already used the term “learning environment” (rather than school or classroom). To understand what Jesus is trying to indicate as he plants this seed means we have to understand the whole context and history of what is, has been and will be going on. He is nearing the end of a three year program of learning (an undergraduate degree you might say?). The core theme of the whole curriculum is the Kingdom of Heaven. You can see that from the most cursory glance at Matthew's Gospel. The disciples have a traditional Jewish idea of the Kingdom and nothing Jesus does or teaches seems to disturb, let alone shake this at all. In Piaget's terms perhaps it could be said that they are locked at a stage of development that means they are unable to take in a concept that can only be arrived at later, perhaps?

And the key thing they cannot, and will not, understand is the Cross. They dismiss the whole idea that the Messiah, the Christ, their Lord, the Son of Man is destined to die as an object of scorn and ridicule. As far as they can see whatever is meant by the “suffering servant” does not and cannot apply to Jesus the Christ. For if they allowed this idea to penetrate their consciousness the whole edifice of the Kingdom they are committed to will come crashing down on their heads and their grand schemes will be scuppered.

Jesus has tried many ways to get through to them (into their “thick heads” as one of my teachers used to say), to no effect.

Can we try to imagine what aspects of education (in our particular case) we have in our minds that Jesus wishes to shake?

- What is the Cross for us that we are to carry as disciples of Jesus?
- What is it that needs to be changed if we are to become humble like the little child? Perhaps we are called to a prophetic role in our day and age.
- What are the fixed ideas we are committed to as we consider the whole learning process?
- Are we wedded to theories of development, faith formation? Has Fowler sewn everything up for us, for example?
- Are we committed to methods and institutions?
- What are our views of “success” and “failure”?
- Do we privilege adulthood over childhood or vice-versa?
- Is religious education still squeezed into other moulds?
- Are we willing to spearhead radical ways of modifying and utilizing the whole process?
- Do we see the learning environment as a “kindergarten”?

- Are we, as teachers, part of the learning process by the way we continue to explore and learn?

(3) The Whole Bible Story

The disciples had their favourite passages and themes (just like us) and Jesus sought to draw from the whole corpus (with them, as he did later with the two on the Emmaus Road).

Their view of the Kingdom of Heaven could be defended from the Scriptures, but only by privileging certain passages over others.

Now we have a responsibility to connect children and young people with the whole Scriptures, and we select and shape how we do this.

- What are our guiding principles?
- What of the “literal approach” talked of by Rowan Williams that keeps the rough edges, and refuses to iron out the wrinkles?
- What of the troubling parts?
- How do we ourselves ensure we engage with the whole?
- How do we ensure that children have the opportunity to do the same?

This is not the place to attempt an overall summary of the Bible, but I will give examples of what I mean. The Bible starts with creation, and the story has hints of darkness and chaos, of nothingness right from the opening cadences. And when you get to the book of Revelation there is a cosmic battle going on between these forces of darkness and God’s light and life. If security is to be found in all this, it is not the sort of security that comes from Valium and splitting off from real life struggles against the odds.

We find monsters of the deep and on the land Leviathan and Behemoth; we find wars, famines, murder, incest, rape, deceit, slavery, plagues, earthquakes, civil wars, revolutions, invasions overshadowing every event. The birth of Jesus, like the birth of Moses takes place in the context of the systematic murdering of baby boys. This “insecurity” (that which threatens security) occurs at every level: from the intrapersonal experience of individual human beings, through families, tribes and nations. And the universe itself is shown to be set in a context of death and extinction.

We find individuals like Job, Jeremiah, wrestling with how to continue living with any integrity or peace: their struggles are described in what some might consider inordinate detail. Esther and her people are threatened with extinction through ethnic cleansing; Jesus wrestles in Gethsemane in a way that recalls his forty days fasting and being tested. This period in turn recalls the forty years of the Israelites in the wilderness; and this period is as nothing compared to the 430 years that the Hebrews spent in slavery calling out apparently in vain to their god.

The problem is that the so-called “Children’s Bibles” filter out most of this shadowy, threatening, ugly, evil, dark side and element of the narrative. And this is very significant not only for children, but for us all, because many Christian adults still depend heavily on what they learnt at Sunday School as a basis for their understanding of the Bible.

Perhaps the best treatment of this process and of its effects is by Gretchen Wolff Pritchard in *Offering the Gospel to Children*. She calls what children are offered a “distorted canon”. At one point she summarises her thesis thus:

“But the greatest problem with these children’s Bibles is their distortion of the Old Testament canon, and the implications of this for children’s ability to understand the Bible not as “a story”, but as “my story”. For the heart of the Scriptures is a continuing pattern of exile and return, of loss, hope and restoration, or new life out of renunciation and death. And it emerges not only from narrative, but from prophecy, psalm, and hymns; from vision and exhortation; from parables, image and metaphor.

“This pattern recurs in the Hebrew Bible in three great movements. The first is the primeval exile from the Garden of Eden, echoed in the call to Abraham to leave his kindred and his country and seek a land of promise. The second is the

bondage in Egypt of the children of Israel, their deliverance in the Exodus, their entry into the land, and the building of Jerusalem, the joy of the whole earth. The third is the faithlessness of the people, the destruction of Jerusalem, the Babylonian Captivity, and the promise, beyond hope, that the dry bones will live...²

One of the main reasons that for twenty years I have been working on a new edition of the Bible³ is so that children and families around the world can read the *whole* Bible for themselves. It is my experience of living at Mill Grove that has made the need for such a major commitment of time and energy necessary. “Children’s Bibles”, like ordinary Sunday School lessons tend to stay on the side of what is comforting and neat. So, for example there is never the end of the story of David and Goliath when David walks around holding the giant’s head, or when Saul puzzlingly asks who David is.

What was needed was a complete text that had the difficult bits in it. And the reason is so that the real lives of children and families with all their messiness and unsatisfactory “conclusions” and events finds resonance in what they read in the Bible. The two stories (the narrative of the Scriptures and the biography of the reader) are allowed to work on each other dialectically.

(4) The Whole Community

The seed has implications for the communities of which we are all part: as it grows it brings change not only to individuals but to groups.

Without questioning the role and place of specialists in different areas of life, it is important to explore the role of the whole community in learning process. I don’t think this should be hard for professional teachers to accept, especially those engaged in religious education. Isn’t it received wisdom that it takes a village to raise (teach) a child?

Jesus was creating a new community, and a radical new type of community at that. As the child stood beside Jesus, surrounded by the solid rank of disciples, a potential new social group was emerging. Would any of the disciples be prepared to break rank, to come down and become humble enough to identify with the little child, and the servant leader who chose to be represented by this little child, this nobody?

He drew from and engaged every part of the communities he encountered: women, outsiders, and children: people drawn from different cultures, ages and backgrounds.

And his purpose was to create a new community, the Kingdom of Heaven that went beyond family and traditional institutional boundaries (Pentecost), and linked people in new ways. It was an inside-out, upside-down and back-to-front sort of group, where the greatest was the servant of all, and the Son of Man gave his life a ransom for many.

- How is the whole church involved in religious education?
- How does school relate to the whole community?

(5) The Whole Planet

The seed has within it that which transcends the merely physical, the here and now, the local and parochial. Where it takes root it connects time and eternity, the individual and the universe of which she is part.

The Kingdom of Heaven is restricted by no levels or boundaries, by no nation or region. It is signed and modelled by the One through whom all things were made: who gave His life out of love for the whole world.

The disciples had a very limited view of the Kingdom: it was about a particular piece of land and a particular ethnic group. Perhaps we imitate their parochialism in a variety of ways: territorial, political, ethnic, professional, denominational, institutional, and the like.

It is worth hearing what Froebel saw as the heart of learning and education: “connecting the soul of each child with the whole universe”. How often we settle for so much less! It is not done by amassing facts about the

² G. Wolff Pritchard, *Offering the Gospel to Children* Boston, Cowley 1992, page 43

³ The Bible (Narrative and Illustrated) WTL-IBS, London 2008

universe, by multiplying subjects, but by connecting with the imagination of children, touching their hearts, stirring their longings, and inspiring their minds.

If there is a book that represents this well it is *Children and our Global Future* by Kristin Herzog. I commend it to you. She shows how following the lead of Jesus leads us into areas beyond which we feel comfortable and where we are at home: the seed has the potential to become a worldwide tree.

- How do we nurture the connections between children, the planet and universe?
- Do we limit the scope of God's love and rule?

(6) The Whole Purpose

Jesus had the ability to see into, and to reach into the very heart of the matter. He saw for example that a little child would challenge the very foundations of what his disciples longed for and prized.

Later he was to have a heart to heart conversation with Peter by the Sea of Galilee that led Peter to exclaim: "You know all things!" And still today Jesus probes our very motives and goals; what we see as the purpose of our life and work.

- What is our involvement with teaching children all about?
- Why are we involved?
- What are our real motives?
- Religious education must lead to such searching questions. In the midst of death we have a short period on earth. What does it mean?

The seed has within it that which challenges the very ground of our being, and how can we teach religious education to others until we have opened ourselves to the searching light of Jesus?

Conclusion

So it is that I suggest to you that one little seed has within it the potential to affect how we understand and relate to:

- The Whole Child
- The Whole Learning Process
- The Whole Bible
- The Whole Community
- The Whole Planet
- The Whole Purpose

Let me leave you with some words of Maria Montessori. I do not suggest that they contain the whole truth, but they echo something of what I have been trying to intimate about the nature of the seed: "I seek to discover the man in the child, to see in him the true human spirit, the design of the Creator: the scientific and religious truth. It is to this end that I apply my method of study, which respects human nature. I don't need to teach anything to children: it is they who, placed in a favourable environment, teach me, reveal to me spiritual secrets as their souls have not been deformed."

And in case we have not already concluded that we can do nothing worthy of the name of religious education without love, here are some challenging words of Paulo Freire:

"It is impossible to teach without the courage to love..."

And finally a poem by Jane Clements, a teacher in the Bruderhof Schools that captures the implications of this for the teacher/child relationship:

"Child, though I take your hand
and walk in the snow;
though we follow the track of the mouse together,
though we try to unlock together the mystery
of the printed word, and slowly discover

why two and three makes five
always, in an uncertain world –

child, though I am meant to teach you much,
what is it, in the end,
except that together we are
meant to be children
of the same Father

and I must unlearn
all the adult structure
and the cumbering years
and you must teach me to look at the earth and the heaven
with your fresh wonder.”

That seems to me the essence of the seed in Matthew 18: Jesus invites us to do just that. There is “unlearning” (coming down and becoming humble) to do, before we can learn to look at the whole world with fresh wonder, with teacher and child united among other things by the fact that we are children of the same Father. Where that happens the Kingdom of Heaven is being realized, and religious education is manifestly taking place.