

CHILD THEOLOGY AND THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

by Jan Grobbelaar

Jesus placed a little child among them
Mark 9:36



Child Theology Movement

Key Topics in Child Theology

Series Editor: Marcia J. Bunge, PhD

Professor of Humanities and Theology

Director of the “The Child in Religion and Ethics Project”

Christ College

Valparaiso University

USA

- | | | |
|---|---|--------------------------------|
| 1 | An Introduction to Child Theology | Keith White and Haddon Willmer |
| 2 | Experimenting Together: One Way of Doing Child Theology | Haddon Willmer |
| 3 | Child Theology for the Churches in Asia: An Invitation | Sunny Tan |
| 4 | Child Theology and the African Context | Jan Grobbelaar |

Other titles to follow

**Child
Theology**
MOVEMENT

The Child Theology Movement Limited

Registered Office:

10 Crescent Road

South Woodford

London E18 1JB

www.childtheology.org

Registered in the UK no. 494 3636

Registered Charity no. 1106542

© 2012 The Child Theology Movement Limited
First published in the United Kingdom in 2012 by The Child
Theology Movement

Email: info@childtheology.org
Website: www.childtheology.org

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without
the prior permission of the Publisher in writing.

Scripture quotations from the Holy Bible New International Version
® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society
Used by permission
All rights reserved

Printed in Malaysia

Booklet design: John Collier
Cover Photo: © 2012 John Collier

*The printing of this booklet has been sponsored by Compassion
International (Asia).*

CHILD THEOLOGY AND THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

Jan Grobbelaar
Extraordinary Lecturer
Unit for Reformed Theology and Development in the South
African Society
Faculty of Theology - Potchefstroom Campus
North-West University
Potchefstroom
South Africa



Child Theology Movement

Preface

This booklet¹ is the fourth in a series dedicated to Child Theology. The first booklet, *An Introduction to Child Theology*, by Keith White and Haddon Willmer, provides an extended working definition of Child Theology as it has been developed in the Child Theology Movement since 2001. The second booklet, *A Experimenting Together – One Way of doing Child Theology*, by Haddon Willmer, explains how a particular kind of experiment has been used in the Child Theology Movement to develop Child Theology. The third booklet, *Child Theology for the Churches in Asia: An Invitation*, by Sunny Tan, presents Child Theology in an Asian form and context. This fourth booklet looks at Child Theology from yet another angle: the continent of Africa.

Writing an essay on Child Theology from an African perspective was not an easy task. In the eyes of the adult community, I am not a child anymore. Although I can think and write passionately about children and their plight, I am still thinking and writing about what I have been many years ago but am not fully any more. I can only think and write about children as an adult “claimed by children, changed by them, and constantly in relation with them,”² while struggling to be a child in God’s kingdom.

I am also a privileged white South-African. Although I see myself as an African because I was born and bred in Africa, I did not grow up as part of a black African culture, and therefore my understanding of the realities of being a child in a black African culture is limited. I have to admit that I can only write from my subjective experiences and interactions with people from within my own context. I am only one voice from Africa and not the African voice.

¹ Parts of this booklet are a reworking of parts of the author’s doctoral dissertation. Jan Grobbelaar, “’n Ondersoek na die bediening van laerskoolkinders in en deur die gemeente as intergenerasionele ruimte” (D.Th. diss., University of Stellenbosch, South Africa, 2008). My thanks to the editors of the series as well as to Halina Hopkins, honors student at Valparaiso University, for their assistance in preparing the manuscript.

² David H. Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability: A Theology of Childhood* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), xiv.

In an effort to combat my own biases, I tried to draw into this conversation as many African sources as possible, including the work of African theologians and scholars, African proverbs, African stories, and the voices of African children. By building on such African sources and by incorporating insights from my exposure to and my interactions with “the other” from different cultural contexts, I aimed to do theology as a hybrid.³ Although this approach and some of my claims might sound foolish to many people, the calling of a theologian is to be a fool (1 Corinthians 1-4) and not a powerhouse of influence and control and wisdom.

Hopefully, my own foolishness, my struggle to express myself within the limits of language, and the rough edges of my thoughts will challenge readers to integrate into their lives and theologies the implications of Jesus’ shockingly foolish act of putting a child in the midst of the disciples as the answer to their deep theological question.

Jan Grobbelaar
Extraordinary Lecturer
Unit for Reformed Theology and Development in the South African Society
Faculty of Theology - Potchefstroom Campus
North West University
Potchefstroom
South Africa.

Manager: Theological Projects
Petra for Children’s Ministry

³ See Nico Koopman, “Hibriditeit bied mense ’n weg,” *Die Burger*, 17 November 2010, 13.

Contents

Preface	1
Contents	3
Child Theology and the African Context	4
Introduction	4
Part One: Doing Child Theology	7
The Nature of Theology	7
Distinctive Characteristics of Child Theology	9
Child Theology as Missional Theology	10
Child Theology as a Hermeneutic	10
Child Theology as a Transformed Way of Doing Theology	11
Child Theology as a Way of Life	17
Part Two: The Child in the Midst	19
The Context of the First Century Mediterranean World	19
The Importance of Contextualization	21
The African Context(s)	23
Children Marginalised in Theology	36
Children Marginalised in African Society	37
Part Three: An African Child in the Midst	39
uBuntu	40
Kinship	45
Socialisation of African Children	49
The Village	50
Part Four: Some Perspectives from the Broader Christian Tradition	57
The Coptic Orthodox Church and Children	58
The Phenomenal Growth of the Early Church	62
The Belhar Confession	63
An Important Question	66
Part Five: Some Implications of an African Child Theology	67
Ecclesiology – Our Understanding of Church	67
Ministry with Children	72
Receiving Christ: Children as Representatives	77
Receiving Christ: an Ethic of Blessing	79
Ministry by Children: Children as Agents	83
Transformed Leadership	85
Conclusion	90

Child Theology and the African Context

Introduction

One day a strange bird arrived in a small village that nestled among low hills. From that moment on nothing was safe. Anything the village planted in the fields disappeared overnight. Every morning there were fewer and fewer sheep and goats and chickens. Even during the day, while the people were working on the lands, the gigantic bird would come and break open their storehouses and granaries, and steal from their food supplies for winter.

The villagers were devastated. There was misery in the land – everywhere was the sound of wailing and the gnashing of teeth. No one – not even the bravest hero of the village – could get his hands on the bird. It was just too quick for them. They hardly ever saw it. They just heard the rushing of its great wings as it came to perch in the crown of the old yellowwood tree, under its thick canopy of leaves.

The headman of the village tore out his hair in frustration. One day, after the bird had plundered his livestock and winter supplies, he commanded the older men to sharpen their axes and machetes and to move as one against the bird. “Cut down the tree – that is the answer,” he said.

With axes and machetes ground to gleaming razor-edges, the older men approached the great tree. The first blows landed heavily and bit deep into the flesh of the trunk. The tree shuddered, and from the thick, tangled leaves of its crown the strange and mysterious bird emerged. A honey-sweet song came from its throat. It reached into the hearts of the men and spoke of fabulous, far-off things that never would return. So enchanting was the sound that the machetes and the axes fell one by one from the hands of the men. They sank to their knees and stared upwards in longing and yearning at the bird that sang for them in all its brilliantly coloured splendour.

The men’s hands became weak. Their hearts became soft. No, they thought, so beautiful a bird could never have caused such damage and destruction! And when the sun sank red in the west, they shuffled like sleepwalkers back to the headman and told him there was nothing, but nothing, that they could do to harm the bird.