

The Sounds of Children:

The Child Placed by Jesus in the Midst of the Disciples in Dialog with Christian Development

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I. Introduction

“There's a sound missing in Kyiv, the sound of children.”¹ This is the comment from a journalist reporting in Ukraine in the aftermath of Russia’s invasion. Children have been killed, kidnapped, and displaced. The sound of children missing from places like Kyiv is now heard in the “foreign” languages spoken on the streets and playgrounds in cities like my adopted hometown of Galati, Romania, where they have settled as refugees. However, just as the conflicts wane from the front-page news, the sound of children has faded to the background as they are assimilated into the local schools or travel back and forth across the border.

Children are not only marginalized in war zones or migrations. While it is true that some children are in the forefront, experiencing privileges unlike any other time in history, children throughout the world are among the most disadvantaged today, suffering from poverty, exploitation, and exclusion.² As we look at the harsh realities facing children, we tend to place ourselves on the side of the righteous, of those who attend to children, and against those who marginalize children – which is probably true of those on this call. But how do missiologists fare in this regard? David Scott has recently pointed out that “the sound of children” is more prevalent in missiological journals than in the past, but there is

¹ Leila Fadel and Arezou Rezvani, “What Russia’s War Has Meant for Some of Ukraine’s Youngest Casualties,” Europe, *NPR*, March 25, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/25/1088720592/what-russias-war-has-meant-for-some-of-ukraines-youngest-casualties>.

² UNICEF, “Progress on Children’s Well-Being: Centering Child Rights in the 2030 Agenda,” UNICEF DATA, September 17, 2023, <https://data.unicef.org/resources/sdg-report-2023/>; John Wall, *Children’s Rights: Today’s Global Challenge* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 6–10; R. L. Stollar, *The Kingdom of Children: A Liberation Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W. B. Eerdmans Pub. C., 2023), 13–22.

still the need to give children more attention.³ Perhaps like the disciples of Jesus, we get caught up in our debates about our understandings of mission, and only when Jesus stops us do we see the child placed in our midst.

When missiologists do reflect on children, the focus is often on education, evangelism and conversion, or third-culture kids.⁴ Another major concern is holistic mission to children, which includes social action and international development.⁵ It is this latter “sub-discipline” that will be the focus of this presentation – though, following Al Tizon, we assert that there “is no other legitimate kind of mission, except integral mission!”⁶

Much good development work has been done by Christians.⁷ Many children have been educated. Many of the sick have been cared for. Many have been fed. Infrastructure that serves entire communities has been built. Markets have been expanded. Many have come to faith as followers of Christ. It is difficult to criticize development work made from sacrificial acts and which is beneficial to those in desperate need. Yet, much of Christian development is done with little theological reflection. Without theological reflection, activism can be carried by its own momentum, which may be informed more by secular models of development that do not

³ David H. Scott, “Where Are Children in Missiology? English- Language Publications over the Past Decades,” *Mission Studies* 40, no. 2 (June 2023): 209–30, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15733831-12341911>.

⁴ Dan Brewster, “The 4/14 Window: Child Ministries and Mission Strategy,” *Transformation* 14, no. 2 (April 1997): 18–21, <https://doi.org/10.1177/026537889701400206>; Scott, “Where Are Children in Missiology?”

⁵ Thomas Dundnes Dronen, “Christian Mission and International Development,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Mission Studies*, ed. Kirsteen Kim, Knud Jørgensen, and Alison Fitchett-Climenhaga (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 257–73; Lap Yan Kung, “Christian Mission and Social Action,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Mission Studies*, ed. Kirsteen Kim, Knud Jørgensen, and Alison Fitchett-Climenhaga (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 274–92.

⁶ Dronen, “Christian Mission and International Development,” 257; Al Tizon, “Mammon and Empire: Confronting the Root of All Evil,” *Christian Relief, Development, and Advocacy: The Journal of the Accord Network* 5, no. 1 (November 2023): 85, 1.

⁷ That is not to say that Christian mission has not also committed harms. See Steve Corbett et al., *When Helping Hurts How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor ... and Yourself* (2014), 61–67. For example, aligning mission with state agendas has contributed to colonization; infrastructure has been built only to be abandoned without the ability to sustain it.

necessarily cohere with the Christian faith.⁸ In this presentation, I reflect theologically on Christian development by looking at it through a particular pericope presented in Matthew 18: Jesus places a child in the midst of the disciples. Because of the limitations of this presentation, I focus specifically on three actions: placing a child in the midst, turning and becoming, and receiving.⁹ I relate these actions to Christian development, change, and power. I contend that Matthew 18 calls us to attend to the “sound of children,” to be interrupted by the child placed by Jesus in our midst who poses fundamental challenges to dominant approaches of evangelical Christian development.

II. The Child in the Midst: Three Actions in the Gospel of Matthew 18

Children play significant roles in the synoptic Gospels, but here we concentrate on Matthew 18. Let us recall the text:

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me...Take care that

⁸ “Christian action for children is often actually based on secular, sociological sensibility, science and concern. We just add a religious gilding to it.” John Collier, ed., *Toddling to the Kingdom* (London: Child Theology Movement, 2009), 26.

⁹ I am looking through the lens of Child Theology developed by Haddon Willmer and Keith J. White, *Entry Point: Towards Child Theology with Matthew 18* (London: WTL Publications, 2013); Keith White and Haddon Willmer, *An Introduction to Child Theology* (London: Child Theology Movement, 2006).

you do not despise one of these little ones, for I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven” (Mt 18:1-5, 10).

In what follows, we concentrate our reflections on three actions: Jesus places a child in the midst of the disciples, tells his disciples to turn and become like children, and bids them to receive children.

A. He called a child, whom he put among them...

Looking at its context, we see that Matthew 18 is not firstly about a child but rather about the question of greatness in the kingdom of heaven. In the synoptic parallels of Luke and Mark, the scene depicts an argumentative dispute about greatness (Mk. 9:33-37, Lk 9:46-48).¹⁰ Without entering into conversation with the literature about what the kingdom of God means, we note that the disciples, at this juncture, have a certain understanding of the coming kingdom that will fulfill the hopes of Israel’s restoration.¹¹ In whatever way the disciples understood the kingdom, they are wrongheaded. They seek high rank and honor based on their claims of merit or seniority.

Into this tense theological debate about greatness, Jesus “calls” a child and places her/him “in their midst.” The child in the midst is an interruption, a surprise, and a disturbance to the argument. Greatness, according to Jesus, is unlike that in the worldly empires – defined by

¹⁰ The argument may follow Jesus’ naming of Peter as the rock and giving him the keys or from Peter, James, and John being invited to witness the transfiguration. In Matthew’s gospel, the disciples broaden the debate from greatness to greatness in the kingdom.

¹¹ This may include the ousting of foreign rule (whether that be Caesar or the Herodian dynasty), the return of God’s glory to the temple and the proper practice of Torah, and the forgiveness of debts, *inter alia*. Jesus redefines these expectations of defeating enemies as Satan, sin, and death and inaugurating the New Creation. See: N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 2. impr, vol. 2, Christian Origins and the Question of God (London: SPCK, 1999).

“territory, control, wealth, and prominence.”¹² In the disciples’ context, the Roman Empire privileges the center at the expense of others and benefits the few hierarchal heads to the disempowerment of the many. The child is a surprise because children are invisible to the disciples or even seen as a hindrance to the coming kingdom (Mt 19:13-15; Mk 10:13-16; Lk 18:15-17).¹³ Jesus says that if one wants to be great in the kingdom of God, then he/she needs to be like a child. This is disturbing because children have no social rank.¹⁴ Not having the standing to fully participate in society, a little child “represents the inability to compete.”¹⁵ Not only do children have no status and thereby no means to compete for rank in the kingdom of heaven, they also are not obligated and seen as incapable of fulfilling Jewish law.¹⁶ As “non-doers of the law,” children cannot achieve a religious position or have any religious standing of their own.¹⁷ They are simply given the kingdom because of their need. Jesus makes the child visible, centers the child, and says that the child says something that the disciples need to learn about the kingdom of God. The child is the image of greatness.

¹² Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading*, The Bible & Liberation Series (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2000), 362.

¹³ The disciples’ quest for greatness is oft repeated. Another instance seen in James and John saying to Jesus, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” Mk 10:37) Further, Jesus says, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them...It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant...” (Mt 20:24-28).

¹⁴ The same Aramaic word is used for “child” and “servant.” See: William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament 2 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publ, 2010), 340; Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27 - 16:20*, Word biblical commentary / [general ed.: Bruce M. Metzger; David A. Hubbard; Glenn W. Barker. Barker. Old Testament ed.: John D. W. Watts. New Testament ed.: Ralph P. Martin] Vol. 34, B (Nashville: Nelson, 2008), 61.

¹⁵ Willmer and White, *Entry Point*, 69.

¹⁶ Judith M. Gundry, "Children in the Gospel of Mark, with Special Attention to Jesus' blessing of the Children (Mark 10:13-16) and the Purpose of Mark," in *The Child in the Bible*, eds. Marcia J. Bunge et. al. (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2008), 169.

¹⁷ Judith Gundry, “Children in the Gospel of Mark, with Special Attention to Jesus’ Blessing of the Children (Mark 10:13-16) and the Purpose of Mark,” in *The Child in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 169–71.

We remember the context of Jesus' actions. The three evangelists have narrated Jesus's words about followers needing to deny themselves and to take up their cross (Mt 16:24-28; Mk 8:34-38; Lk 9:23-27). As Warren Carter points out, the cross is a political image of shame, humiliation, pain, social rejection, marginalization, condemnation, and death. By using the cross as a requirement for discipleship, Jesus is summoning disciples to a "life of marginalization" and to identification "with those understood as cursed by God."¹⁸ Since the disciples have failed to accept or to understand this, Jesus places a child in their midst. Whereas the disciples had been resistant to "the way of the cross," Willmer and White think that "[t]he child might be a helpful sign, charming with new life rather than dark with death."¹⁹ The child serves as a parable.²⁰ Through the child, Jesus reiterates the call to discipleship, to take up one's cross, to attend to the child that is invisible, marginalized, and outside the power games. Contrary to competing for position in the kingdom, they are to turn and become "like this child."

B. Unless you change and become like children...

Matthew's is the only Gospel in which Jesus calls the disciples to "turn" or to "change." While the word is not the same as used to translate "convert," R.T. France says that the word does suggest "the radical nature of the change involved."²¹ It implies that the disciples are looking and heading in the wrong direction. In fact, the disciples are jockeying for position in the

¹⁸ Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 344.

¹⁹ Haddon Willmer, "The Triangle: Theology, Mission and Child," in *Theology, Mission and Child: Global Perspectives*, ed. Bill Prevette (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2014), 19.

²⁰ Evans, *Mark 8-16*, 61.

²¹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2007), 274. Hagner too argues that verb *strepomai* coheres with "repent" *metanoein*. Donald A. Hagner and Bruce Manning Metzger, *Matthew 14 - 28*, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, Nachdr., Word Biblical Commentary / [General Ed.: Bruce M. Metzger; David A. Hubbard; Glenn W. Barker. Old Testament Ed.: John D. W. Watts. New Testament Ed.: Ralph P. Martin], Vol. 33, B (Nashville: Nelson, 2008), 518.

kingdom of heaven, and here Jesus implies that they still need to enter by turning and becoming like children.

However, Jesus is not asking the disciples to become immature or childish. As “child” is socially constructed, many notions are applied to what “becoming like a child” means. For example, in Africa children tend to be seen as not fully human; in Asia, children tend to lack agency;²² in the West, children are often romanticized.²³

Perhaps children are often more visible than in first-century Palestine. Today, it may be more appropriate to identify other invisible and vulnerable people: the elderly, immigrants, imprisoned, minority ethnicities, those with disabilities, among others. The biblical text itself intimates applicability by moving from actual “child” to “little ones” (18:6), who refer to Jesus’ disciples. In fact, in his commentary, Hagner emphasizes that “those in view are not little children but disciples.”²⁴ Yet, Hagner, in effect, erases the actual child and makes the text self-referential (i.e. disciples are called to be like the disciple and to receive disciples). In our application of child to other vulnerable people, we still need to note aspects of the actual child. Otherwise, we may commit an “illegitimate identity transfer” of applying different concepts to the same referent.²⁵ So, we can apply the child to other invisible, marginalized, or vulnerable

²² Sunny Tan, *Child Theology for the Churches in Asia: An Invitation* (London: CTM, 2007).

²³ The idealized child is evident in Lane’s comments: “Unlike adults, who do not want anything to be given to them, children are comparatively modest and unspoiled” (Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 360.) Carter cautions ascribing post-Enlightenment ideas of innocent or pure to children (Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 363.) For a description of the understanding of child in an African context, see: Kenneth Mtata, “Children in African Theologies of Community and the Human Person,” in *Child Theology: Diverse Methods and Global Perspectives*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2021), 62.

²⁴ Hagner and Metzger, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 520.

²⁵ Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics & Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 122.

peoples, but must also name the particularities of the child.²⁶ For example, in comparison to other categories of humanity, a child may intimate aspects like newness of life, smallness, socialization through imitation and differentiation, new beginnings, growth.²⁷

While there is no univocal definition of what it means to be childlike, the call to “become humble like this child” provides a clue. Humbleness can mean to relinquish status, to be vulnerable, and to be dependent on God to meet one’s needs.²⁸ The disciples become humble like a child by “stooping humbly to serve children.”²⁹ Humbleness relinquishes status and competition for rank. Becoming like a child involves the recognition of dependency on others for life.³⁰

Jesus hears the hushed sounds of a children, indicating that they point to the entry way into the kingdom of heaven. Jesus calls the disciples to become like the child, which is potent with

²⁶ White points out that “Jesus promises the kingdom to the poor and feeds, heals, and forgives the poor, but he only ever put a child in the midst.” Keith White, “He Placed A Child in the Midst,” in *The Child in the Bible*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2008), 354.

²⁷ Jurgen Moltmann, “Child and Childhood as Metaphors of Hope,” *Theology Today* 56, no. 4 (January 2000): 603–4, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004057360005600412>. Perhaps playfulness, curiosity, or naivete would be other important aspects.

²⁸ Hagner and Metzger, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 518; Judith M. Gundry-Volf, “‘To Such as These Belongs the Reign of God’: Jesus and the Children,” *Theology Today* 56, no. 4 (January 2000): 474. Green says that “children were the weakest, most vulnerable among the population. They had little implicit value as human beings, a reality that is related to the high likelihood that they would not survive into adulthood.” Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, The new international commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1997), 391.

²⁹ Gundry-Volf, “‘To Such as These Belongs the Reign of God,’” 475.

³⁰ Becoming humble like a child does not mean “becoming mindful of sin” or making “oneself “lower than one actually is.” Kelly M. Kopic, *You’re Only Human: How Your Limits Reflect God’s Design and Why That’s Good News* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2022), 113. Similarly, humbleness is not self-abnegation or the acquiescence to domination (often of women, minorities, and children); rather, it is the “renunciation of oppressive forms of power and truthful self-evaluation.” Luke Bretherton, *A Primer in Christian Ethics: Christ and the Struggle to Live Well*, First edition (Cambridge, United Kingdom; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 199.

meaning: denouncing status, being dependent, being among those who are marginalized - the opposite of what the disciples are competing for.

C. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name...

Jesus then tells the disciples to welcome children. Such an act of hospitality is socially subversive.³¹ Receiving means performing the actions of hospitality, which entails servitude.³² To provide hospitality in a first century Near Eastern culture is to acknowledge the equal or higher status of the guest.³³ Evans says that “to be received implied being welcome and being treated as a friend, even as family.”³⁴ This is highlighted by Jesus taking children into his arms, what Gundry calls “an adoptive embrace.”³⁵ Here it is not so much about giving the child status but creating social relationships in which status is irrelevant.

Receiving a child as child means that the child does not need to mature, change, or become an adult in order to be a person. Disciples “become like a child, without ceasing to be adult, when they let the child they receive be a child.”³⁶ This is a non-coercive act, which risks the uncontrollable possibilities of a child’s life – perhaps most reminiscent of the sacrificial love of the Prodigal Father (Lk 15:11-32).

³¹ Jesus’ welcoming children stands against any patriarchal norm that this is women’s work. White, “He Placed A Child in the Midst,” 365.

³² Gundry-Volf, “‘To Such as These Belongs the Reign of God,’” 475; Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 651. Greatness in the kingdom of God means serving (Mt 20:26-27).

³³ Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 391.

³⁴ Evans, *Mark 8-16*, 62. ³⁴ Children might be called upon to perform acts of hospitality, like washing feet, but “normally they would not themselves be the recipients of honorable behavior.” Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 391.

³⁵ Gundry, “Children in the Gospel of Mark, with Special Attention to Jesus’ Blessing of the Children (Mark 10:13-16) and the Purpose of Mark,” 156. He is not assuming the role of the parents, but Jesus is “extending kinship relations” (159).

³⁶ Collier, *Toddling to the Kingdom*, 24.

An aspect of hospitality is providing safety and protection. Jesus says, “do not despise one of these little ones” (Mt. 18:10). If they are invisible, then they are more easily exploited. If anyone scandalizes a little one, they will be judged. “[I]t would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea” (Mt. 18:6). The disciple is to remove any stumbling block.³⁷ In no way are children to be exploited and, ultimately, hindered from coming to Jesus (Mt. 19:14).

As the disciples are de-centered from their debates on greatness and the child is centered, the focal point remains Jesus. The child receives significance through Jesus’ intimate identification. By welcoming children, Jesus says we welcome him.³⁸ Some view this identification as representation. For example, Lane believes that the child represents Jesus who is welcomed through his emissary.³⁹ The child may indicate, as Bonhoeffer believes, that Jesus wants to belong to children.⁴⁰ Yet, the text seems to imply more. Jesus’ identification with the child says something about his status (i.e., humble and lowly), the location of the kingdom he proclaims (i.e., belonging to those who cannot compete for it), and comportment in the kingdom (i.e., humbleness, hospitality, and protecting the vulnerable). The child may also be understood as a sign. The child may signify the “already” of the promised kingdom, but she may also point to

³⁷ Are these images of dismemberment reminders of the call to self-sacrificially lay down of one’s life?

³⁸ Mark and Luke add the Sender: “whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me” (Mk 9:37) and “whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me...” (Lk 9:48). This has implications for trinitarian relationships.

³⁹ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 341.

⁴⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 10, Barcelona, Berlin, New York (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 351 as cited in Andrew Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age: Keeping Sacred Time Against the Speed of Modern Life*, Ministry in a Secular Age, volume three (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2021), 232.

“the darkness that is still waiting for the Kingdom.”⁴¹ This involves communing with Jesus in the not-yet, in the suffering, and in the inexplicable realities experienced by the child. Inspired by John Wesley’s instructions on caring for the needy, Pamela Couture says that caring for children is a “means of grace, a vehicle through which God makes God’s self known to us and to them.”⁴² Others see the identification more sacramentally. For example, Moltmann holds that the identification means Jesus’ hidden presence in children, as with others who are lowly.⁴³ Jesus’ presence is mediated through the child. While some may overidentify Jesus with the vulnerable,⁴⁴ Moltmann safeguards this by pointing out that Jesus’ identification with the poor is unilateral.⁴⁵ Jesus establishes that who welcomes the child, welcomes him and is therefore not reversible. Whether one envisages the identification as one of representation, revelation, a means of grace, sacramental presence, or a sign it is, as Gundry states, an issue of “ultimate significance.”⁴⁶ The child, in some way, mediates a direct encounter with Jesus.

Looking at three actions in Matthew 18, we note Jesus’ redirection of his disciples toward greatness that centers the marginalized one without the ability to compete for status, his

⁴¹ Collier, *Toddling to the Kingdom*, 25.

⁴² Pamela D. Couture, *Seeing Children, Seeing God: A Practical Theology of Children and Poverty* / (Abingdon Press, 2000), 13 & 54.

⁴³ Moltmann, “Child and Childhood as Metaphors of Hope,” 599.

⁴⁴ The identification of Jesus with the child resonates with Jesus’ identification with the “least of these” (Mt. 25:40). Some may overidentify Jesus with the vulnerable, ascribing to them salvific potential. See: Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, eds., *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y. : North Blackburn, Victoria, Australia: Orbis Books ; CollinsDove, 1993), 580–603.

⁴⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, 1st Fortress Press ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 123-30.

⁴⁶ Gundry-Volf, ““To Such as These Belongs the Reign of God,”” 476.

insistence that his disciples radically turn and become like a child in humility and dependency, and his bidding his disciples to receive a child as family and in so doing welcome Jesus.

III. Relating the Three Actions to Three Themes in Christian Development

There are various ways that the text from Matthew 18 can be applied to the development context. Some simply take Jesus' invitation to children as a mandate for ministry to children. With an almost proof-texting hermeneutic, they state that because Jesus cares for children, Jesus' disciples should care for children.⁴⁷ As an image of vulnerability and dependence, the child in Matthew 18 can be applied to those who are poor, vulnerable, and invisible or those seen as inconsequential or hindrances in our society such as the elderly, immigrants, minorities, or those with disabilities. Here, however, we are not primarily looking at how Jesus treated children but rather at what Jesus is communicating about the kingdom of God through the child. In what follows, I place Matthew 18 in dialog with evangelical authors on development.⁴⁸ I relate each of the three actions discussed above to three themes: Jesus places a child in the midst with the context of Christian development, turning and becoming with theories of change, and receiving the child with power in development work.

A. Relating the Child in the Midst to the Development Context

⁴⁷ For example, Monty L. Lynn, Rob Gailey, and Derran Reese, *Development in Mission: A Guide for Transforming Global Poverty and Ourselves* (Abilene, Texas: Abilene Christian University Press, 2021), 98–101.

⁴⁸ Bryant L. Myers, *Walking With The Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*, Rev. and updated ed (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2011), Jayakumar Christian, *God of the Empty-Handed: Poverty, Power, and the Kingdom of God* (Monrovia, Calif: MARC, 1999), Bob Mitchell, *Faith-Based Development: How Christian Organizations Can Make a Difference* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2017), Corbett et al., *When Helping Hurts How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor ... and Yourself*, Brian Fikkert and Russell Mask, *From Dependence to Dignity: How to Alleviate Poverty through Church-Centered Microfinance* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2015), Lynn, Gailey, and Reese, *Development in Mission*.

Many theologies of development take the kingdom of God as its central theme.⁴⁹ We can rephrase Miroslav Volf's words and say, "The kingdom of God is our social program."⁵⁰ By placing a child in the midst, Jesus expected to change the disciples' understanding about the kingdom of heaven.

Christian development theorists speak of the kingdom of God in similar ways. According to Mitchell, Christians "are working for the kingdom of God" or "establishing the kingdom of God."⁵¹ Myers discusses the kingdom of God but sees its claims and promise as that which defines a better future for which transformational development is working.⁵² For Fikkert and Mask, poverty alleviation is a foretaste of the coming kingdom, which happens primarily through job creation, work, and provision for one's family.⁵³ Interestingly, none of these important theorists on Christian development reference Matthew 18 in their discussions on the kingdom of God. Perhaps that is why they all presume to be already on the inside of the kingdom and working for it. In our application of this pericope to development, the child represents the marginalized or the one in need, who is a clue to the kingdom of God and one's entry into it. Our dialog partners do not identify the invisible, those without status, the vulnerable, or the

⁴⁹ Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 90; Christian, *God of the Empty-Handed*, 167–224; Mitchell, *Faith-Based Development*, 14–15; Fikkert and Mask, *From Dependence to Dignity*, 38–39.

⁵⁰ Miroslav Volf, "'The Trinity Is Our Social Program': The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement," *Modern Theology* 14, no. 3 (July 1998): 403–23; Miroslav Volf, "Apophatic Social Trinitarianism: Why I Continue to Espouse 'a Kind of' Social Trinitarianism," *Political Theology* 22, no. 5 (July 2021): 407–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1462317X.2021.1955576>. This assumes all the necessary caveats like being guided by the kingdom of God but never ascribing our social programs to the kingdom of God. The correspondences of our social programs are always partial, faulty, and penultimate but hopefully seeking after and pointing to the kingdom, nonetheless.

⁵¹ Mitchell, *Faith-Based Development*, 14.

⁵² Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 90.

⁵³ Fikkert and Mask, *From Dependence to Dignity*, 38–39. These authors problematically too closely equate the kingdom with the church (115–116).

dependent as great in God's kingdom. Instead, they seek to make them great through their development work.

Matthew 18 is a more radical vision. The task of the disciples is not to help children better integrate into their world but rather to enter into God's new world imaged by the child. Gundry states it as such:

...the Gospels teach more than how to make an adult world kinder and juster for children, and how to raise children in a Christian way for an adult world. The Gospels teach the reign of God as a children's world, where children are the measure, rather than don't measure up to adults, where the small are great and the great must become small.⁵⁴

While helpfully highlighting the need to challenge our visions for the world and the shaping of adults by children, Gundry steps too far by making children the measure for the world or for God's reign, which potentially idolizes the child and is antagonistic to the goodness of God's creation of adulthood.⁵⁵ Instead of promoting a "children's world," Jesus says something about his kingdom and his world through the child. Rather than integrating the child into a reality that consists of status and competition for greatness, the child is a reminder for followers of Christ to lay down their lives and to take up the cross for the sake of the kingdom. This stands as a direct challenge to those who regard development as increased wealth, status, and power.

⁵⁴ Gundry-Volf, "To Such as These Belongs the Reign of God," 480.

⁵⁵ These insights are from personal email correspondence with Haddon Willmer, September 19, 2022.

While laying down one's life for the sake of another may sound antithetical to development, Jesus says that this is the way to human flourishing, to being greatest in the kingdom of God.

The child placed by Jesus in the midst serves to disrupt much of Christian development. Those who are excluded are a revelation of the problem of those who exclude. Development work is not the building of God's kingdom through the betterment of the lives of the excluded; rather, betterment is a witness to, an approximation, a seeking, or a sign of the kingdom of God. Instead of creating projects to "develop" the vulnerable and impoverished communities or to build God's kingdom, the first move is for development workers to train their eyes to the child, to see her greatness, and, in order to enter the God's kingdom, their need to become like and to receive the child.

B. Relating "Turning" and "Becoming Like a Child" to Theories of Change in Development

Most development organizations develop strategies or theories for bringing change. They name problems that lead to poverty and possibly identify assets among impoverished communities and then create proposals to systematically bring the change they want to see – often detailed in logical frameworks or the like. Bob Mitchell evaluates four theories of change: the "scientific rationalist or technocratic approach" (responds through technical fixes and careful management and measurement), "community participation/empowerment" (evaluating power dynamics and structural issues affecting the local context), "human rights" (seeking to ensure dignity and agency for all people with appeals to international law), and a "multi-disciplinary

approach” (non-linear, highly contextualized, and iterative based on ongoing feedback).⁵⁶ Much could be discussed and critiqued about these approaches.⁵⁷ We mention only that these theories are functionalist and tend toward a reductive analysis of reality based on the scientific method.⁵⁸ Additionally, while the desire to measure for the sake of evaluating program effectiveness is laudable, managing change can be a subtle way to manage the poor. For our purposes we note that these theories of change primarily identify the problem as being one of the impoverished community and the task of development workers is to help the poor respond to their problem.⁵⁹

The communal image of Jesus, child, and disciples in Matthew 18 intimates a different perspective that presupposes a relationship between the child (the marginalized and invisible) and the disciple (those competing for power). Recognizing the interconnectivity of all human beings helps us understand the problem of poverty as being one we all face. Speaking of interconnectivity, the missiologist Lesslie Newbigin says that all humanity shares a common nature as created by one God who is Father of all.⁶⁰ Humanity is created as interpersonal relational beings and is saved through reconciled relationships.⁶¹ Newbigin is building his anthropology on the imago Dei. Because God is not a solitary monad, asserts Newbigin, neither are human beings.⁶² Although they do not reference Newbigin or other trinitarian theologians,

⁵⁶ For a summary, see: Mitchell, *Faith-Based Development*, 25–36.

⁵⁷ For instance, Mitchell never names sin as a problem or one that needs to be faced by theories of change.

⁵⁸ The ACCORD network, comprised of major Christian development organizations, states, “Measure what matters.” God’s presence, action, grace, or power for growth, change or many of the indicators of becoming like the “child” cannot be measured. “Accord Network,” Accord Network, accessed November 22, 2020, <https://accordnetwork.org/>.

⁵⁹ This may inadvertently infantilize the “underdeveloped.”

⁶⁰ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology / by Lesslie Newbigin* (Eerdmans, 1978), 183. He applies the interconnectivity to all of nature.

⁶¹ Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 70.

⁶² Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 70.

Fikkert and Mask propose such a trinitarian theory of change.⁶³ They suggest that poverty is due to humans' "inability to live in right relationship with God, self, others, and the rest of creation."⁶⁴ Therefore, by reconciling people to right relationships through union with Christ, poverty is alleviated. While helpfully articulating a theological theory of change and addressing sin and demonic structures, there are also problems with their approach. For example, they hold a nominalist metaphysics, believing that God is one being among others and not the Source of all being, which pits God in competition with creation. Conversely, the classical theological position views God as the source of all being and who is not in competition with creation for power, space, agency, souls, grace, etc. Here, the classical theology connects with CT, which intimates that humans are to follow God in cultivating non-competitive relationships with one another. This has implications for development work.

Capitalist markets generally function as a win-lose exchange. Resources are scarce, so competition ensues. Those who are poor benefit less from the economic system due to lack or denial of access to capital, resources, markets, etc. The most prominent approach of evangelical development ministries is to help the poor gain access to the market by cultivating existing assets (assets-based community development),⁶⁵ or by or supporting microloans and entrepreneurship, and cash transfers.⁶⁶ When these development ministries have a longer-term approach, they may

⁶³ Fikkert and Mask, *From Dependence to Dignity*, 102–21.

⁶⁴ Fikkert and Mask, *From Dependence to Dignity*, 104.

⁶⁵ Corbett et al., *When Helping Hurts How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor ... and Yourself*, 119–31.

⁶⁶ Bruce Wydick, *Shrewd Samaritan: Faith, Economics, and the Road to Loving Our Global Neighbor* (2019), 102–15.

offer education, healthcare, or child sponsorship.⁶⁷ At any rate, the end goal is to access and benefit from the market.

The markets are competitive. Whereas scarcity breeds competition, a perspective of abundance enables relationships based on non-competitiveness. Jesus' call to become like the child is a call to relinquish competition. "The child represents a world of values - the kingdom of God - which is incompatible with any world to which the competitive quest for misconceived greatness is intrinsic."⁶⁸ The kingdom is not entered through achievement or rank but through grace offered by God because of our need, our dependency, and our vulnerability.

If Jesus, through the child, is inviting the disciples out of scarcity and competition and into economies of abundance and noncompetitiveness, then what does this mean for development ministries? Let us name at least five implications. First, where development projects often focus on individuals or households, they could look to the creation of public goods and identify metrics for evaluating sustainable sharing. Second, we can interrogate Myer's, Fickert's and Mask's relational view of poverty. They say that "the poor are poor largely because they live in a network of relationships that do not work for their well-being."⁶⁹ However, relationships should not exist for the exchange of goods, but the other way round.⁷⁰ In an economy of grace, objects

⁶⁷ Wydick, *Shrewd Samaritan*, 116–29.

⁶⁸ Willmer and White, *Entry Point*, 70.

⁶⁹ Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 15.

⁷⁰ This corresponds with Hunter's depiction of power as "inherently asymmetrical," which is why humans need each other's abilities and talents to survive. Thus, power is also "inherently relational, interactive, dynamically shared, and contentious..." James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 178–79.

have a social rather than material value.⁷¹ Development organizations could evaluate their economic initiatives in relational terms.⁷² Third, for development organizations, the locus of change is the poor. CT points to the change needed in those who are competing for greatness. They are to turn and receive the vulnerable child. The burden of change is shouldered more by the non-poor, rather than those with limited power or access to markets. While this should lead to positive change in the lives of the poor, development organizations can also propose and monitor change in the non-poor by looking at aspects like status, sharing, and receiving. Four, development organizations should refuse competing with one another. Five, development organizations can reconceive of projects, evaluations, and impact reports so that they are based on an economy of grace. These are typically focused on what the organization can deliver, and what they deliver justifies their existence. Instead, they can include what they receive and when they are received, where they fail and what they learn, and how they share.

There are other issues with Fickert and Mask's trinitarian theology of change. By placing the self in the center of their scheme, it is overly individualistic. Also, the authors assume that the non-poor benefit from right relationships.⁷³

Looking at development through the lens of Matthew 18 challenges both the notions that poverty is the problem of the "poor" or that poverty is a collective problem of all humanity in which the "poor" need to change. Instead, in Matthew 18, the disciples are the ones who are

⁷¹ Kathryn Tanner, *Economy of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 51.

⁷² Myers adapts an evaluative scheme for changed relationships from Jayakaran (Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 297).

⁷³ See Stephen Offutt et. al., *Advocating for Justice: An Evangelical Vision for Transforming Systems and Structures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 34–35. Fickert and Mask also imagine, as seen in their diagrams, that change occurs through Christ with only subsequent interaction with the Spirit and the Father. This raises questions about their trinitarian claims.

called to change. The disciples presuppose that they hold ranks in the kingdom but find that it belongs to the children. This is consonant with J. Christian's naming of the "god-complexes" in which the non-poor have a sense of superiority and of knowing best what the poor need – though he does not explicitly relate this to development workers as well.⁷⁴ Following Matthew 18, a "theory of change" starts with those with power turning and becoming like a child: humble, vulnerable, and dependent.

We can conceive of this change through prayer. When prayer is mentioned in international development work, it usually refers to intercession. Here prayer has turning and becoming like a child in view. It is a confession of humbleness: the truthful recognition about oneself before God and others. This includes gratitude for gifts and abilities as well as failures, frailty, and needs. Prayer is opening oneself to God to use one's powers for the sake of others and the renunciation of oppressive power in which one's win implicates another's loss. Prayer is an acknowledgement of one's vulnerability before God and others and dependence on God and others for life. Dependency is often viewed by development practitioners as "toxic" and something to be avoided.⁷⁵ Dependencies that control, disempower, or paternalize should be prevented; however, the child reminds us that we are dependent beings, existing through God and one another. Dependencies need to be recognized and should cultivate mutual flourishing. All of this means that development is not only for those perceived to be in need but is also for those who are competing for status and power. In fact, the burden of change is placed on the shoulders of those

⁷⁴ Christian, *God of the Empty-Handed*, 121–25. Myers follows Christian and even notes the fallibility of all development projects due to the corrupting power of sin. Yet, he still tends to place the development worker on the inside of God's kingdom, working "alongside poor and non-poor alike, helping them and helping ourselves uncover and accept our true identity as children of God" (Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 180.)

⁷⁵ Robert D. Lupton, *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help (And How to Reverse It)*, (New York: HarperOne, 2012); Fikkert and Mask, *From Dependence to Dignity*. Fikkert and Mask make the helpful distinction between unhealthy dependence and healthy interdependence.

with access to power. In this light, prayer involves repenting, changing, and becoming like a child, acknowledging our dependence on the grace and goodness of God who we name as our heavenly Father. This prayerful work is a means of change and should inform visions for development.

C. Receiving a Child and Power in Development

No development practitioner can ignore the subject of power, as Bryant Myers reminds us.⁷⁶ Theories for development analyze poverty and propose ways for people to gain aspects like resources, access, opportunities, freedom, and health. To achieve any of these ends involves power.⁷⁷ Myers draws on J. Christian who says, “Empowerment definitions and strategies that affirm power to the poor, sustainability that measures mere transfer of power, and transformation that does not challenge the very meaning of power will be woefully inadequate.”⁷⁸ Yet, J. Christian overidealizes powerlessness as he does not consider any positive aspects of human power. Negatively, he understands powerlessness as imposed on the poor by the non-poor. It is viewed positively in the kingdom of God where power, according to J. Christian, is defined as powerlessness.⁷⁹ With more nuance, Myers does not reduce positive expressions of power to the notion of powerlessness. He sees asymmetries of power as a cause of poverty, but he also affirms that not all asymmetries are negative as inequalities exist in the created order.⁸⁰ He can thus deduce that power is not inherently bad and that social power structures need not be demonized;

⁷⁶ Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 90.

⁷⁷ Interestingly, Cobbert, Fikkett, and Mask hardly address power – perhaps because they assume so much from Myers’ proposal?

⁷⁸ Christian, *God of the Empty-Handed*, 220. Many of the Christian development approaches accept the status quo of power relations. The “underdeveloped” are helped so as to rise to the levels of the “developed,” but little consideration is given to challenging the structures that currently privilege those who are “developed.”

⁷⁹ Christian, *God of the Empty-Handed*, 181–207.

⁸⁰ Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 91.

rather, development work must “manage power relations for human wellbeing.”⁸¹ Yet, by evaluating power so that the “underdeveloped” can be empowered by the “developed,” “subordination is built in” from the beginning of a development project.⁸²

From the perspective of Matthew 18, Jesus does not call the disciples to empower the child. Rather, the child has power: innate agency, potential for growth, possibilities of becoming, *inter alia*. The child is a “fully alive, fully present, and fully endowed with promise in God’s world.”⁸³ This defies “a teleological orientation” or purpose-driven vision of Christian development, asserting rather that a child is already, in some sense, “developed.”⁸⁴ Moreover, the child is invested with power from Jesus: centered, welcomed, and protected. The child is not so much empowered as recognized and welcomed. Asymmetries of power persist. The child may be smaller, weaker, and less capable. However, vulnerabilities are not despised but rather affirmed. By not scandalizing the child, she is given space to be a child, to belong, to grow, and to be safe. Instead of competing for greatness, the disciples are called to use their power to receive and to not cause the child to stumble. This is dignifying of the child and confers a status to the child of honored guest, friend, and extended family. Welcoming the child implies moving development workers from seeing those in need as beneficiaries of professional services to seeing them as kin.

⁸¹ Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 92. Of course, this raises the question regarding the capacity of humans to manage power relations.

⁸² Lynn, Gailey, and Reese, *Development in Mission*, 80.

⁸³ David Hadley Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability: A Theology of Childhood* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005), 122.

⁸⁴ Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability*, 126.

The welcoming of the child raises questions about what it means to be human and part of human communities. When Jesus places a child in the midst and calls his disciples to become like them, he fully affirms the humanity of the child. Through this act, Bonhoeffer believes that “Jesus becomes the inventor of childhood.”⁸⁵ A child does not need to change or develop in order to become human. This does not imply that a child has all of their capacities. Who does?

Recognizing one’s limitations is a way in which one become like a child. The child is one who is in need of others.⁸⁶ Balthazar says that an infant’s dependency on parents is undifferentiated from dependence on God.⁸⁷ He goes on to say that a child is invited to personhood through the gaze of the mother. Accepting dependencies on others and awakening to oneself through the love of others is the experience of humanity that becomes like a child.

The fact that a child is both fully human and dependent on others raises questions concerning how a child belongs to human communities. Bonhoeffer explores this problem within the ecclesial structure, looking at the tensions between the child’s will and responsibility and between child’s membership and agency. Bonhoeffer enters into dialog with Weber’s and Troeltsch’s distinction between “church” (a family in which one is born and which affirms the world) and a “sect” (a club which one joins voluntarily and which opposes the world).⁸⁸ Volf states that in contemporary societies, everyone is deciding where they belong and where others

⁸⁵ Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 236.

⁸⁶ James E. Loder, *The Logic of the Spirit: Human Development in Theological Perspective*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998). Loder places child development and Christology in conversation to depict growth in response to the Spirit.

⁸⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Unless You Become like This Child* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 18.

⁸⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Clifford J. Green, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer works v. 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 89.

belong, including churches, which renders Weber's and Troeltsch's categories implausible.⁸⁹ Bonhoeffer likewise rejects Weber's and Troeltsch's distinctions as false because all communities are "willed."⁹⁰ Instead, Bonhoeffer distinguishes between a "life-community" (a community of persons) and a "volunteer-society" (a community from which one receives and consumes).⁹¹ The volunteer-society exists for itself and for its own dream. The one who loves the community, destroys it; the one who loves his sisters and brothers, builds community.⁹² Whereas volunteer-societies instrumentalize human relations, life-communities are those in which people experience relationships that are "meaningful in themselves."⁹³

Here arises the "problem" of a child. If participation in a community is "willed," and "we cannot assume that the child is a subject with a will,"⁹⁴ then how does she belong to the community. Bonhoeffer says that the child participates through acts of "love, trust, and obedience."⁹⁵ The children's belonging is not because they are born into the community (as in Weber's and Troeltsch's "church"), but because they participate through "their parents' will."⁹⁶ In this way, Bonhoeffer negotiates between membership in the community and agency of the child. The child is a member of the church, affirmed through infant baptism, through the will of the parents. (Perhaps inverting our question, Bonhoeffer says that "baptism is the call to the human

⁸⁹ Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Brazos Press, 2011), 80. Volf also states that there are other reasons why people belong to a community (habit, ritual, relational attachments, etc.), but the choice to stay or to leave remains indispensable.

⁹⁰ Bonhoeffer, Green, and Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 89.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 90–91; Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 224–225.

⁹² Dietrich Bonhoeffer et al., *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, First English-language edition with new supplementary material. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

⁹³ Bonhoeffer, Green, and Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 90, n. 99.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 240, n. 345.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

being into childhood...⁹⁷) The baptized comprise “*all those who potentially* belong to the church...⁹⁸ Through catechism, confirmation, and the willed partaking of the Lord’s Supper, the agency of the child is progressively affirmed. Yet, keep in mind that this does not reduce membership to the receiving of baptism or of the Lord’s supper, lest the life-community become a volunteer-society. These acts are only meaningful where the church can “carry the child.”⁹⁹ The church community “carries its children like a mother, as its most sacred treasure.”¹⁰⁰ The child in the midst is the litmus test for the church.¹⁰¹ If a church cannot carry its children, then “its responsibility before God should prompt them to close its doors.”¹⁰²

Although intricately connected to his ecclesiology, Bonhoeffer’s motif of “carrying children” can serve as a model for development organizations and other human communities in their affirmation of a child’s humanity, agency, belonging. This view fundamentally affirms that children belong, while providing space over time for the child to be and to participate based on their own willed response. The onus of responsibility is not borne by the child but is carried by the community.

Where Bonhoeffer helpfully depicts the child as an indicator of what it means to be a human community by virtue of its ability to carry children, CT reminds us that it is not only the child who is in view but Jesus and the kingdom who are revealed through the child. This perspective

⁹⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer et al., *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works : Act and Being*, First English-language edition with new supplementary material., vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 159.

⁹⁸ Bonhoeffer, Green, and Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 242.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 241.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 228.

¹⁰² Bonhoeffer, Green, and Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 241.

can protect development ministries from disempowering children by carrying them. The child is not an object or resource but “shares in giving love, being a friend, and receiving the delight of being parented (carried).”¹⁰³ If development organizations are to be “life-communities,” then they are not asking themselves: “How can we survive? How can we grow? How can we innovate and be more relevant? Instead, it asks, “How can we care for and carry our children?”¹⁰⁴ And, in imitation of the child, we recognize in our vulnerabilities, dependencies, and relational longings that we too need to be carried.¹⁰⁵

Furthermore, CT relates Bonhoeffer’s “carrying the child” with his “when Christ calls a person, he bids them come and die.” The carrying of the child is a form of following Jesus and carrying one’s cross. We remember the narrative context that leads to Jesus placing a child in the midst. After telling his disciples of his imminent crucifixion and rebuking Peter for becoming an obstacle, Jesus invites the disciples to on his path: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mt 16:24-28; Mk 8:34-38; Lk 9:23-27). Jesus foretells his passion again, but the disciples are greatly distressed (Mt 17:22-23) or do not comprehend (Mk 9:30-32; Lk 9:44-45). The particular life of Jesus is the model for who humans are to be and how we are to live. The words on Pilate’s lips, “*Ecce homo!*” (Jn 19:5), spoken of Jesus in the hands of his executors, points to the fulfilled image of humanity. This is the self-giving life that dwells in the kingdom of grace, offering it even to one’s enemies. Jesus then reiterates the call to take up the cross by placing a child in their midst.¹⁰⁶ If the martyr is too

¹⁰³ Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 228.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 240.

¹⁰⁶ See: Barram, *Missional Economics*, 160.

harsh an image of the human being, the child may be more inviting. Willmer and White think that “[t]he child might be a helpful sign, charming with new life rather than dark with death.”¹⁰⁷ The image of the fulfilled human being is Christ, who lays down his life for others, who humbly stops to receive the child, and who calls his followers to do the same.

This does lead to the question: is the child invited to follow the way of the cross? Liberation and feminist theologians are critical of any demands placed on the oppressed or marginalized that diminishes their agency and selfhood or that increases their vulnerability. These critiques must be heeded. They correspond to Jesus’ injunction: “Do not despise one of these little ones...” (Mt 18:10). Due to their social standing, children are vulnerable. As Sarah Coakley argues, one is called to be vulnerable before God but not to make oneself vulnerable before an abuser or as negation of the self.¹⁰⁸ They are invited to retain their vulnerability in a protective community that prioritizes not causing little ones to stumble – even to the costs to those less vulnerable (Mt 18:8-9).

This vision of what it means to be human and human communities by “carrying the child” and “carrying the cross” can help development organizations move from being program-driven to existing through and for relationships. Following Bonhoeffer, Root says that the organization as “relational space” encounters joys and connection but also conflict, hurt, and

¹⁰⁷ Haddon Willmer, “The Triangle: Theology, Mission and Child,” in *Theology, Mission and Child: Global Perspectives*, ed. Bill Prevette (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2014), 19.

¹⁰⁸ Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender*, Challenges in contemporary theology (Oxford, UK ; Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 34–37.

death.¹⁰⁹ Development workers engage that space, “not as experts with a utility belt of resources and strategies, but as a child, who sees, cares, and seeks connection.”¹¹⁰

In Matthew 18 Jesus is mediating relationships in which the child and the disciples are mutually shaping one another. Contrary to agonistic visions that feature oppositional binaries like poor/rich, female/male, or bourgeois/proletariat, this pericope does not pit child against adults. Instead, this reading is consonant with post-development and postcolonial critiques of the hegemonic influence of the West whose discourse on “development” privileges the powerful and reinforces the subordination of the “other” to existing power relations. Helpfully, Homi Bhabha describes these historical oppositions (West/Third World, Colonizer/Colonized, etc.), but identifies how these binaries shape one another, creating “hybrid” forms and a “third space” in which there is “negation,” “negotiation,” “translation,” and the “rearticulation” of “something else,” an “inbetween space.”¹¹¹ In Matthew 18, the child/adult relationship is an invitation to reciprocity, the discovery of an “inbetween space” in which Jesus places a child and calls his disciples to imagine different social relations, shaped by the adult opening up to and becoming like the child. The child too is shaped by Jesus and the disciples who see her, welcome her, and do not cause her to stumble. This is an “inbetween space” in which the disciples are called to be like Jesus who sees, centers, and receives a child.

Furthermore, by using their power to welcome the child, the disciples welcome Jesus, which implies an encounter with God through those who are marginalized by the world’s power

¹⁰⁹ Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 233–237.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 236.

¹¹¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, New ed. (London New York: Routledge, 2004), 28–56.

dynamics. With reference to Matthew 25, Mitchell, Myers, and Lynn et. al. speak of Jesus' own identification with the poor is so close that serving the poor is equated with serving Christ himself.¹¹² For them, this is a motivation to love the poor and alleviate their suffering (Myers) or to provide a more passionate service and deeper sense of vocation than just professional humanitarianism (Mitchell). However, they do not mention welcoming the "poor" or the "child" as an encounter with Christ.¹¹³

The identification of Jesus with the child is a summons to faith that Jesus is actually identifying with those who are marginalized. Similarly, the identification of Jesus with the marginalized is a call to faith that Jesus is received by us. This liberates development workers from assuming any messianic complexes of saving others. Instead, we are invited to meet the Savior through our receiving of others. Furthermore, our development work is not focused on giving access to privilege or power but rather on following the way of Christ to solidarity with "the least of these." This means that we are not only trying to witness to the goodness of God through our acts of hospitality to those with little social standing, but that we are experiencing the presence of Christ to us through them. We are encountering Christ, being disciplined, and being changed through those we are called to receive.

IV. Conclusion

¹¹² Mitchell, *Faith-Based Development*, 65; Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 108–109; Lynn, Gailey, and Reese, *Development in Mission*, 25 & 59.

¹¹³ Lynn et.al. follow Jon Sobrino's thought on the mystery of Christ revealed through the poor, but they use the idea to support a "preferential option for the poor," provide no explanation about identification, and do not refer to this in any of their treatment on specific development work (Lynn, Gailey, and Reese, *Development in Mission*, 59).

In this presentation, we have looked at three actions of Jesus in Matthew 18 and related them to three themes in Christian development. First, by placing of a child in the midst of the disciples' debate about greatness in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus redefines "great" by calling their attention to the invisible and those unable to compete for rank. Through the child, Jesus reiterates the call to take up the cross and follow him among and for those without status. This challenges development workers who assume that they are already in the kingdom of heaven and are building it to instead understand themselves to be seekers of the kingdom and to healthily question whether they have yet entered it. How would our development work look if we presume that we are on the outside of the reign of God, seeking to enter the kingdom by seeing and attending to the child placed by Jesus in our midst?

Second, in the face of development schemes that try to aid the underdeveloped in becoming great(er), Matthew 18 presses Christian workers to surrender notions of development as achieving better positions in this world and instead to creatively imagine a different world in which the "developed" life is one laid down for the sake of others and in which those who are invisible are seen and the vulnerable welcomed. The burden of change is not placed on the poor but rather on the "non-poor" and those who believe they are "developed." This vision can inspire programs that help the non-poor divest, redistribute privilege, and challenge structures that enable the powerful and limit those with less power. Development work can also be conceived as prayer to become like a child: humble, vulnerable, and dependent. What would our development work look like if "developed" societies is not the model but rather we imaginatively cultivate "development goals" inspired by what the child signifies about the kingdom of God, of non-competitive, vulnerable, and interdependent social relations in which status is irrelevant?

Third, Jesus calls the disciples to welcome the child and in so doing to welcome him. Instead of seeking power to be great, power is used to receive and protect those who are marginalized. Rather than simply focusing on empowerment, the development worker is challenged to acknowledge the innate power of those they see in need of development. Hospitality allows the “child” to exist without being coerced to become an adult, a believer, or anything else conceived by the host. In this way, the agency and power of the “child” is affirmed and welcomed. This act of hospitality involves the child and the disciples mutually shaping one another: guests are dignified, and hosts are transformed. Instead of providing professional services for beneficiaries, hospitality cultivates familial relationships with those who are excluded. Furthermore, instead of serving those in need of development in the name of Christ, Christian workers are invited not only to serve but to encounter Christ through those who are on the margins. In this way, Jesus is mediating relationships and power dynamics and meeting those showing hospitality through the marginalized. How would our development work look if, rather than sending, we emphasized receiving, if we envisioned shared familial life instead of professional development projects, if those in need are not the objects of mission but mediators of Jesus’ presence?

In these ways, Jesus’ placing of the child in the midst of his disciples serves as a fundamental challenge to contemporary approaches to Christian development. May we attend to the child placed by Jesus in our midst and hear the “sound of children,” and through them hear the voice of God.

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