



Jesus placed a little child among them.....

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Report of the Cambridge (UK) Consultation on Child Theology

Westminster College 8-10 September 2004

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Prologue

This report gives a brief account of a short meeting held for two days at Westminster College, Cambridge, England in September 2004. It was the fifth in a series of similar consultations organized by the Child Theology Movement (CTM). Other consultations have been held in Penang, Cape Town and Houston. Other similar consultations are planned. At each consultation, participants were invited to discuss and to help develop aspects of Child Theology.

The meeting that this report describes was shorter than those preceding it and in some respects it was not possible to achieve all that had been intended in the time available. Consequently, some of the discussion reported here was inconclusive and some participants felt uncertain as to the significance of what we mean by 'Child Theology'. As editor rather than writer, it does not fall to me to make up the gaps, even if I could! However, I have tried to present the discussions adequately and in a focused way so as to help the reader to discern those parts that were clearer and perhaps more instructive. As an aid to bring this clarity and show the relevance of the matters discussed, I have included as Appendices post-consultation reflections from two of the organisers on the themes dealt with in the consultation.

We were meeting just a week after gunmen stormed a school in Beslan, Russia and, with the rest of the world, we were still in a state of shock from the horrific slaughter of so many children. These images were fresh in our minds as we attempted to ponder again the significance of Jesus' action in putting a child in the midst of his disciples. The tenderness of Jesus' approach to children could hardly be more starkly illuminated than by the darkness of this tragedy. If Jesus was right, and we believe he was, children have much to teach us about the world, communities and organizations in which we live and work. Sadly, we often only hear them as they scream in terror or whimper in desperation.

The Child Theology Movement hopes to contribute to change for the better through its influence on the church. The meeting commenced in the evening of the first day, continued throughout the second day and finished after lunch on the third day. Perhaps this pattern reminds us of the promise of resurrection, and thereby of the hope for a new world in which children will naturally take a leading role: *'a little child shall lead them'*.

John Collier (editor)

Cover Pictures:

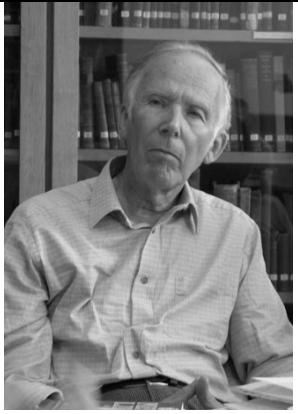


Front: Detail of a stained glass window at Westminster College

Back: Doorway at Magdalene College, Cambridge

Session 1: Welcome and Introductions

The meeting started with brief personal introductions from participants.

<p>Jerome Berryman</p> <p>I am from Houston and have been thinking about CT for a long time. I would like to pursue the conversation started at Houston in a CT meeting in May (see Houston report for details).</p>		<p>Judith Sadler</p> <p>I'm from Newcastle on Tyne and a bit nervous – am I here by accident? I'm a children's work advisor in the diocese; excited by the idea of theology with the child in the midst</p>	
	<p>Peter Privett</p> <p>I have been interested in CT since birth! I have always loved Jesus and have worked as primary school and Sunday school teacher. I work with Godly Play in the UK. I'm also interested in the comparison of CT with LT</p>		<p>Michelle Dalliston</p> <p>I'm from Newcastle on Tyne where my husband is Dean at the Cathedral. In the last year I have been finding many new roles and getting interested in Children's Spirituality and Godly Play.</p>
<p>Steve Pearce</p> <p>I work for the Methodist church as the secretary for the children's work. I have always worked with children and had a concern about the children's place in the church.</p>		<p>Rosemary Johnston</p> <p>I am the children's advocate in the URC and I am curious to know what value CT might be to help me encourage the best children's ministry in the church.</p>	
	<p>John Pridmore</p> <p>I am a parish priest in Hackney, city of sorrows and city of God. I have read and written a lot about the theology of childhood. Recently I have become interested in children's spirituality.</p>		<p>Diana Murrie</p> <p>I am the national co-ordinator of diocesan children's advisers. I try to help the network to find best practice and put policies into action.</p>

<p>Nigel Ashbridge</p> <p>I am chaplain for the Children's Society, an organization that tries to put children at the heart of everything it does. We are currently getting children to elect their own representatives who will sit on every board in the organization.</p>		<p>Graham Melville-Thomas</p> <p>My daughter asked me to come! And CTM seemed to me to be filling a gap between the church and secular Children's spirituality. I am now retired and was a child psychiatrist.</p>	
	<p>Janet Marshall</p> <p>I am the education officer at the Anglican shrine at Walsingham. I am a trained teacher and organise school visit programmes. I try to enable children and adolescents to be pilgrims in their own right, helping their own theological reflections.</p>		<p>Piers Lane</p> <p>I was a Methodist minister for 10 years and then went to join SU. <i>"I'm sorry it didn't work out for you in the ministry but at least you have that nice job with children to go to."</i> So it's good to be here! SU recognizes the need to grapple with new issues.</p>
<p>Martyn Payne</p> <p>I know Keith very well and so came to know about CT. I now work for BRF which has a growing work with children's resources. Before that I was working with CMS with children and before that I was a teacher in East London.</p>		<p>Gill Ambrose</p> <p>I am the children's work adviser for Ely diocese and a parent grateful for the insights that my children give me. I have come because I am interested in what CT is and hoping for an opportunity to reflect with others.</p>	
	<p>Kathryn Copsey</p> <p>I grew up overseas as a MK. Later, in East London, I found a sense of belonging and started working with a local charity for children. I try to work out the connection between children's spirituality, the urban situation and children's development.</p>		<p>Vicki Shaver</p> <p>I am from the International Christian College in Glasgow. I've spent 35 years working with children and have many theological questions; the hardest questions relate to hurting children, which I face this all the time.</p>

<p>Adrian Thatcher</p> <p>I am Professor of theology at the college of St Mark and St John in Plymouth, a C of E further education college. I am writing a book on Families, children and Christian ethics</p>		<p>Marian Carter</p> <p>I was a teacher for many years and then went into ministry. I kept coming up against prejudice from adults regarding children's work. In the last 8 years, I have been doing research for a PhD on a theology of childhood.</p>	
	<p>Debbie Forman</p> <p>I am from Frontier Youth Ministries in Bristol and I am keen to learn what CT might have to contribute to our work.</p>		<p>Paul Nash</p> <p>I have been involved in Christian youth ministry for 22 years. I now have 2 part time jobs: training Christian youth workers and I am also a chaplain at Birmingham Children's hospital.</p>
		<p>John McNeil</p> <p>I am at Cambridge university and just about to start a dissertation on: 'The problem of the child in Theology'. I have a Calvinistic background which had a very heavy attitude to children - total depravity etc.</p>	

Session 2: Introduction to Child Theology



The three representatives from the Child Theology Movement each gave an account of how they had personally become involved and in this way provided an introduction not only to the movement but also to some of the key aspects of Child Theology, as they perceived it.

Keith

I was born in a typical East London neighbourhood but an unusual family. For over 100 years now, it has had an open door for other families in need. From this background, I studied sociology (as a formal discipline) and now lecture at Spurgeon's College. The sociology of childhood has only arisen in the last 15 years or so

and it has some implications for theology. The challenge is how to involve children without destroying their identity as children. This was not such a problem for female and black theologians.

Some years back, I was asked to speak at Westminster Chapel on Mt 18 and, as I did so, became aware that it was speaking to myself personally. Shortly afterwards, I was at a programme planning group for a Cutting Edge conference¹ and noticed the absence of substantive theology. On making the observation, I was asked to solve the problem! As I tried to do so, I found my huge pile of reference books to be of little use and so resorted to working through the Bible from beginning to end again with this specific task in mind.

My paper at the subsequent conference led to a deluge of questions from the conference delegates. Many were heart-breaking and one wonders why in 2000 years of Christian theology so little had been done to address the issues raised.² At the end of the conference, the questions were literally left at the foot of the cross and subsequently I began a process of consultations in various parts of the world involving academics and practitioners, male and female, to attempt a response.

In the course of these meetings, I have enjoyed discovering other processes in related areas and we are happy to develop partnerships with those exploring the same terrain. What we understand by 'Child Theology' (CT) is not coterminous with 'Theology of Childhood', where the child is the focus. We believe that the 'Child' informs theology just as theology informs Christian activity with children.

Haddon

I knew about Keith's family project for many years but the first I knew about CT was about 3 yrs ago.

One evening in December 2001 I was in discussion with Keith and he surprised me by asking me to be involved because I had never done anything with children and in fact am very much in favour of adulthood! A lot of my working life in theology actually involved rather little theology – administering a department for example. So now I am looking forward in retirement to being allowed to focus on key, basic theological issues, which CT allows me to do.

Along with this, for the last 8 yrs I, along with my wife Hilary, have had the full time care of our grandson, Nathaniel. We have found this to be a great blessing. I have had to learn to walk at the pace of a child and this has been extraordinarily illuminating.

Our other consultations on CT have never included such an array of child professionals! There are so many specialists in our society that deal with children – educationists, child psychologists etc. These disciplines seem to be self-contained, asking and answering the important questions relating to children. I find this quite intimidating. And CT is still at a stage of exploration and development. Will it have a unique and valuable contribution among so much expertise? I believe so. Why? I think it will contribute because CT works from the distinctive starting point of Jesus' placing the child in the midst of our theological discussion. That theological discussion is carried on not only in the mere words of wordy theologians, but in the various embodiments which Christians in action, in church and mission, give to the gospel.

What happens when Jesus placing a child in the midst of theology is enacted and institutionalised in the contemporary churches' engagement with children? A number of sensitive points might be touched, some of which we tend to overlook, for example:

- **Our organized, explicit child friendliness** easily leads us to picture ourselves as battling in a simply child-unfriendly world. There is much child friendliness around: the teaching profession is a massive exercise in child-friendliness of a sort. It does not help to misrepresent our situation. *We must not assume that Jesus' teaching was just a variant of our present day child friendliness.* We tend to assume that if we are child-friendly, we are in tune with Jesus. This may not be so and therefore CT may make us uneasy in our child friendliness. If CT points beyond our contemporary child-friendliness, what is it pointing to? Is there anything there?
- **We should not talk about the 'whole child' because no human being is whole.** Insisting that the child is a whole human being is not the way to protect the child against adult superiority. We are all in the process of change and growth. All human beings are un-whole, incomplete. If we think within a theological vision of the Body of Christ, none of us would claim wholeness in our individuality. And if

¹ These international conferences are organized by Viva Network for Christians working with and for children at risk.

² A summary of these questions is provided in the report of the Penang 1 consultation in 2002.

we know that none of us has yet arrived (Phil.3), no adult will present himself as essentially different from a child: we are all on the way and not yet complete or whole.

- **We should avoid the idea that childhood is morally superior to adulthood.** In reaction against the view that the child is an incomplete adult, we switch to the judgment that the child possesses the secret of life the adult has lost. We should not think like this, not to save the adult from being put down from his high seat, but to avoid thinking of our children as fated, caught in the process of a human life that is downhill all the way.

It's often said that 'child' is a model of the 'kingdom' because of innate qualities, such as humility, trust, innocence, etc. but the lists of qualities are so selective – what about other qualities, such as: they can't help growing up? Moreover, children are very variable from each other and even from day to day. They change so much and so rapidly in comparison to adults and they accept the transitoriness of their existence. I remember that 'Puff the Magic Dragon' was one day tossed aside and died. Would that aspect of 'child' have something to teach us - something about losing your life to gain it? We must be sure that in welcoming the child we do not develop an antagonism to adulthood.

John

Way back, I trained in medicine because I wanted to become involved in God's mission in the world. As it turned out, I did very little of the traditional 'missionary doctor' work but I believe my medical experience, mostly in the organization of pharmaceutical research, was a useful preparation for my present role with CTM. To be further equipped and so that I could spell (understanding may come in due course!) some of the long words that Keith and Haddon use I have recently been studying for an MTh at Spurgeon's College in London.

I first became involved with CT, although it didn't have such a name then, at the Cutting Edge conference that Keith referred to. I then attended the first CT consultation in Penang in 2002 and wrote up the report of that meeting. It became clear to those of us involved that the future development of CT would be greatly facilitated by having an organization to manage the process and provide a channel for accountability. So, the Child Theology Movement (CTM) was formed as a charitable (not for profit) company registered in the UK and I am Company Secretary for CTM.

Questions from participants

Participants asked for clarification on some issues and the organisers commented as follows.

- **How was the representation in the various meetings decided?**
Although some participants were linked to organisations with a potential interest in CT, none came as 'representatives' of their organisations or of a particular movement or point of view. We aimed to learn from black, feminist and liberation theologies the importance of convening a circle of men and women from a variety of cultures, including practitioners and theorists. The intention is to build a movement, a network sharing information and experience. To this end, the meetings have been deliberately small, with no 'back row'.
- **What is the distinction between CT and the Theology of Childhood?**
There is a degree of overlap, of shared interests and themes. The Theology of Childhood reflects on children and childhood theologically to enhance work with children. CT, while supporting this enterprise, has a wider goal. It aims to let the child shed light on a broad range of theological and practical issues³, not just those traditionally thought to relate directly to children. We like to sum up our intentions in this way: *'no Christian activity involving children without theological reflection and no theological reflection without the child in the midst.'*
- **Can one consider children without consideration of the nexus of relationships that children are involved in?**
To speak about an individual is already an abstraction. To speak just about child is even more so. A family theology perspective is very important. The child brings in the whole world but if there is no focus on the child she will be ignored or overlooked; and Jesus actually took the child, without making reference to her relationships. The notions of child and childhood imply and draw in all relationships. It is an important point that we would like to see explored more fully.

³ e.g. ecclesiology; Biblical theology; mission

- **It is striking that we have no Black or Asian people here. Why is that?**

Our intention at Cambridge as elsewhere was to get as wide a spread of perspectives as possible. This is a valid criticism that shows we did not adequately achieve our intention. Perhaps it reflects that our network is still at a formative stage. However, CTM held consultations in Asia and Africa *before* holding meetings in Europe and North America. We should attend to having black and Asian British participants in future consultations in the UK, when possible, as their perspectives on the British child are different.

Session 3: Bible Study on Mt 16-21 in groups⁴

Outline of Matthew 16 – 21

16: 1-4	Pharisees demand a sign
16: 5-12	The yeast of the Pharisees
16:13-20	Peter's confession of Christ
16: 21-28	Jesus predicts his death
17: 1-13	The transfiguration
17: 14-23	Healing of the demonised boy
17: 24-27	The Temple tax
18:1-9	Greatest in the Kingdom
18:10-14	The lost sheep
18: 15-20	The brother who sins against you
18: 21-35	The unmerciful servant
19: 1-12	Divorce
19: 13-15	Mothers bring children to Jesus
19:16-29	The rich young ruler
20: 1-16	The workers in the vineyard
20:17-19	Jesus predicts his death
20:20-28	Zebedee's wife's request for her sons
20: 29-34	Two blind men healed
21:1-11	The Triumphal entry
21:12-17	Jesus at the Temple

Participants had been asked to prepare in advance for this session with the following notes:

- Matthew 16-21 is a section of the Gospel where a few nuggets (*direct and indirect*) on the child are to be found. Identify them.
- There is a tendency for those who have a special interest in children to extract these nuggets from the surrounding text. They can then be deployed in advocacy for children and in the making of 'theologies of childhood'. What difference does it make if they are not treated as nuggets to be extracted, but as threads woven into the whole texture of this section of Matthew's writing? What picture are they part of and how do they contribute to it?
- This section of Matthew's gospel is shaped by the confession of Jesus as the Christ, by his working his way towards Jerusalem and by his trying to get the disciples to understand and to share in his way. As such, this is a text which deals with theological, Christological, soteriological, ecclesiological and missiological questions. What place has the child and childlikeness in this story? What significance has the child for the theological questions being opened up by Jesus on his way?

This study was developed in the meeting in three smaller groups. Summaries of the reports delivered by each group follow.

Group 1

- This section of the Gospel weaves a route through Palestine from the Transfiguration to the Crucifixion. Into this, Matthew threads in brief anecdotes about children that challenge the narrative.
- Jesus is very direct in his approach and strikes the imagination of both adults and children. There is no need to 'water this down'.
- Jesus gives no certainty, no answers and no comforts, even though the presence of the 'Good Shepherd' gives security. The child has an unknown future too, reminding adults that we are all unfinished creatures.

⁴ An example, prepared outside the consultation by Keith White, is attached as Appendix 1

- The passage gives shock after shock, to readers now, much as it must have done to Jesus' contemporaries at the time.
- We learn about becoming a child from children. They are mischievous, cheeky, self-willed, exploring, demanding, questioning, growing, trusting too. Jesus didn't define which quality (ies) he had in mind but rather leaves us to make our own discoveries.
- Who is protecting whom from whom when we 'protect' children?
- This is a joint pilgrimage not, as often thought, one which adults control and take children along.
- Children are able to make connections through emotion. Too often we teach away emotional knowing that leaves children at a disadvantage.

Group 2

- It is significant that Matthew uses the stories for a particular purpose. The context is different from that of Mark and Luke.
- Is this passage primarily about church? Two themes could be central to church: losing and saving; the child
- The passage reflects a pattern of discipleship where revelation is followed swiftly by us making a mess of things! There are moments of deep, almost overwhelming, insight followed by a plunge into ordinariness.
- Vulnerability, worth, power, inclusion, are all themes of the passage. Yet, are we interpreting Jesus' attitude to children correctly? Does Jesus seem to be devaluing the child by using him/her as a visual aid? Or does Jesus empower the child by bringing him/her into centre stage? Is he proclaiming they are central to the kingdom?
- Perceptions of childhood today are complex and various, e.g. the view that children 'dominate'; the view of children as commodity; the view that children can't cope (e.g. with death). Is childhood romanticised as much as is thought?
- The passage covers a range of themes: divorce; illness; wealth; status. This is the world of the child.

Group 3

- This is not classical textbook structure! The teaching is embedded within a lot of the 'messiness' of daily life and of discipleship.
- How did the different Gospel writers choose their contexts? They seem to be asking different questions.
- How did the disciples and the society at large view the child and vulnerable people in general?
- Is it 'dependency' rather than 'humility' that is the key characteristic of the child that we are intended to see? The disciples' response was to be sad rather than humble.
- The only child who speaks in the Gospels is the 12 year old Jesus!
- The key theme is the transformation of power relationships in the Kingdom of God, as the transfigured Christ goes up to Jerusalem:
 - Power in the church
 - Power of men to divorce women of whom they are tired
 - Power of an employer to pay what he wishes
 - Children as victims of adult power
 - The importance of relationships: no power without relationship
- The inclusion of the story about the Temple Tax in this context may suggest working within society and systems, however corrupt

- Children do not fit adult patterns. We need to change the Victorian idea of church services as ‘adults worship, children listen’. We must share with children what is important.

Session 4: An experiment in CT

The experiment involved giving groups a series of tasks. There was a set time for each task and then the group moved on to the next task. Only the immediate task was described to the groups, not the tasks ahead.

1 Introduction

What is meant by an ‘experiment in child theology’? This is a method for doing child theology as a group reflection. We hit upon it, almost by accident, in Cape Town and have developed it with variations since. A booklet is being written about it. Each time we do it, there is a double experiment. We hope to learn more about child theology; and we hope to learn more about this experimental method and its strengths and weaknesses.

As an experiment it is a learning process, a venture into the unknown to discover whatever is there. It is not an instructive, didactic process *per se*.

The essential ingredient in the experiment, what makes it an experiment not an instruction, is to put a child, by imagination, in the centre of a working group, who are in a significant, practical theological argument. This way of working derives from, but is not an imitative repetition of, the Gospel story of Jesus’ setting a child in the midst of disciples who were arguing about who is greatest in the kingdom of God.

2 The first task (15-20 minutes)

In this consultation many participants were agents of the churches’ varied ministries to children. This means that they had a professional as well as a personal commitment and had been shaped by their organisational involvement. As such, they participate in what is a major, long-developed, lively form of organised Christianity in Britain. People in this sector may complain that the churches still do not give children the priority they merit but the sector still has a significant mass of resources, personnel, and methodologies. It has overlaps, cooperative partnership and critical tension with religious education.

For the purpose of this experiment, we asked everyone to imagine themselves in a circle of disciples, not by pretending to be Peter or James or Thaddeus around Jesus in the first century but as participants in the world of organised churchly and para-churchly concern with children. Wearing this hat, we took stock of who we felt ourselves to be. We sought to describe and/or feel the culture of this particular form of Christian existence - its key features, its encouraging and discouraging aspects, its fruit and its frustrations. In these organisations, what arguments would take place (or be suppressed) about its aims, value, spirit and effects as witness to and service of the kingdom of God?

In our organisations and ministries we are committed, by virtue of employment if nothing else, to being concerned for children in a Christian way. That is the explicit focus and goal. That is what our mission statements, if we have such things, tell us. But such statements may be no more than aspirations: what we would like to be. They may be ‘useful hypocrisies’ that help us gain power, resource or status. There is a difference between *professed* theology and *operative* theology in churches and movements. Therefore we need to look at what we really are and really believe as we wear this hat. The issue is: what is the operative theology in these enterprises? What notion of God and his kingdom actually makes these enterprises tick?

In this short session, groups were not expected to paint a complete picture of child-oriented Christianity in Britain. The purpose of the session was to enable us to get into the role of thinking within its framework and as its representatives. For many in this group, this meant thinking and talking what they already were. Some commented that they felt ‘on the edge’ of church life. Those working in inner cities felt especially marginalised. ‘Children should be seen and not heard’, we’re told, but in church they have no voice and are invisible too. The true reality, as one participant expressed it, is: “the church can’t be the church without the children”. Adult structures are imposed on children. Even hymns written for children do not come from a child’s point of view. Adults in the church tend to look at children and focus on behaviour. What if they focused on relationship? For some present, there was a confusion of roles – parent, child worker, etc. This can also be an issue for children: “As a vicar’s wife in the East End, my children were the church’s children.”

Once the groups were imaginatively inside this role, we were ready to move on to the next stage of the experiment.

3 The second task (40 minutes)

When the disciples were arguing about who was greatest in the Kingdom of God, Jesus placed a child in the centre. The child was a disturbing and illuminating contribution to the theological argument.

So in our experiment, we let a child be placed in the midst of this child-oriented Christianity which we were representing. We stood round the child in our adopted roles. In this theological experiment, the child was not placed in the midst to be educated or cared for by us. This was not a child at risk nor was it a beautiful child to be wondered at. The child was in the centre in an active role as a clue to the kingdom of God and a call to radical conversion.

The disciples probably thought they were beyond that: they had already left all to follow Jesus, whom they knew to be the Christ. We as active representatives of child-oriented Christianity tend to think we have already been converted with the help of the child in the midst. Has not our Christianity developed over the last two hundred years by a deliberate turning towards the child, by conscious child-centredness, by receiving and welcoming the child? Do we not tend to think that it is other kinds of Christianity, not ours, which still needs to be converted by the placing of the child in the midst?

As an experiment, we were to suppose that Jesus might still want to place the child in the midst of our organisations, and the arguments about policy, values, and even theology which are woven into their operation. Our task was not to indulge in criticising other kinds of Christianity which are not child-friendly but to imagine that Jesus had placed the child in *our* circle as the clue to *our* entering the Kingdom. This carried the implication that we may not be as certain to get in as we like to think. Is the child in the midst a call for some specific conversion even in our child-friendly, child-serving ministry? Or, for contemporary child-oriented Christianity, has the story of Jesus placing the child in the centre of the theological argument of disciples become redundant? As if we have *kept this law from our youth up!*

If that were so, then we would not have to place the child in the midst by an act of imagination in a special experimental occasion. Rather, we would see that we live and work in organisations and cultures which have been and are shaped by the child in the midst. So is what we find in our practice *already embodied* child theology? If we say 'Yes', then this stage of the experiment would be an extension of the first: we would be continuing to (get to) know ourselves as participants in this kind of Christianity, practising the Kingdom. If we say 'No', then this stage would invite us to go beyond the first, and be converted so that we might enter the Kingdom.

Another way of focusing this question is as follows: If our organisations and their cultures are child-oriented, generated by receiving the child placed in the midst, *what* child is in the midst? Some of our contemporary Christian and secular operations are centred on the child *at risk* (of what kinds?), others are centred on the child *to be evangelised* (in various ways), others on the child *who has a right* to self-fulfilment (perhaps meaning to enjoy life as a consumer?), others are centred on the child *as the model human* being, enjoying a brief moment before adulthood destroys it all. Are any of these the child as placed by Jesus in the midst as a sign of the kingdom of God? What would happen to our child-orientations if the child in the midst were one placed there by Jesus?

The groups struggled to some extent with this task. It was recognised that the child in the midst exposes the lack of child influence in our organisations and, perhaps more worryingly, our lack of skills in relation to children. Some wondered if, at the end of the day, the *institution* of the church mattered. At the heart are quality relationships through which we discover wonderful things about God. Some were concerned that we don't even have a language with a rich enough vocabulary to help us with those relationships. That there needs to be a conversion of the adults, that adults must change, was recognised.

4 Outcomes

Groups were faced with these questions:

- What message, if any, comes out of this experiment for our child-oriented Christianity and its organisations?
- What changes if any in our operative theologies are called for?
- Is this method useful and effective? How might it be developed?

Some participants found the task of recasting their organization as a group of disciples to be a 'grotesque comparison'. Comments were made about 'power hierarchies' and endless arguments about where power and authority lie. But it's possible that first century disciples might recognise the scenario all too well and might feel, along with some participants, a sense of pain in having colluded with ungodly conversations or processes. Some found it helped to distinguish between the institution and the disciples in it - maybe a 'useful hypocrisy'? Others found it hard to feel a disciple at all in their organization, relying entirely on the local church for this affirmation. Some felt that this process had exposed the lack of influence children had in their organizations, even those organizations or departments expressly focused on children.

Some felt that if a child were actually in the midst there would have to be a change in the boring, irrelevant and frustrating meetings they experienced in their organizations. It would not be right to force adult structures onto children. Perhaps they would meet on the floor and include play and food! There would certainly be less paper and a change in the language used – this may not only refer to less use of jargon and technical words. There would certainly be fewer arguments about the meaning of words! There would probably be more questions and fewer answers. Work might change its meaning. Time might go more slowly.

Apart from meetings, the inclusion of the child might be a unifying force, bringing people together, with a particular impact in inter-faith dialogue. There would probably be a change in the way money was spent.

When Jesus spoke about 'welcoming' children, it was about more than just receiving a guest, as a temporary visitor. It was about making a home, receiving the Gospel, hearing and obeying.

That Jesus placed a child in the midst of disciples, as a sign of the Kingdom of God and the way to enter it was not prominent in these final reflections. It is not easy to focus on the child as placed by Jesus in the midst, which is a way of focusing on Jesus as Lord. That focus is essential to child theology and this experiment revealed some fundamental problems about it: does it make enough sense to be useful to Christians engaged with children today, let alone to others?

Session 5 Theology and the child in the UK today – Godly Play

Presentation by Peter Privett

There is much theology in UK which is concerned with children, with the value, rights and care of children, or with RE or education in general, with Godly Play and the spirituality of the child.

- What has Godly Play to do with child theology?
- Does it make any contribution to child theology?
- Does it depend in any way on one kind of child theology or another?
- What other forms does "*theology and the child*" take in the UK?
- Are the essential elements of child theology to be found anywhere already?
- Is the work being done without the label?

Peter invited us to think about our response to this under three headings:

- **Clarity:** is CT and new branch of theology or does it aim to get theology thinking differently?
- **Value:** he sees a huge potential value in the process, even though there are still many unclear aspects
- **Viability:** we need to beware of turning the journey into a sight-seeing trip which people can join or leave as they wish.

Peter presented a version of a Godly Play story using large circles of coloured felt on the floor and other shapes and objects to talk about God as Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer.

Session 6: CT and culture

When CT seeks to place the child in the midst of theology, it is done by people who are enculturated in specific limited ways. We looked in preceding sessions at the state of theology in the UK, and thus at some aspects of our enculturation. Another vital aspect of enculturation regards the images and

theories of the child. It is such a child, defined by our culture, that we imaginatively set in the midst by in the process of CT.

The simple child, as a universal essence, is not available. Any child set by any theologian in the midst of theological work is perceived in some limited set of terms, i.e. of a culture.

- Do we set in the midst of theology the romantic child?
- Or some other culturally produced image of the child?
- Do we set real individual children, who challenge all images?
- How should CT learn from, work with and criticize the history and sociology of child, which reveals that children have been seen in many different ways, and that whole cultures are symbolized by the image of the child they work with and give prominence to?
- How does CT today find its way in relation to images of the child which are the products of past cultures, which have had great power and still have significant if lingering influence (e.g. Romanticism)?
- How does it find its way in relation to any emerging cultural imaging of the child?

The Archetypal Identity of the Child

John McNeil led us in a review of the book ‘Unless you became like this child’⁵ by von Balthasar, a Roman Catholic theologian.

Many theologians have made use of children as metaphors of hope in their systems, for example, Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer and Moltmann. Rahner and von Balthasar seem to have a better approach, seeing the child in terms of origins and in this book Balthasar sees the incarnation as a way to understand children. He compares Mt 18:5 with Jesus’ discussion with Nicodemus in John 3. So he understands natural childhood to be in a sphere of wholeness and holiness. Although the child is in the sphere of original wholeness, she is also vulnerable both externally and internally (original sin). For him, this means that all children are born into spiritual childhood, a state which they will eventually lose or leave.

When we say ‘Son of God’ we are not using an analogy. Jesus never left his childhood behind. He was (is) always in the bosom of the Father. This enables Jesus to have a unique understanding of children. The child is closely related to Jesus: ‘whoever welcomes this child welcomes me’. There is a relation between natural and eternal childhood and the child cannot distinguish between the natural and the divine parenthood.

Childhood is an archetypal model for understanding the hope which is found in the past. The roots of hope must be in the past, not the future. Though end and beginning are identical (alpha and omega). The child in its original state, in its mother’s womb, is a gift of God. There is both separation from and unity between mother and foetus that models the transcendental meaning of identity – separateness and belonging. Balthasar critiqued Hegel’s advocacy of the need for a child to leave its family to enter wider society. The giver of life to the foetus is the mother (Father) but primarily and ultimately is God. The Giver and the gift are united.

Comments

Where are real children in all this? Experience seems to be discounted. Perhaps we need to be careful of this kind of abstract theology done by celibate men. We all constantly reshape our memories of childhood. There is a danger of idealizing childhood by adulthood. George MacDonald in his book “The child within us” spoke of the eternal child. He had eleven biological children and two adopted. We are being shaped by such things whether we like it or not.

What of a mother’s experience of the child in the womb? It’s almost impossible to study this. It is almost another universe of discourse.

There has been and is a Roman Catholic Child Theology and this is an important connection with our work.

⁵ Ignatius Press; 1991; ISBN: 0898703794

The Spirituality of the Child

Marian Carter introduced a discussion of the spirituality of the child, defined as a capacity for relational consciousness. Spirituality is often ridiculed by adults and Millbank suggested that sociology has replaced spirituality. So the spiritual child has become counter cultural in western rationalistic society.

But this view is increasingly being challenged. It is being appreciated that children are innately spiritual, independent of parental influence and that this capacity is often lost as they mature due to the challenges of society (see Hay and Nye⁶). Their spirituality is intuitive, creative and non-rational. For example, Virginia Axline quotes the following from a three year old speaking to his newborn sibling: “Tell me about heaven, where you came from, because now I’ve forgotten.”⁷

Spirituality is coming to be seen as the ‘fifth dimension’ - not the selfish gene but the altruistic gene. This implies that adults must learn to re-inherit their spirituality. It may be that the sight of babies in prams and young people together help to open adults’ eyes to the spiritual world. This spirituality should not surprise us because ‘spirit’ (breath/wind/spirit) is something of the essence of being human - the light that lights everyone. We need to think of spirituality not as a compartment in our lives but as its bedrock.

Several recent books written about children and childhood are developing this view. Philippe Ariés wrote in “Centuries of Childhood”⁸ that the concept of childhood developed from two influences: that children had come to be appreciated as a ‘way of being’ and the development of education and moral concerns. The Romantic Movement, e.g. Blake, Wordsworth etc, saw the child as one with nature, a contrast to all that is wrong in society. This is easy to ridicule now but they were reacting against the excesses of the Industrial Revolution at the time and the Puritan emphasis on original sin.

Other books and writings mentioned were:

- Hugh Cunningham wrote about “Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500”⁹
- In Scott Holland’s book of sermons “Facts of the Faith” there is one on Mt 18:1-5 in which he interprets the story to mean that we should be “open to everything, no shallow routine ... a church with the simplicity and courage of a little child”
- Robert Coles wrote about “The Spiritual life of Children”¹⁰ in which he challenges Fowler’s book ‘The stages of Faith’.
- Sofia Cavaletti’s writings explore the spiritual life of children from 3 to 6 years of age.

Session 7: Thinking practically about the future of CT

As the consultation moved towards its final stages, participants took time to consider whether or not they wanted to see CT developed and if so how:

- Through CT booklets?
- In the family and in the day to day living with children?
- In education?
- In the local church?
- In Christian witness to society by participating in its work for and with children
- In the training of church people, for various offices, starting with the despised so-called lay persons?
- In the development of syllabi and new research programmes in theology at HE levels?
- In the training of secular teachers and social workers and in related research?

⁶ The Spirit of the Child;: Zondervan; 1998; ISBN: 0006278558

⁷ “Dibs – in search of self” [quote p154]; Penguin Books Ltd; 1990; ISBN: 014013459X

⁸ Random House; 1965; ISBN: 0394702867

⁹ Longman; 2005; ISBN: 0582784530

¹⁰ Houghton Mifflin; 1990; ISBN: 0-395-55999-5

CTM has already made some preparations for the future of CT. Some consultations are planned: for Latin America and east Europe 2005 and Penang in 2006. A book is in preparation which should see publication in May/June 2005. Some time later, may be there will be a series of booklets. Marcia Bunge is developing another in the series of books that started with 'The Child in Christian Thought'. A web site is up and running but needs further development as resources become available. We are aware of students with relevant PhDs at different stages of completion. A CHILD resource Centre has already opened in Penang and we are developing our ideas of just how it can be a resource to the worldwide church.

There was a general consensus that there is a need for new thinking in relation to children. Society is very confused about what children are – threat, commodity, etc. We need to take account of what is happening in the child's world today, for example exposure to media and exploitation as consumers. Some, therefore, were hoping for new theological models of childhood, a Christian vision of what childhood is or may be, which CT does not explicitly provide. Therefore one question asked was whether CT offers anything more than the Children's Spirituality initiatives. There is also a great need for new thinking regarding children in ecclesiology and ethics. There was a sense expressed that CT might be weak in developing ethics. Whatever is done should be practical or readily applicable to the 'average Parish church' in its work.

Alongside these concerns, some were anxious to ensure that any new thinking about children is done primarily in a relational and not an individualistic context, so thinking about children in families and developing a new vision of family. There is a huge range of social problems that affect children.

It was hoped that this discussion would yield more concrete proposals. That it did not was probably due in some measure to continuing lack of clarity in the group over the nature of CT.

Sessions 8 and 9: Group work on issues raised in session 7

Three groups were formed, constituted according to interest and competences. The aim was to have real working groups that could produce either serious contributions to theory or proposals for action. The following summary includes comments in the plenary session following the group work. The issues to be considered by the groups were:

- Theological models
- Educational methods to understand CT
- How to enhance the value and status of work with children in the church

Theology offers various models (or theories) relating to children. Dichotomies are often set up as in: doctrine and experience; parent and child. But, in reality, practice and theory cannot be divorced: a good theory is practical. Schleiermacher suggested that relationships come first and understanding later – it was so for the first disciples and continues to be so. But there are respectable epistemologies that say relationships and understanding are simultaneous and even some that put understanding before relationships. Whatever the order, theory and practice must be considered together.

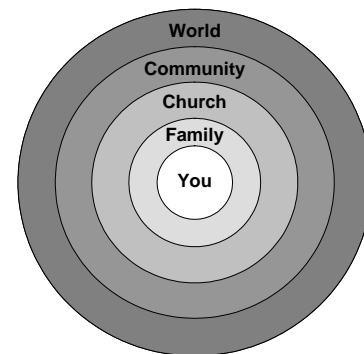
Although the following theological models may turn out to be relatively simplistic the light of the material in Bunge 'The Child in Christian Thought'¹¹, they do serve to illustrate the point that each theory has a practical outcome:

- "Depraved" knock out (beat out?) the sin
- "Empty vessel" fill it up
- "Full vessel" be open to receive from it
- "Development" keep moving people on through the stages

¹¹ The Child in Christian Thought, ed. M J Bunge, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids; 2001. See also reports of previous CT consultations for more detail.

The group commenced explorations of how each of these views of children might interact with and inform doctrine, such as the Trinity, Anthropology, The Bible etc. When we speak of the 'Father' this implies the Son, so the quality of relationships is important. The child is part of a complex web of relationships which are complex to understand but if there is to be any in depth understanding of child, these relationships must be explored.

The group exploring educational methods found itself with a tension between focussing on the attributes of the child on the one hand and attending to the meaning and purpose of Jesus in placing a child in the midst, on the other. CT emphasises that there is an important distinction between focusing on the child and in attending to the *purpose of Jesus* when he placed a child in the midst.



The group discussed some techniques that might be used to introduce CT through 'shared discovery' experiences. While this is good, the focus on experience alone can lead to groups going round in endless circles. It is important to include light from Christian resources, e.g. Bunge; Rahner, so that there can be a 'spiral' breaking out or moving forward from the circle.

Ideas discussed included:

- Godly Play techniques of 'show and share'
- The circles of felt as used by Peter
- Other tangible media e.g. 'floppy dolls'
- Literary devices: story (parable!), teaser, poem, etc

The felt circles approach is illustrated on the right. It could be used with photos or drawings of children which participants would place on the circles and reflect: 'why is *this* child *there*? what difficulties might he/she encounter? Where is the Kingdom of God? Etc.

The group attending to the enhancement of work with children in the church recognised the potential conflict between CT and the child unfriendliness which is rampant both in the world and in the church. Even so, they recommended that CT should not aim to be a powerful revolutionary group but become active, as yeast working in dough, in small ways such as Bible studies with friends.

It was felt that a booklet would give some added status to the subject. The Bible Study on Matthew 16 to 21 could be a useful way to open the subject, as was used here. If it were possible to bridge the gap between children's workers and academic theologians, it might be possible for the theologians to be more aware of the theology the children themselves are doing. The group thought that 'centres of excellence' might be established that would help to resource churches.

Final Moments

There was time for a group photograph and for 'thankyou's to various key contributors, especially Rebecca Nye who had done much of the groundwork for the meeting but who was unable to be present at the last moment, being in the last phase of pregnancy – quite literally having baby Thomas in the midst.

Closing Reflections of Participants

The meeting discussed the value, or otherwise, of using the 'child in the midst' as a resource. Inevitably, there were mixed views. Some thought that it had been positively helpful in keeping the group focused and avoiding slipping into well-worn top-down methods. However, some were frustrated at being limited to Matthew's account. Some would have liked to use other images of Jesus with the child – there are at least 8 in the Gospels and the silent child is only one of them – or even extend the range into the Old Testament. They all share the characteristic of having a 'child in the midst'. The truth about the contribution of the child may be found in the

dynamic between the models. There was a feeling that the exercise could have been more valuable with a little more assistance.

More generally, some would have liked to use the opportunity of the mixed gathering for more creative theologizing than actually occurred. An explanation about CT would have been useful at the beginning rather than later. Some found the format stimulating, others thought it stifling.

However, the group expected to be more creatively disruptive in conversations about theology as a result of the consultation. The Gospel is a subverter of the status quo. This is something that children do too.

Appendix 1: A Walk with Jesus from Caesarea Philippi to Jerusalem

Matthew 16-21

By Keith White

Introduction

In yesterday's devotion we pondered insights embodied in Psalm 8 that Jesus drew attention to when he had arrived at the Temple in Jerusalem for the final time. Today we take a walk with Jesus and his disciples from Caesarea Philippi to Jerusalem as he made his last preparations to equip His disciples for ministry, including child ministry.

Caesarea Philippi was on the slopes of Mount Hermon, North of the Sea of Galilee not far from the present day Damascus. The journey we are embarking on with Jesus took him from near the very north of the area in which he ministered to near the south, from a centre of pagan worship to the heart of Jewish celebration and sacrifice. All the time Jesus is heading for the place where the divine cup awaits him. And it is significant that his ministry has a new urgency and focus. He is still announcing and revealing the Kingdom of Heaven, but once Peter has declared that he is the Christ, the Son of the living God, Jesus shares with his followers the heart of the Gospel: that he, the Christ must suffer and be killed before being raised to life, and that the Kingdom is completely and utterly different to the kingdoms on earth.

It is difficult to keep track of Jesus's life story when we focus on single verses or passages, and so we can miss emerging trends or links. Do you remember what happened immediately after the stunning revelation on the Mount of Transfiguration that confirmed in an unforgettable way the truth of Peter's declaration? The father of a boy who was suffering from seizures (probably a form of Epilepsy), confronted Jesus and told Him that His disciples hadn't been able to help his boy. They asked Jesus why they were powerless in this situation and when Jesus explained why there began the period and the journey on which we are now embarking with them.

As we look at this we notice of course that He led by actions and example, not simply by words, and that is how we will best teach and equip others. The process is as important as the content of the Gospel. I have argued elsewhere that a theme running right through this climactic period of the ministry of Jesus is that of children and childhood. It seems as if every incident and all teaching is compared and contrasted with childlikeness. I am not going to expound this today, but my exposition is set within this understanding of the narrative context.

So let's begin our walk with Jesus, for some perhaps the idea of a pilgrimage will resonate, possible even for others a forerunner to the stations of the cross.

Eight insights

Eight insights into the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven taught by Jesus that are axiomatic in our ministry among children, young people and families

1. The critical importance of faith and prayer

(Matthew 17: 20 and Mark 9: 29)

As far as we can ascertain, it was on Mount Hermon that Peter, James and John saw the transfigured Jesus with Moses and Elijah, and it was in the shadow of this snow-capped peak that the father brought his son to Jesus. And Jesus healed the boy. The disciples who had been unable to help wanted to know why they couldn't rebuke and drive out the demon.

And Jesus spoke of their lack of faith (Matthew) and the need for prayer (Mark). The two responses form an integrated truth: faith and prayer are inseparable. And they are the bedrock of our mission with children and in every setting.

As I have pondered this response of Jesus it has begun to dawn on me that the overwhelming importance of prayer and faith was not just something that Jesus reiterates in his teaching and mentoring of his followers, but is incarnate in his life and ministry. In John's gospel we have the privilege of eavesdropping as Jesus prays. Later we will enter into his wrestling in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane.

But this was accompanied by the profoundest faith in history. He has just told his followers that he must suffer and die...and that he will be raised to life on the third day. Have you stopped to reflect on the faith of Jesus? I'm not sure what the writer to the Hebrews had in mind when he summoned up his great catalogue of the people of faith by referring to the Jesus as the author of our faith (Hebrews 11: 2), but in using a word applied to Jesus as the author of life, and of salvation, perhaps we should pause to let the significance of this moment in his ministry sink in.

Notice before we move on, the faith of those who brought people to Jesus, including the father of the Epileptic boy. We, the body of Christ have no monopoly of faith. If we think that children's or any ministry in the name of Jesus is possible without faith this is the time to quit! The words "Have faith in God" above the door of Mill Grove, my own home, testify to a century of faith: trusting God, relying on His promises. Faith and love go together. We see that beautifully clearly in 1 Corinthians 13: 4-8. The Rose Walton Centre and the Peto model of treatment within our community is founded on faith in the potential of every child.

Until we can pray "Thy will be done" we are loose cannons in our interventions. We should seek to find the agenda of our Heavenly Father in the life of a child or family. Our primary task is to discover the *Missio Dei* and to join Him in it, not to seek to enlist His assistance for our own endeavours!

2. The necessity of changing and becoming like little children (Matthew 18: 3)

By heading south we have now arrived at Capernaum, the well-known town on the shores of Lake Galilee, where Peter's house was situated, and one the centres of the ministry of Jesus. It was the place where he had healed so many as the sun was setting and so fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah. (As it happens this was where I stayed for a time as a student in the 1960s, and so the lake and the silhouettes of the mountains come to mind as I speak.) The meaning of this teaching is commonly misunderstood. Usually people make a list of the attributes of children (for example, they are trusting, questioning, reliant and dependent on others) and then seek to apply them to adults. We must be very careful if we do this that we don't read our adult and cultural preferences into children! A primary question concerns whether we are prepared to *change* or not. If we are not, then we are unlikely ever to enter into God's way of doing things. So, let's ask ourselves whether we are allowing Jesus to change us. This is something that is happening to many who have engaged in Child Theology.

Then comes the issue of *becoming like* children, and I want to admit that I am becoming steadily less sure what it means as I study its meaning with others across the world. We certainly must avoid sentimentality in our responses and ideas. Perhaps it has something to do with having open and enquiring minds; being ready to learn and to obey, to grow, to change, to wonder. Put practically, it may be about being ready and willing to pray the Lord's Prayer: "Our Father in Heaven...your way of doing things take precedence, your will be done..." "You are the potter: I am the clay."

3. Welcoming/receiving/accepting children in the name of Jesus, and so welcoming Jesus Himself (Matthew 18: 5)

We are still in Capernaum with the fishing boats moving silently across waters of Galilee clearly visible as Jesus speaks. Some years ago I was asked a question that cut me to the quick. I had already given more than quarter of a century to caring for children at risk in my family home, Mill Grove. The (angry) questioner challenged me: "Do you really want to be in this ministry?" I immediately knew from my instinctive defensive reaction that he had touched a raw nerve. The result was a deep pondering of my calling during which I realised that I had reservations, and possibly regrets, that must have affected my relationship with the children and young people I sought to help. Over time I began to learn what it was really to welcome children in the name of Jesus: to be open to them with my whole being. And I have come to recognise those parents, teachers and carers who have opened their hearts to children; who love and respect the children they are alongside. The process is similar to that experienced by Jean Vanier, and Henri Nouwen. In fact Henri Nouwen's last book, *Adam* is a brilliant description of the process involved. For it shows with an honesty and reality that our ministry is only Christ-like when it is two-way, when we open ourselves up to the possibility that we are being blessed. Please don't think this welcoming is an easy or painless process!

And when we are open to children; really joyful in our ministry, then we will find that we have welcomed Jesus. In the book Haddon and I are exploring whether it is in receiving or welcoming children that we become like them. If so our work is a great privilege. (This interpretation is an antidote to a spirituality that focuses on the pilgrimage and identity of self. In such a case ministry among children might be a way of meeting our own needs rather than theirs.)

(The riddle of Mill Grove, and the spirituality that visitors so often sense and feel.)

4. Understanding how abhorrent child abuse is to God (Matthew 18: 6-9)

With barely a pause Jesus changes mood as dramatically for example as in the final movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. It could well be that these words of Jesus are His most angry and condemnatory. And as he speaks he surely points at Galilee: that is where the ripples of the person drowned with a millstone around his neck would forever be lodged in the imaginations of the listeners to his dire warning. It's so hard to read and hear them that we often simply omit them. Don't you shudder when you hear the numbers of priests in the Roman Catholic Church in America who have been involved in child abuse? (In 1962 there was a document written by Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani discovered by the British newspaper *The Observer* that insisted that clergy should be secretive and silent when confronted by sexual

abuse within the RC Church. This silence was to include the alleged victim, under threat of excommunication.) Can you conceive of how Jesus feels, or who can sound the depths of sorrow in the Father heart of God (the title of the hymn by Graham Kendrick)? But this is not restricted to specific acts of abuse. It includes everything that might cause children (“little ones”) to sin. Have you considered the world we have allowed to be created for twenty-first century children, and the pressures on them to sin? Think of child soldiers who steal, murder and rape in there hundreds of thousands. Think of the tens of millions of child prostitutes. Think of the children of the rich who grow up to envy the possessions and wealth of others and long to have it. Consider those who are “branded” around the world by transnational corporations and marketing machines. Think of corporate and institutional paedophilia. In all these cases and so many more, children are being led into sin. How does God see the modern world developing around us, given His primary concern for children, little ones, the weak and the vulnerable? And where does that leave us.

“Why do you go to church? You know everything in the Bible, and you are good, so you don’t need to go!” “I go to kneel down and ask God’s forgiveness for the sins that I know I have committed, but also for the systems, institutions that I am allowing to be created, and not challenging, that cause little ones to sin.” It’s a sobering thought.

5. Valuing each child as an individual of inestimable worth

(Matthew 18: 10-14)

The water of Galilee is still lapping near the feet of Jesus, but now it is the hills, particularly to the east, richer in colours and textures as the afternoon turns to dusk, where the listeners now focus their attention. Don’t overlook the fact that the story of the one lost sheep in Matthew’s Gospel is set in the context of children and little ones, and that it begins with a reference to the guardian angels of children. (We are taking this mysterious and often neglected teaching as a context for about a third of the book that we are writing.) There is also a moral: see that you do not look down on these little ones.

Statistics are powerful and they can stir us with a sense of huge injustice and suffering, but in the final analysis it is vital to realise that we are called to be good shepherds who will join in the search for the one lost sheep. I don’t know how administrators in children’s work cope! I am impressed by those who sponsor an individual child. We must be ready to restructure our lives so that the individual child is loved unconditionally. (I have written about this in *Celebrating Children*.) There have been some varied Christian reactions to the CRC but something that underpins the document is a sense of in dignity and worth of each child.

It is salutary to reflect on the fact that this is why we are all here today: because God sees each one of us as of eternal value, and sent Jesus as the Shepherd to search for us and bring us to our Heavenly home on His shoulders.

(The example of Pandita Ramabai and life-stories. Hymns: I will sing the wondrous story of the Christ who died for me; the Ninety and Nine etc.)

6. Allowing children and their families and friends to come to Jesus

(Matthew 19: 13-15)

Jesus now leaves Capernaum and Galilee and wends his way south along the River Jordan, but on the East side known as Transjordan or Perea. He would have passed the place where he was baptised, and it is not fanciful to consider that it was near such a spot that this next incident occurs. John the Baptist at first resisted the request of Jesus for baptism before allowing the authority of Jesus to take precedence.

This is one of the eight elements where we probably think we can move on without much need to reflect. Surely we all agree on this point? What controversy could there possibly be? Well, the disciples, having been taught specifically by Jesus all that we have just considered actually tried to prevent people from bringing children to Jesus! And sadly it is not difficult to find examples of churches and Christians who have, intentionally or not, done this down through the centuries. We have tended to overestimate our own skills and importance and to underestimate the significance of the direct relationship between children and their Saviour. (The experience of discovering how adults have come between children and Jesus in the case of “Children’s Bibles”.) What if people bring children to Jesus outside our office hours? What if they have some very strange ideas? What if they need, in our view, education and medical help? Please don’t lightly assume that you and I and our ministries have been innocent in all this. But rejoice that when children do find their way to Jesus, He welcomes them and blesses them beyond our comprehension. And let us be thankful for Fröbel, Montessori, Cavalletti and Berryman in all they have taught and modelled.

7. Seeing children as signs of the Kingdom of Heaven

(Matthew 19: 14; Mark 10: 13-16; Luke 18: 15-17)

We are still alongside the River Jordan, and the final destination of Jesus, and the critical event in the unfolding revelation of His kingdom in Jerusalem, is near. This is where I personally came into the whole field of Child Theology: at Westminster Chapel in London. Let me briefly mention just two of the points that dawned on me during that period. First, if children are signs of the Kingdom of Heaven, then we must get rid of all notions of power, territory, possession and hierarchies to enter it. This kingdom is a whole new way of living. It’s an upside-down, inside-out and back to front world. Put simply it works on almost exactly the opposite principles of the political kingdoms we know from

personal experience and history worldwide. Second, just as the child is both fully human, and yet still becoming an adult, so the Kingdom of Heaven is both Now and Not Yet. You have daily reminders of God's way of doing things whenever you see children at work and play. Is there a better sign of the Kingdom? Is this what the "Resurrection Mind" is all about, as it refuses to become fixed and finalised, as it remains open to further journeying, revelation and change? It is such a complete contrast with what the disciples and the mother of James and John still had in mind somewhere between the Jordan and Jericho (Matthew 20: 20-28).

8. Understanding children's expressions in the context of God's way of doing things (Matthew 21: 12 -16)

And now, at last Jesus enters the Temple itself. He has come to His Father's House. He has come home. He has come to His own.

Yesterday we began to see how the cries of newborn babies can be understood in a whole new light when we trust God's way of doing things; His purposes and intentions. In the Temple the authorities saw the behaviour of the young people who were singing and shouting as wholly inappropriate. Jesus saw them in a completely different way: they were doing exactly what God had intended.

As we listen really carefully to everything children and young people say and try to reflect on it in the light of God's heart we will find surprising things happening! When children shout and cry in anger we will see sometimes that this is as it should be; they have experienced abuse and injustice. When children see play as more important than formal education, perhaps that is how God sees it too. And when they don't do exactly what we think they ought to in church, is our disapproval representative of God and how He feels? Perhaps their worship is more real than that of many adults. At the very least we should ponder what children are saying rather than ruling it out of court straight away.

Closing Reflection

And so we come to the end of our journey, our walk with Jesus. This period in the life of Jesus is of considerable importance in understanding the Kingdom of Heaven, and children, and how they relate to each other. There may be no great surprises, but perhaps we are struck by the way Jesus seems to have anticipated modern theories, policies, conventions and legislation. If we are to equip other Christians to join us in ministering to children, then it makes such a difference if we root and ground our teaching in the life and teaching of Jesus. It is a walk, a journey, a pilgrimage that we must all undertake.

Please notice that the focus is not simply on the needs of children, as if ministry is a one-way street. As we draw alongside children with the eyes of Jesus, then we are called to change, to repent. For some of us this may be equivalent to "being born again".

The journey from Mount Hermon to Mount Moriah was an epic one for Jesus, and to all those whose eyes and ears are open, the heart of the Kingdom and Gospel have been revealed it is also momentous. And the whole journey is framed by the cries of an epileptic boy and then the cries of a group of rowdy young people. Strange that all this has been so hidden from the wise and learned commentators! But then Jesus had already anticipated this: "I thank you, Father, that You have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes...Yes, Father, for such was thy will." (Matthew 11; 25-26) So we have come to the end of this particular journey, and find ourselves back at the place where we started, and now we are better placed to understand why the cries of suckling babes are one of the most beautiful, insightful and powerful sounds in creation.

Keith J. White; Easter Day 2004

Appendix 2: Post-Consultation Reflections

By Haddon Willmer

Shortly after the Cambridge CT Consultation, a meeting was held elsewhere on 'Reforming theology with children'. The advertised programme suggests that we have an authoritative settled theology and the meeting intended to look for what it says about children. With such an approach, which is all too frequent, we would get our view of children and our practice with them into line with what we believe our tradition teaches or offers us, which *may* also be what we *really* believe. With this approach, there is no intention to look to see whether the child set in the midst might change our theology, or put it into question in any way.

This is not what we understand CT to be. We believe that if putting a child in the centre were the first move, or if that were done at the initial stage, it would lead to a different theology which would then be a different basis for our view of and work with children.

- If the child has been in the midst, has the child effected any changes in our theology?
 - What is the theology now that it has been changed?
 - Can we spell it out?
 - Does the child change our theology at certain points, or all across the board?
- Jesus did not put the child in the midst everywhere – on every question - but in a situation where he judged it appropriate.
 - What was that judgment based on?
 - On Jesus' perception of the conflict with the disciples about his way and his perception of the analogy between his way and status and that of the child?
- Does placing the child in the midst say and do something crucial?
 - so that we live within and in accord with the reign of God?

There are many theologians in the world

For some, there is no God.

For some, God is a vague shadow around the edges of life

For some, God is a tremendous presence, filling life, silencing speech

For some, God is found in the Bible and in the church

For some, God is named the Rock, the God of Israel,

For some, God is the Father to whom Jesus taught us to pray

For some, God is in Christ reconciling the world to himself.

Some know God confidently in some form, under one name or another

Some seek God with all their heart, some in occasional bursts of longing

Some believe and some pray: I believe, help my unbelief.

Some look for God in solitude, others in company, others in service

Some look for God as consolation for suffering, others in coming of new Jerusalem on earth.

There are many who take God seriously, one way and another.

There are many who talk with themselves about God, seeking and finding, grieving and celebrating.

There are some who talk with one another, like the women John Bunyan met, sitting on their doorsteps in Bedford,
talking about the things of God.

There are, in short, many theologians in the world.

There are many who talk theology all their lives even if they never know it.

God, we can see in the Bible, is a theologian too.

God talks God in his Word,

Through whom he creates all things,

So all things are there for his speaking,

Words for the Word.

And the Word was made flesh

And speaks in life, a particular life,

In meaningful action, humanly chosen.

God speaks God in the Spirit, sent by the Son

In those he chooses and holds on to

Those who know his voice and follow him.

God speaks God in all things

And in all things God is hard to follow,

Speaking God in what is not God

Truth in indirection

The word of God in human mouth.

And God the Word puts into our arguments

Sometimes a special word,

Clue and lever:

Child.



Child Theology Movement

No child related activity
without theological
reflection

No theology without the
child in the midst