

First Brazil Consultation on Child Theology

25–29 September 2006

Report to Participants



Child Theology Movement

Visão Mundial
World Vision

MÃOSdadas

Jesus placed a little child among them....

"The Urban Child"

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Report of the First Brazil Child Theology Consultation

25 – 29 September 2006

Itú, São Paulo, Brasil

“The Urban Child”

Editors: James Gilbert and John Collier

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Preface

How the Conversation started

In a sense, the Consultation in Itú, São Paulo, began at the third Child Theology Consultation in Penang Malaysia in June 2006¹. Though a small group had met long before Penang with the hope of having a consultation in Brazil, it was at Penang that the method and the actual structure of the Itú consultation was dreamed up and decided. We wanted actual conversations with Brazilian children at risk at the center of the consultation.

There had been seven similar consultations preceding this meeting. Up to this time, putting “a child in the middle” of a Child Theology consultation had used a ‘virtual’ child appropriated in various ways: through stories of children; through cultural and sociological readings; through memories of childhood; and usually through a mixture of several approaches. These are all legitimate and helpful but our dream was actually to sit down with real, present children and spend time conversing with them. This challenge has always been at the center of Child Theology: how to put the child in our midst of our theological reflections, yet without patronizing her or simply using him for another adult agenda? Put thus, our reticence expresses a worthy and legitimate concern for children but we recognize the potential for deceiving ourselves! Could it be that it was we ourselves, the adults, that wanted protection from the unknown – from the unscripted questions and observations of (theologically) ‘untrained’ children?

Near the end of the Penang consultation, a small group met and decided that we would actually go and visit Brazilian street children and children at risk. The subject of the consultation was the child in the Brazilian urban setting.² We wanted to ask children what they thought the ideal city might be like. The idea was to start a conversation with them. This was only to be the first mile of the journey. Out of respect to the children we wanted somehow to walk a second mile with them. Thus we planned a second visit. The hope was to continue the conversation, respond if possible to questions raised and simply admit that we adults aren’t always sure of the answers – or even the questions!

This is the report of that encounter with many different children. It relates our many conversations, our joys and tears and many reflections, all of which happened from the 25th to the 29th of September 2006. We believe that most if not all of the adults were moved, blessed and challenged by these children which Christ told his disciples to ‘be like them’. We all hope and pray that the grace of God continues to grow in each child we met, shared with and learned from.

We would like to thank the organizations which so graciously let us “invade” their ministries to have these important conversations. We were all impressed with the quality of care, love and concern that each ministry offered towards these children. God bless them all.

We would also like to thank the following organizations for making this consultation possible: Visão Mundial of Brazil, Compassion, The Child Theology Movement and Equip Inc.

James Gilbert and John Collier



¹ Penang III Child Theology Consultation, “The Ministry of Children in Training for Ministry”, June 12-17

² Brazil over recent years has gone through a high migration from the countryside to the cities.

Participants in the Conversation

Karl Heinz Kepler

I was raised in the church in the southern Brazilian culture where I had the opportunity to have an encounter with Jesus. God was the Lord whom we should obey and who inspired fear, seriousness and good behavior. When I was 16 years old this almost caused me to go crazy. Only in the seminary did I begin to discover the superior authority of the Bible above the preachers and pastors and encountered another theological vision: that God is more gracious than I knew. I could see this clearly in the Bible. When I was in my thirties I was more a teenager than when I was fifteen! Now I am fascinated with the love of God, my greatest motivation. I work as pastor counselor in the CPPC organization and in secular society as a journalist.

Karin Helen Kepler Wondracek

I was born in the interior of Rio Grande do Sul, in a Baptist family which spoke German. I remember during my childhood the German playfulness and seriousness, Biblical stories and the love of reading. By the grace of God, early on I accepted Christ as my Savior and this decision has kept on being renewed with each life crisis. I married at 19 years of age. I studied Psychology and late psychoanalysis. Now I work in a clinic as a therapist for adults and in my work I discovered that the child is alive in each one of us, whether we like it or not. When our son Jean was born, life became happier and more meaningful and I returned to study doing a master's about the contribution of a pastor-psychoanalyst, friend and therapist of children: Oskar Pfister. I became a professor of psychology at the Escola Superior de Teologia (São Leopoldo).

Keith J. White

I am married to Ruth. We have four children and one grandchild. The name of my house is *Mill Grove*. It is a home for many children that cannot live with their families. The first girl that came to live with my grandfather was in 1899 and, since then, around 1200 children have stayed with us. I reflect upon this experience writing books and articles and sometimes also lecturing. Child Theology is a part of this reflection. For 28 years I have lectured at Spurgeon's College and since 2001 at The Malaysian Baptist Theological Seminary. I have interests in music, mountaineering, sports in general, chess, reading and the arts.

Jörg Kühnapfel

My name is Jörg. I am 43 years old, and have been married for 10 years to Flávia, a Brazilian from Anapolis. We have two beautiful children, gifts from the Lord, Daniela who is 5 and Samuel who is 3. When I was 25 years old I had an encounter with Jesus that transformed my life. I arrived in Brazil for the first time in January 1991 and worked for 3 months in an orphanage in Juquitiba (SP). I was assaulted in Rio de Janeiro by street children, which left a deep mark on my journey here in Brazil. I returned to São Paulo in 1993 to do an internship with ETED (Escola de Treinamento e Discipulado) which is part of YWAM Brazil. From 1994 until 1996 I worked in a ministry for "street children" with YWAM in São Paulo, going daily to the Praça da Sé and other places in downtown São Paulo to encounter children and tell them about Jesus. Since 1999 we are with the mission APEC (Aliança Pro Evangelização de Crianças), responsible for a ministry with poor children.

Ismael P. De Santana Arruda

I have been married for 21 years to Severina. We have two sons, Felipe Lucas and Raphael Mateus. I studied at the Theological Baptist Seminary North of Brazil in Recife (PE). I am a member of FTL (Theological Fraternity of Latin-America) and a member of the First Baptist Church of Bultrins, Olinda (PE), where I am involved in pastoring children aged 9 to 12 years old. This pastoring is done integrally, that is, we seek to see the child holistically. We also work with the families of the children.

Johannes Lukasse

I was born in Holland in November 1954. My conversion happened when I was 18 years old. I married Jeanette in 1970. We started ETED (Escola de Treinamento e Discipulado) with YWAM (Youth With A Mission). We have worked as missionaries since then. We are the parents of 5 children, two of which are adopted. Three are married and we now have one grandchild. Since 1986 we have implemented the work of YWAM in the downtown of Belo Horizonte. From the start, our approach to

working on the streets has been to establish a network of care homes for various categories of children, teenagers and families at risk – Rescue Home (leaving the street, relief, and moving on), Restoration Home (shelter, reintegration for street boys), Retreat Home (shelter, reintegration for street girls), The Bright and Happy Homes (community centers with discipleship, literacy, and after school programs), Plant Home (support for deaf children), Renewal Home, New Birth Home (shelter for pregnant mothers and/or mothers with babies). Our ministry offers various courses for training and we also have various other projects.

Ronaldo Pereira Martins

I am the Director of Institutional Relations for Visão Mundial (World Vision Brazil). I graduated in Social Communications at the Federal University of Minas Gerais and am doing graduate work in Information Sciences at UFMG. I worked for 15 years as a journalist. I am a member of the Second United Presbyterian Church of Belo Horizonte (MG).

Sueli Catarina de Carvalho

My conversion happened when I was 11 years old, shortly after the death of my father. I came from a humble family living on the outskirts of the city (Baixada Fluminense, RJ) and participated in a community church. The church gave me the opportunity to live in relationship with God and in a Christian community. In my youth my faith in Christ propelled me to become involved in the political and social struggle. The relationship with the church resulted in my studying theology and my involvement in society resulted in my studying Law. I have worked for 25 years on the social question, not because of my professional choices but, above all, as a personal commitment as a Christian and to have the certainty that the Reign of God will be implemented. This is a task that does not depend only on the church but I am certain that the church has an important part to play.

Nilza Valeria Zacarias do Nascimento Oliveira

I am Valeria, born in Duque de Caixas, Rio de Janeiro. I am the eldest child and I have two other siblings. My family is Baptist and I just played along, until I decided to become a Christian as a young teenager. Now I try to take this seriously, including using my journalism. I write (I love to write!) and want my information to help people transform themselves. I do this because I believe that another world is possible. I am also married to a Baptist pastor. I have two children – a boy of 10 and a girl of 8. I believe I am here, participating in this consultation, for the sake of my children's work. I live in São Paulo where the world certainly isn't perfect.

Cilus Fiuza Gavioli

My conversion happened when I was 15 and at 19 I went to seminary with the desire to serve my Lord as a pastor. I worked for 3 years at the Apiaí Presbyterian Church and returned to Campinas where I did my theological studies. For two years I worked as an assistant at the Central Presbyterian Church of Campinas but I had little motivation in the ministry. When I was invited to a new church that had started a work with favela children I accepted the challenge with respect and fear. My wife had already been working there. I have been working for more than 13 years in this church. I have a masters in pastoral theology and defended my thesis on children in the favela. Today I am Professor of Poimênica and Social Action. I am very involved in these areas in the context of the church and its transforming action.

Carlos Más

I was born into a humble but caring and loving family in Sorocaba (SP) in 1956. My mother was a simple housewife and my father a truck driver. I studied in a Catholic high school, among the rigid nuns. My childhood was full of fun and friends. At 15 years of age I had my first and only girlfriend, I married her and we have 3 children. I graduated in Nursing and Midwifery and did my postgraduate work in administration. In the last few years I had the privilege of adopting two children, Gabriel and Adriana. My actual work is with children and teenagers in risky social and physical situations.

Henrique Terena

I belong to the Terena Tribe in Mato Grosso. We were the first ethnic group here in Brazil to receive evangelical missionaries. I had the privilege to know Jesus shortly after my parents became believers.

The fact that I had a structured family provided me a healthy life and a firm walk in the ways of the Lord.

Debora Lilia dos Santos Fahur

I was born in an Evangelical home. My parents were missionaries in the northern part of Paraná. I grew up in a Christian environment. At 17 years of age I met the one who would be my husband and we married 3 years later. We have two daughters: Bárbara who is 18 and Rebecca who is 7. I studied Psychology (Methodist School) and presently I work in different capacities as a clinical psychologist. My ministry was “designed” during the opportunity I had working with residents of a favela in São Paulo with the Ministério Vale da Benção. I presently write social projects, supervise projects and direct the social programs of Vale da Benção. We maintain 9 house-homes, one day-care center, one community center and two programs of assistance for independent life. I completed my MBA in Social Entrepreneurship and Incubation (USP). Presently I am a member of the directors of Visão Mundial (World Vision Brazil) and coordinator of the incubator group of RENAS – Network of Evangelical Social Action. I am a member of IBAB (Baptist Church of Água Branca). I give lectures on social organizations and development of the Third Sector. I believe in partnerships and, because of this, I study forms and functions of networks.

Tsuruko Masuko Abe

I am a content woman, very blessed by God. I have a loyal and loving husband, three children and three grandchildren, all serving God. Presently, I am a retired professor and pastor, but continue participating helping out teaching at AME (Hope Mission Association), at ABIAH (Baptist Association for Human Incentive) and as an assistant pastor in the Japanese language in my church, Igreja Metodista Livre de Diadema. I worked for six years in an American School founded by my spiritual mother, Helen Voller, and later in public schools for more than 25 years, executing roles as professor, pedagogical coordinator and director. My specialty is childhood education. I studied at the Methodist Theological Seminary in São Bernard do Campo with further studies at the Faculdade de Teologia Metodista Livre. I am very grateful to God for my life. Ebenezer! Until now God has protected me!

Neuza Cesar da Silva

I am an educator. I have worked for 22 years with the public network of schools on the outskirts of São Paulo. I worked for 17 years as a teacher and 5 years as pedagogical coordinator. I retired in 1998. After this I worked in the health area, in a hospital and clinic (as an assistant secretary) and in banks. I studied Pedagogy, Letters and graduate work in Psycho pedagogy (Latu Sensus). I studied musical leadership for Christian churches at UMESE. For almost 20 years I have worked with children's vocal groups in the church and in schools and social projects. Presently, I am regent of the Children's Rainbow Choral, which also includes poor children, and the Grupo Vocal Cantarte (teenagers and youth). In the ministry working with children at the Methodist church I am responsible for the opening devotions for Sunday school. I also work in the prevention of (ex) chemically dependent people from returning, Grupo Apoio REVIDE, at the Methodist church in Santo André. My Christian experience comes from my family- my father (passed away in 1975) was a Methodist pastor and we always worked together in the mission of the church. I am the second daughter of a family of nine, and live with my mother. Three sisters work at UMESE and one brother is a Methodist pastor in Vila Mariana.

Maria Aparecida Mattar de Oliveira

I had the grace of growing up in a structured family and had a happy childhood. As a teenager, it was a time of total experimentation – arts, student movement, traveling and more traveling. I studied pedagogy and I had the dream of working in a rural school. An encounter with death radically changed my perspective on life. I faced God, his holiness and my sinful nature. From then on, my life did not belong to me. I worked as a teacher in poor communities and favelas. During a trip to the USA, I had the opportunity to learn about ‘Education with Principles’. I returned to Brazil and founded the first school in the country with this approach, being the director for 9 years. I am the Executive Director for the Association for the Education with Principles Christian Schools. I am also involved mentally and with my heart in the Happy Child Ministry, where I work as a counselor. My vision is to educate generations with the Christian worldview so that they know and act with God in all the areas of their life.

Carlos Caldas

I was born in an Evangelical home in eastern Minas Gerais. My whole life trajectory has been involved with the Presbyterian Church. I have been married 16 years, I have a 14 year old son and two daughters, one 12 years old and one 10 years old. I am a professor of theology and work as an assistant pastor in a Presbyterian Church on the outskirts of the Western Zone of São Paulo. Presently my academic research is in Latin American theology, theology and history of the Protestant Reformation of the XVI century and the interface between theology and literature. Among my interests are soccer (faithful fan of Cruzeiro and of Vasco da Gama), literature, cinema, *raiz* music (the best music that Brazilian culture has been able to produce!) and traveling (I have an irresistible calling to be a globetrotter!).

Alcir Almeida

I am a Brazilian, carioca (from Rio de Janeiro) and flamenguista (soccer team). My companion in this journey is Ana Claudia, with whom I have two sons, Lucas and another who, until today is having fun in his mothers tummy! I was born in a humble home and in the Roman Catholic tradition. I lost my father 5 years ago and my mother 17 years ago. At the beginning of my youth I was won over by the grace of God and started to serve Him in a local church in a ministry with children. From the start of my life experience and my reading of the Scriptures, I always focused my ministry on the holistic mission of the church. Called by the Lord, I trained to be a pastor and am now working as a missionary at the Center of Evangelical Missions, a school that prepares servants of Christ for the work of holistic and trans-cultural mission.

Klenia Cesar Fassoni

I live in Viçosa (MG) and work at Editora Ultimato. I help out with the magazine *Mãos Dadas* and with RENAS – Rede Evangelical Nacional de Ação Social. My husband is an engineer and a professor at the Universidade Federal de Viçosa. I have 3 children, ages 18, 16, and 5 years old. I am a daughter, granddaughter and great-granddaughter of pastors on my father's side and, on my mother's side, great-granddaughter of evangelicals. Even though I had this influence, as a teenager I had to decide for myself about the faith of my family, much more the work of God than my own effort. I am more Martha than Mary and my children have helped me balance the two sides. Since my teenage years I have liked children and being with them. Our children have been "challenging blessings" in my and my husband's lives.

Terezinha Aparecida de Lima Candieiro

I was born in São Paulo and gave my life over to Jesus when I was 15 years old. Three years later I felt called by God to prepare myself for ministry, serving Him as a missionary. I studied theology with a specialization in Religious Education at the Faculdade Teológica Batista de São Paulo. I also graduated in Pedagogy with a specialization in Magisterial and Orientational Education. I was sent to Mozambique as a missionary with Junta de Missões Mundiais da Convenção Batista Brasileira. There I worked for 14 years in Theological Education, church planting and social ministry with PEPE- Programa de Educação Pré-Escolar. Presently I coordinate PEPE and I am the International director of the PEPE network. I am a widow and have a beautiful son called Davi, who is a blessing and inheritance from God for my life.

Bráulia Ines B. Ribeiro

I was born into an intellectual family in Belo Horizonte. My father was a journalist and my mother a sculptor. Since my early years, I learned that you needed to believe in something; if you have a cause you should fight for it with all your being, with all your passion. My conversion came when I was 16 and, at 17, I joined YWAM (Brazil) moving to the Amazon. Since then I have worked with indigenous people, urban communities and river people, evangelizing, missionary training, church planting, producing orthographies and ethno-educational programs, etc. I graduated with a BA as an ethno-linguist from the University of the Nations in Hawaii, USA, and have a masters in linguistics from the University in Rondônia. I am married to Reinaldo Ribeiro and am the mother of three children: Samuel, João and Sofia. Presently, I am the national President of YWAM (Brazil). I also write for the magazines Ultimato and Eclésia.

Iolanda Miranda da Silva

I was born in Piauí and grew up in São Paulo. My conversion happened when I was 15 years old. Since then, I have worked with children, at first in the church and then with the children of my own siblings. The Lord put in me a lot of love for poor children and I have worked for six years in the favela Heliópolis in São Paulo with the PEPE program. Recently, I went to the Northeast of Brazil to start a program in that region. I believe that God has been continually preparing me to serve children and the church and to learn from them. I studied theology as a means of serving God and I always worked in organizations that serve the low income child. My work presently is the coordinator of PEPE Brazil.

Elsie Bueno Cunha Gilbert

I was born in Tacaratu, the interior of Pernambuco. My parents were missionaries there with the indigenous people called Pankararu. Around my ninth year we left there and, after a few years in Minas Gerais and São Paulo, we went to live in Anápolis, Goiás. That is where I did my basic formal studies. It was also where I strengthened my walk with a community of faith and where I met my husband, James Gilbert. After some time in the USA, where my husband finished his theological formation, we returned to Brazil to work in the area of holistic missions focused on the child at risk. We have four children and live in Viçosa (MG), where I work with the magazine Mãos Dadas.

Claudia Mercia Eller Miranda

I graduated in theology and Social Communication with a specialization in Journalism and Marketing. I was the editor of the magazines Raio de Luz and Raio de Luz Criança. I am a member of the Presbyterian Church of Brazil.

James B. Gilbert

I was born in Milwaukee, WI, in the USA. My parents divorced when I was 2 years old. I grew up in the Lutheran Church. I lost my sister when I was 16 years old. I went to the university without much interest in studying and graduated in Business Administration. When I turned 26 years old I began to question the significance of life. I went to Brazil the next year and felt God calling me to serve the poor. I am married to Elsie. I did masters work in missions and returned to Brazil in 1999. This is my third Child Theology Consultation.



The Syntax of the Conversations.

The Itú consultation was conceptualized around the idea of putting the child in the midst of our theological thinking. It was decided in Penang that we should have the experience of visiting Brazilian children at risk³. We wanted to ask them what they thought, to listen and to converse with them. We would then reflect upon our visit in our group, before making a return visit to continue the conversation.

In a sense, then, we were to have a conversation within a larger conversation. There was the consultation, an extended theological conversation, and couched within it was the conversation with the children. The theme of the conversations was the child at risk in Brazilian towns and cities.

It may seem odd to describe ‘what a consultation might be’, but we have found that it is usually not clear to all the participants. A consultation is a purposeful conversation. Though it really doesn’t have rules, so to speak, it really only works if a majority of the participants participate throughout the whole consultation. We all know how it is when a late comer tries to enter in the middle of a long conversation. These intrusions can distract from and inhibit the conversation. The problem is not new voices or insights, these are welcomed. Perhaps it is more the tyranny of time, having to go back over old territory to relate what has already been said. Though impossible to prevent, the goal is to reduce this as much as possible.

Another important aspect of the consultation is that it values each participant’s input, their differing perspectives and questions. Though there is a leader(s), or facilitator(s), the conversation is only enriched when all the participants live up to their part by participating. This requires both patience and careful facilitation.

Finally, the selection of participants was carefully thought out and a real challenge. We wanted to have about an equal proportion of practitioners and academic theologians (all Christians by nature are theologians)⁴. Equally important was the ratio of women to men, as well as those people from differing races and locations from within Brazil. The goal was to try and represent Brazil as best as possible, reflecting its richness and strength of diversity, to enliven and deepen the overall conversation.

The center of the broader conversation was to be the conversations with the children. That is a way of putting the child in the middle. To facilitate these, we decided to divide the 30 or so participants into five groups, each group visiting a different age group and location. The challenges we put forth for these visits were the following:

- Firstly, we did not want the people who work with and care for the children to prepare the children’s answers, or guide the children to give the “correct” answers. We wanted as much as possible the conversations to be with the *children* and not with the *children mediated by adults*. To do this we carefully prepared the caretakers of these children beforehand. Though impossible to prevent all such influences we felt we had limited them.
- Secondly, we did not want to use the children for our adult agendas. To prevent or avoid this, it would have been much easier to read about a child or children, reflect upon our childhoods - good approaches which have been used by the Child Theology Movement in the past. Yet we felt that as Jesus had brought a live child into the middle of a live theological debate, it would be good to imitate this. If one accepts and believes that a

³ Children at risk is used here more in a sociological sense than psychologically, though one does not exclude the other. The context of urban Brazil is central to the millions of marginalized children.

⁴ See Keith White and Haddon Willmer, *An Introduction to Child Theology*, (Child Theology Movement: United Kingdom) pg. 3. See also, Howard Stone & James O. Duke, *How to think Theologically*, (Fortress Press: Minneapolis) pg. 1.

child alongside Jesus may have important things to say to us adults; if God's Word presents children as having perfect praise; if they can and do hear God's voice; and if they are models of the kingdom according to Jesus, then our approach will be respectful, listening to and constructing a conversation, instead of fulfilling an agenda. Of course we had an agenda, which is impossible and not very useful to do away with. More importantly, by this process we could have a real conversation between children and adults. Neither the children nor the adults always had to have an answer.

- Thirdly, we did not want the groups to respond with pat answers. We wanted to respect these children as much as possible, which meant that each adult participant realized and accepted that "adult", simplistic or forced answers were not acceptable. Neither were these conversations organized evangelistic opportunities. Though Child Theology is in no way against evangelism, it questions any evangelism that treats people in general, and children specifically, in simplistic ways. It is possible to impose our mission and evangelistic agendas on children and this we strived to avoid.

In summary, the words of children can be words of grace for us and others, if we only listen and respect them. Perhaps in this last phrase lies the center of our method. It was not invented by us, we believe, but is taken from Jesus teaching his disciples by placing a child at his side, telling them to become like them (Matthew 18:1-5 & parallels). In this text the disciples were having a theological conversation, and Jesus put a child in the middle of it. We hope that in a small way we have imitated Christ in this process.

The following table gives a visual overview of the structure and rhythm of the consultation.

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Morning	Arrival	1. Introduction to Child Theology and the program. 2. Paper on the Brazilian context.	Presentations on children and theology.	1. Presentations on children and theology. 2. Final preparations for second visit.	Final reflection in group and summary.
After noon and evening	1. Introductions 2. Opening service with special liturgy.	1. Visits with the children. 2. Time for reflection after the visits.	Group work on the conversations with the children.	1. Second visit with the children. 2. Evening service with foot washing.	Departure

During the final reflection, we sought to return to where we started the conversation. The final reflection answered the following questions.

1. What is the principal theological question taken by each group?
2. What is your final theological declaration?
3. Who is the single child that you met whom you would like to share with the whole consultation?
4. How was the process special for you?

This section has tried to describe the method of the consultation. One could think of the method as a map and that we were on a pilgrimage. A pilgrimage because we had a departure point, a spiritual objective and we had much reflection and struggle along the way. Our hope was to deepen and broaden our understanding of God, His people and the world. To help guide

us we brought along some children, specifically, urban Brazilian children at risk. The following section might be considered these children's résumés or curriculum of our guides. This will be followed by five stories of each groups' journey.

The Situation of Children in Brazil

Eduardo Nunes (Visão Mundial)

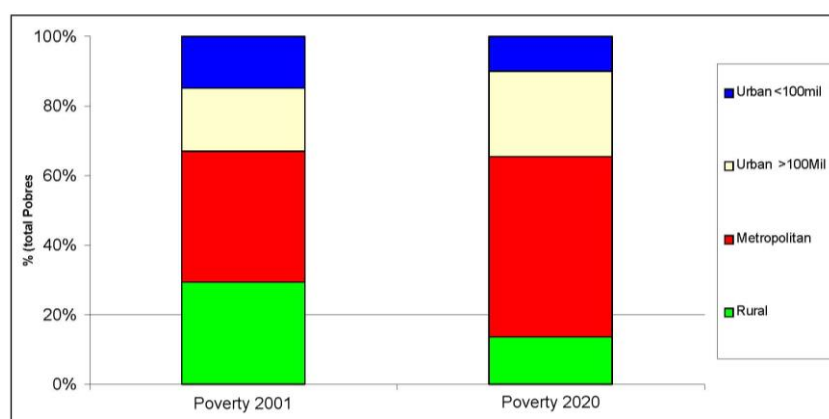
The distinguishing mark of Brazilian society is inequality. The table shows how since 1960 the immense difference between the rich (economically top 10%) and the poor (the bottom 10%) has only got worse. It is the greatest economic inequality on the planet!

Ratio between the incomes of the top 10% and bottom 10% by year.

Year	%
1960	34
1970	40
1980	47
1991	78
2000	89
2004	84

Some examples. The per capita income of the 40% poorest in the southeast is only half the legal minimum wage. But in the northeast it is only 27% of the national minimum wage. In the northeast, if a person receives 6 times the minimum wage he is among the 10% richest in the region. The northeast has a high rate of absolute poverty with 38% of the population below the official poverty line. This compares with 12% in the southeast and a national average of 20% below the poverty line.

Inequality is greatest where there is the highest concentration of the rich. This creates a vicious circle. Poverty in Brazil is becoming more and more a metropolitan issue, in cities of more than 3 million inhabitants.



The majority of Brazilian children are social outcasts. 45% of Brazilian homes with children less than 14 years of age do not have piped drinking water. This falls to 34% in the houses without children.

Percentage of houses without basic public services

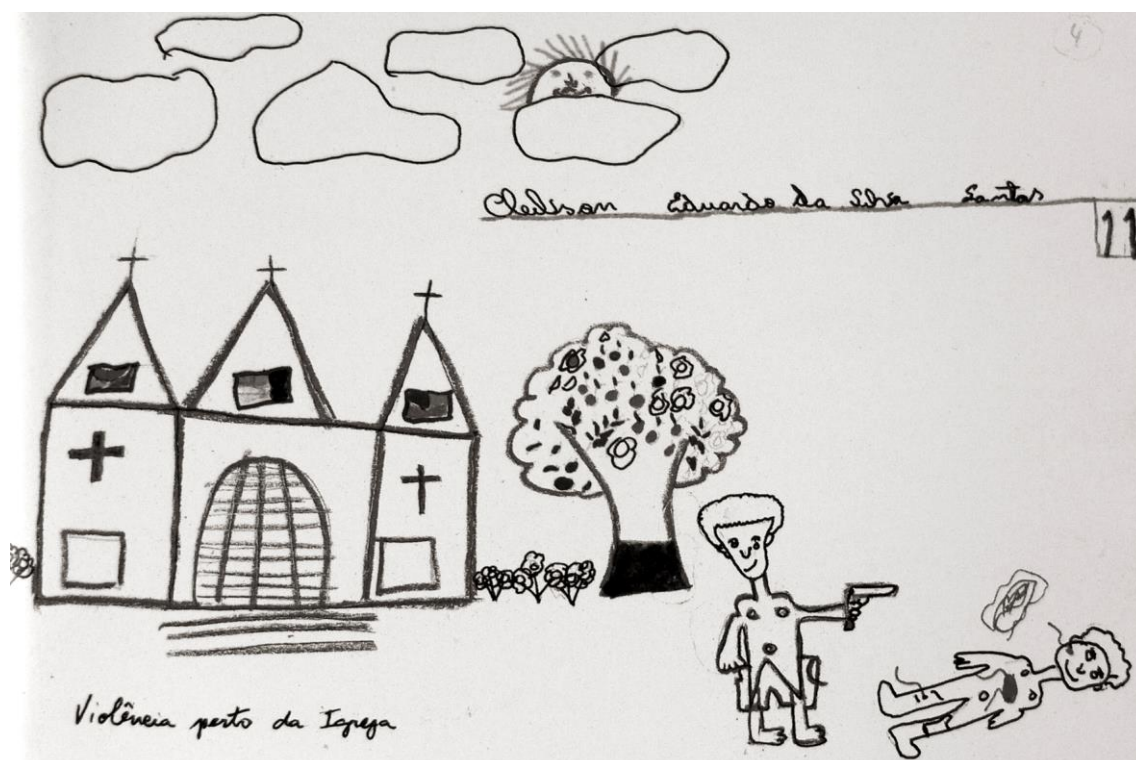
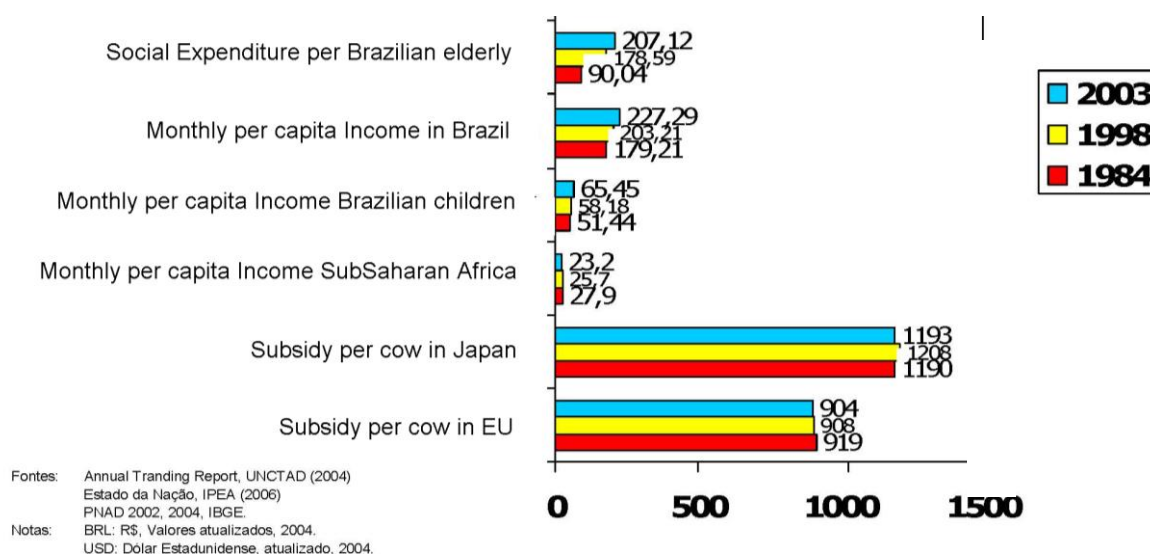
	With Children (0-14)	Without Children
Without piped water	45%	34%
Without sewerage	28%	16%
Without rubbish collection	36%	28%

The rate of violent death before 21 years of age in children from the 20% poorest black urban children is 608 per 10,000. In Brazil, black children are much more likely to die than white children.

Infant Mortality rates (1 year)

20% + Poor	34,9 ‰
20 % + Rich	15,8 ‰
20% + Poor black	47,1 ‰
20% + Poor black + NE	67,9 ‰
20% + Poor mothers < 25 yrs	40,9 ‰

Investments and Values Compared (USD)



A Child's Dream

Ariovaldo Ramos

Tiaguinho (Jimmy) was seven years old when he showed up at our conversation program with street children. Certainly, he came because of the lunch, the possibility of having a decent meal.

We were drawn to him. He was alive, intelligent, talkative and seemed to have a resilient joy, the type that suffering cannot to destroy, at least not easily. He had left his house and presently was fighting for his space with others over one of the various *mocós* (hiding places of street children often in holes, construction sites, bridges, plazas and abandoned places) in the downtown of the city.

There are many cases in which the children go to the streets in search of sustenance but at the end of the day return to their houses. Tiaguinho had fled from an alcoholic father and desperate mother. He had fled from beatings, hunger and degradation. He did not want to return home. The street had turned into his home - there he didn't get beaten, he didn't need to see his father beating his mother and he did not have to do what he did not want to do.

Our boy was among those that were far from God. He was one of those victims of a scandal, about whom Jesus had warned in the sixteenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. He could no longer understand the significance of God as Father, because the figure of a father was violent. He could not understand the affirmation that 'God is Love', because everything he knew about 'love' was full of exploitation and abuse.

Tiaguinho was another victim of the urban world. His parents were migrant workers; those that leave home, thrown out by hunger, in the hope that in the city they will encounter economic and social liberty. On the other hand, when they arrived at the city they lost their identity, they were converted into numbers. And what these numbers tell about them is that they are unable to overcome the urban environment. And the city is relentless to those that falter.

The Stigma of the City

In the Old Testament, the city is under the stigma of being marked anti-God. It is principally the enemy of the rural world. The city was born, in the scriptures, under the stigma of insurrection and ends up becoming a paradoxical relationship. The first instance of this phenomenon is the city founded by Cain, which is given the name Enoch. This city is born under the sign of rebellion. Cain is a murderer whom God, instead of giving him the death penalty, punishes with a type of banishment: you will wander about the earth and the land will no longer produce. So that no one resorts to do justice with their own hands, he receives a sign by which all will know that he is under judgement from God and nobody should interfere. By creating a city, Cain not only goes against God's judgment, declaring that the protection God offered was insufficient, he also decides to take over the land that was denied him. Cain's city is as much the proclamation of independence from God as it is an imposition on the land, an aggression of the ecosystem instead of integrating ecologically with the land, becoming its servant and reconsidering his "ethos". Thus the city came about as a place centered on humanity and its rebellion towards God and the environment. It is the world in the image and likeness of the human being.

The city of Enoch was taken away by the flood and the next scenario is the City of Shinar. After the flood, humanity settled in the valley of Shinar. The objective was to resist God, who wanted humanity to spread throughout the planet, and to establish a new principle in history: human interest, another rebellion, independence from God reaffirmed. This city became a sign not only because of the disgrace that occurred there but because it became the urban paradigm in the scriptures. It received the name Babylon, the mother of all prostitutes. This city also inaugurated urban segregation, wars and social injustice. She is represented, at the end of the scriptures, as the place of political and economic injustice, as the worshipper of the market, an impersonal self-regulating god which trades in the abuse and autonomy (reification) of humankind. All those that profess faith in the Kingdom of God should leave! But it also appears in Jeremiah as the place where Judah goes to be punished and where they

should pray for the enjoyment of peace. It is also the place where the Hebrew prophet interprets the dream of the pagan king about the succession of time.

Other cities appear in anguishing contexts: Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because of the oppression with which they treated their vassal states, because of the injustice that they inflicted on the poor and the needy and because in them there could not be encountered ten just people, from which the city could be refounded. Episodes like these tell us that there exists a judge in history. It is always good to remember that the iniquities were always connected with the contempt towards the poor and needy.

Nineveh, another symbolic city, in the first instance, receives a chance to repent because the number of children that it had but it succumbed too in a second judgment by fire, launched for the same reasons as Sodom and Gomorrah. Other cities could be cited with this paradox: Tyre and Sidon will be judged but they will receive in the last judgment more clemency than those cities that rejected the visits of the Apostles. Even cities irrevocably condemned, such as Jericho, know something of this. Although condemned for the atrocities practiced, principally against children, in the same city we find a prostitute that submits to the God of Israel and is saved.

The city with the most distinction is Jerusalem, guardian of the Ark of the Covenant and called the city of the great king. It is the city which the prophets cry over, Jesus of Nazareth being the greatest, proclaiming: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which kills her prophets and stones those that were sent, how many times have I wanted to gather you as a hen gathers her chicks, but you did not permit me". This is perhaps the most paradoxical of cities: it is a precious city but it will be sent into exile and will finally be destroyed. It will effusively receive the great king but it will also sacrifice him. Of all the cities it will receive the most promises and punishments but it is unique in that it is graced with the hope of resurrection, coming down from the heavens, becoming the eternal dwelling of the Eternal One.

Tiaguinho dreams of this converted city, where the Garden is in the center and gives tone to the life of the city. He dreams of the new reality described in Isaiah eleven, where a child leads, where its environment is completely beneficial and there are no restrictions, even the possibility that the child can without fear place his or her hand on the serpent. In this city, the simplicity of the child triumphs. It is a city for children, where the most adult-like are child-like. In a city like this, a child like Tiaguinho would learn to want to be a person and indeed be recognized as a person. This is the time when we learn to like to be people so that we can like people.

Tiaguinho dreams of a city where, as Zechariah 8:5 says, "The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there. (NIV)" For this to come about there needs to be a new paradigm for the administration of the city.

A Christian Project

According to Matthew 10: 42-45, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (NIV)

Jesus Christ recommended a new society in which governmental power is exercised by serving all. Only in a society in which the governor assumes the role of servant for everyone can all be citizens and flourish. For society to fulfill its true vocation, in Christ's society power should be exercised in the following ways:

- A society where the use of the land is regulated for the good of all. Isaiah 5:8 says God does not allow that someone could buy house after house and lot after lot until they are the only owner in the place. In Christ's society, the land would be divided among everyone for it is for everyone. This type of thing only happens when the governor is serving everyone.
- A society where wealth is distributed with equality. That is, as the Apostle Paul says: God desires that those that harvest extra do not stay with it and those who harvest less do not lack, 2 Cor. 8:15. A society with the consciousness of collectivity. Where the taxation would be

the legitimate instrument for the redistribution of wealth. This only happens when the governor is serving everyone.

- A society where the workers can use the wealth of their labor, as it is written: the worker is worthy of his salary, Luke 10:7, and “Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain”, 1 Tim. 5:18. That is to say that the worker is the first to use what he produces. A society of workers for the workers. This only happens when the governor is serving everyone.
- A society where the child has priority, for God does not want one of the little ones to perish and threatens harsh penalties on the society that leads children away from their divine provision: the provision of health, education, security, long life, work – that is a life that can be celebrated. This only happens when the governor is serving everyone.
- A society where the orphans and the widows, those that have lost everything, do not remain without anything, just the opposite. Part of the production of society would be designated exclusively for them so that there would not be any misery in society. This only happens when the governor is serving everyone.
- A society where the elderly are a reference of wisdom, never a weight. In the Bible the elderly are counselors that help the young on their journey and because of this are considered as mentors. They are those that preserve the values that should guide society. They should be honored, as citizens of excellence, who constructed and left success for the succeeding generations.

In the society that Christ recommended, the citizens are the state. Everyone is a citizen. That is why the governor must serve everyone. This signifies that the governor should be under the control of the citizen and human rights are respected carefully. Thus, the future of the citizen would be guaranteed. This foresight would do more than take care of health and the elderly. It would include schooling, security, work, recreation, to the end all that would have a quality life. In this society, the governor would be an agent of foresight. The future would not be something that is better the farther away it is but would be a succession of ‘presents’, where each day would bring the guarantee of a secure future.

There is nothing worse for Tiaguinho’s dreams than a society that does not tackle the question of future security and human rights, which is not a society of citizens. Yes, now there are citizens but very few. The only citizens that are represented and whom the governor serves are those that hold economic power and finance the political class. For them there is no problem of future security or respect for their human rights because all their rights are already respected.

This generates an “apartheid”: on one side you have the holders of economic power, on the other side the people. When it is said to the people that they also are citizens, in reality it is a falsity for their votes only legitimize what the few have already decided. The people vote but they cannot obligate those elected to represent them. The consequence is that they will never have their rights respected. Who respects those that only serve as a mass of manpower? And more, the vote of the people becomes subverted by the large marketing companies that elect someone who has no identification with the people, who through another marketing campaign will be able to legitimize all the desires of the dominant class.

During the term of these so called representatives, the people will have to swallow all kinds of falsities such as:

- Privatization - the solution that no one explains. Good administration is for the health of the company but certainly not for the health of the employees.
- State companies can only fulfill their social role with efficiency if they are profitable. State companies with a social role have to be efficient to be effective. The worker does not pay taxes so that the municipal transport company is profitable but that the he or she can be transported with dignity.
- The great problem is inflation, never unemployment, misery, illiteracy, low salaries and hunger. But to resolve the inflation problem, there needs to be more unemployment, lower

salaries, more misery and more hunger. The people give in and the problem never gets resolved.

- There is never money for social problems and even less for social prevention.

Tiaguinho dreams of a miracle of power, to play on the streets and in his house, and in the school! Not a supernatural miracle, but a miracle of conscientization, the miracle that opens the eyes.

Each worker, every marginalized person has to be conscious that 'the people' is a category that does not exist; either you are a citizen or you are nothing. Each one of them has to be aware that their rights are to be respected, so that the governor does not trick them with falsities. Each one needs to become a citizen. That is, he or she has to turn into someone that the governor has to serve, has to transform the obligation to vote into the right to vote, to vote only for those that pay attention. It is necessary that there be an electoral reform that makes it impossible for the elected to subvert the citizens. The category 'the people' has to be substituted by the category 'society' - a society of citizens where the law is for everyone. Where citizenship triumphs, the 'people' disappear and the citizen and society appear.

Oh, that this would be so in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ!



Daily Meditations in the Word

Tuesday – Proverbs 24:11-12

Bráulia Ribeiro

Release those being conducted to death, save those that are being dragged to perdition. If you say, “We don’t know”, perhaps you don’t realize that God is the one that knows our hearts.

In Brazilian society there is no great preoccupation with human rights and citizenship in relation to the indigenous people. Brazilian government authorities consider indigenous people as semi-divine or (contradictorily) as little more than animals. In some cases, aboriginal groups denounce the indifference of governmental bodies that use ‘culture’ as a way of avoiding their responsibility. There is a tendency for evangelicals in Brazil to emphasize only the more religious side of evangelism. This has to change and the evangelical Brazilian church has to become aware of the need and to work to make society aware.

The Roman Apostolic Catholic Church in Brazil is conscious and militant on behalf of life but the Brazilian evangelical church is in general negligent. Infanticide among indigenous people has been practiced in Brazil from times unmemorable. One Federal Representative, a candidate for the Brazilian senate, prepared a project that aimed to legalize abortion in all jurisdictions. It is urgent that the evangelical church raise her voice against these practices.

Wednesday – John 6: 1-14

Pastor Henrique Terena

It is a privilege to have been welcomed into the family of God. I belong to the Terena tribe in Mato Grosso. In 1912 it was the first group in Brazil to receive the gospel. The gospel made a very big difference in the life of these people. Even though it was a great change the people did not lose their culture and customs. Today we have various churches with indigenous leaders and people involved in the work in various parts of the country.

Eleven years ago I worked in Chapada dos Guimarães with indigenous people training for the work as missionaries to villages. I prepared to work directly in the village but God called me to train others, to reach other communities in the country.

Today, in Brazil, there are 650 thousand Indians and half of these live on the edge of the country subjected to all types of problems encountered in society, including those affecting children. They have been the principal target of my work.

In this text (John 6:1-14), we can see that after an entire day of work Jesus was still surrounded by a multitude of almost five thousand men, hungry for the word and, with it already being late, hungry for food. But there was not enough food for everyone. Only one person was prepared for this occasion. Before the miracle of multiplication, Jesus asked everyone to sit on the ground, everyone getting down to the same level. This caused me to think that for us to do the work that pleases the Lord, it is necessary that we humble ourselves so that the people can see that we are the same as they are, indigenous or not.

First the people sat, a position in which to receive, coming lower. We can suppose the boy came from a caring family as they had provided for him. They were backing him up. He was also prepared to give away what he had, even though it was so little. Indigenous people have this attitude of sharing with each other. Somehow the boy wanted to be a part of that moment, sharing what he had. It is critical that the Brazilian church becomes more aware of how important it is to share what it has been given (even if it is only a little). We know that whatever is put in the hands of the Lord can multiply.

Some years ago, I had the privilege of visiting the isolated indigenous people of the Valley of Javari. After much difficulty, we reached the place and found that the persons in charge of the NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) responsible for that place did not allow entry to evangelicals even though they allow exploitation by magazines and television. Since we were Indian, we were allowed to enter. While we were there the Indians told us a story of another Indian who had been in that region and had taught them about God's love. My theology fell on the ground as I remembered that if we will not or

cannot speak, the stones will cry out in our place. God has his ways that are not limited. He is able to put his plans into practice in his way, for all that need his love. And today, especially for the children.

Thursday – Psalm 131

Karim Hellen Kepler Wondracek

There are two keys that open the door of Child Theology. The first one is in Psalm 131. In verse 2 we see that the combination of food and fondness satisfies us. The image of the child in the lap of the mother reminds us of the way that God treats us and that we do not exist without God. This is basic for the formation of “me”. Just as the baby needs the relationship with the mother, who feeds and protects it, man needs God. Our relationship with God is like the relationship of a mother with her child. The dependence and reliance that exist in this relationship is what sustains us each day. The relationship of the mother or father to the child is the first hermeneutic key for the relationship between God and the human being. So, the observation of babies enriches Child Theology.

The second key is related to the theology of human development and it was forged in three stages: reading of psychoanalytic theory; observation of babies; and theological reading, principally of the spiritual development of human beings. This development is not a continuous ascent. Difficulties open ways for new learning. In development, nothing is ready or determined. The baby in development is connected with the persons and the environment and through these relationships it goes through a sequence of stages. So there are created internal structures that enable it to attend to the vital necessities. The result is an incredibly competent ego able to survive and maintain a balance between pleasure and displeasure. For Child Theology, it is the challenge of looking to the first months of life and, starting from there, taking away all the possible consequences that indicate the readiness of human beings for a relationship with God.

These observations help us to understand the depth of the fall and also the depth of the love revealed in Jesus Christ. God's face does not turn away.

Friday – Isaiah 39 and Psalms 78

Johannes Lukasse

Through the reading of the Word we know that God's preoccupations should pass to the next generation and the land should be filled with the knowledge of the Lord.

However, what happened with King Hezekiah, reported in Isaiah 39, also happens in our days. He did what was wrong in the eyes of the Lord and selfishly he did not worry about the uttered prophecies since in his days there would be peace. We are not concerned a great deal about future generations, only about our comfort, our security and our well-being. The preoccupations of our days are opposite to biblical values, the real values that the generations should know, such as is written in Psalms 78. If we leave the biblical order of discipleship for the next generation to carry out, we will have a very serious problem! We have to disciple the next generation so that they are stronger and more successful than we are. So, we are launching arrows to go where we cannot go, into the future.

Children are important for Jesus. He did not say that we should be like them only to compliment them but he had a more profound purpose. He wants us also to enjoy playing, humility, innocence, honesty, loving heroes, faith, confidence and creativity. But aren't these qualities only characteristic of children created in the comfort and safety of a structured home? Therefore, if the child who is raised in the street today does not manifest these qualities, we should be greatly concerned for them.



Child Theology Distinctions: What Child Theology is and is not

Marcia Bunge

Theologies that relate to Children

Christian Theology approaches children and childhood in a number of ways, each with particular emphases and interests. For example, there are:

- Theologies of Childhood
- Theologies by Children
- Children's spirituality
- Theologies for children
- Children and religious education

Each of these has its own particular insights and emphases. For example, Theologies of Childhood:

- Provide sophisticated theological understandings of children and childhood and our obligations to children.
- Should take into account various perspectives on children and childhood from the Bible and the Christian tradition
- Should honour the dignity and complexity of children.

We believe that Child Theologies offer something distinct and different. For example, they:

- Build on theologies of childhood;
- Re-examine fundamental doctrines and practices of the church using the "lens" of the child;
- Provide new insights into central themes of the Christian faith.

Even though we should be careful to differentiate them if we are to gain value from the new insights offered by Child theologies, these theologies also have similarities and overlaps. For example, both these examples:

- Put children at the centre of serious theological reflection;
- Prompt action on behalf of children;
- Have implications for the church and children themselves, especially in the areas of
 - Children and family ministry
 - Religious education and faith formation
 - Child advocacy

A Child Theology Approach

The approach adopted by CTM and reflected in this consultation has the following features:

- It involves an international network of theologians and practitioners
- It uses a distinctive approach for putting a child "in the midst"
- It recognizes that child theologies will be diverse, building on:
 - The Bible
 - Authoritative texts in particular traditions
 - Research in social and national sciences
 - Experience in specific cultures and faith communities

Child Theology affirms that in traditional understandings of children in theology, the emphasis is too narrow, e.g. as depraved and victims of original sin. We need to broaden our understanding to note that they may equally be models of faith.

Some theological approaches to children emphasise their vulnerability and need. While not overlooking these issues, we should also note their strengths and gifts. We often develop programmes to teach children but within those programmes seldom allow space for the children to ask their own questions.

The Child in the Midst of Biblical Witness

Keith White

Resource Material

- The Child in Christian Thought
- Rediscovering Children at the Heart of Mission
- Introducing Child Theology
- Child Theology Consultation Reports
- Precious in His Sight

Introduction

It is always a joy and encouragement when we come to the Bible with a particular group of people or question in mind and find that God is ready and waiting to greet us. By his Holy Spirit, he has not left us without a witness.

In this unique collection of writings comprising 66 books compiled over 1,500 years God's purposes towards a huge number of groups and situations is revealed. Thus those in Latin America who sought to understand the place of the poor and oppressed in God's kingdom were able to trace his commitment to them from the earliest pages and stories, especially in the liberation of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt. So it has been for those enquiring about those seen as outsiders because of their culture, ethnicity, crimes, brokenness or gender. I personally remember the time when as a sociologist I read Jacques Ellul's great book *The Meaning of the City* which traced the place of cities in God's unfolding purposes from the very first chapters of Genesis to the last pages of Revelation.

One of the results of such a search is to see things more comprehensively and sensitively. Anyone who has tried to understand the place of women in God's mission for example cannot fail to read the Gospel of Luke differently to those who wrote commentaries a few decades ago.

In some ways, the reading of the Bible that makes children the starting point for study can be compared to these other perspectives and movements. There are striking similarities but the emerging field of Child Theology has also found a significant point of departure: a uniqueness, if you like. Put simply it is the fact that Jesus took a little child (not a woman, poor man or gentile), placed him in the middle of his disciples and used the child as a key to understanding the Kingdom of Heaven and the very heart of his calling and mission.

But that is to go ahead of ourselves. Before looking at the place of the child and children in the Scriptures, we need to remind ourselves that at the very heart of the Bible we find God himself, revealed in different ways and at different times but supremely and most fully in Jesus Christ. However precious any part of creation is, and children are very dear to God's heart, anything that displaces God will tend to become an idol. So, in relating to creation we will tend to become guilty of idolatry however indirect and unconsciously. This point has been made carefully in *Introducing Child Theology* and so I do not need to labour it here and now. But I would like to stress that all of us must take good care never to think or act in a way that elevates children or childhood in such a way that God is relegated to the background. Needless to say I will try to make sure I do not do so in this paper!

Children in the Biblical Witness

1. Children (and young people) as children

I am delighted that you have given me this title: biblical witness. More often people tend to think of “children in the Bible”. And there is a big difference. We can indeed look right through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation using a concordance and find lots of references to children and young people. You can do the same thing with plants, mountains, rivers, women, colours, cities and so on. You end up with an impressive list, and if you reflect on it you can work your way to some sort of biblical or even theological understanding of the category that you start with. At best you will work towards a theology of children, plants, mountains, rivers, women, colours or cities. And that has its place, because God who created all things delights in every part of creation and it is good to have our eyes opened to new aspects of his work of art we think of as the universe.

But biblical witness is about something more than this. It challenges us to see the meaning of each part of creation; its testimony if you like. What is it pointing to? What is the message it is designed to convey to us? And it doesn't take us long to realise that the Bible itself is crystal clear that everything in creation is designed to point to God in Jesus Christ. Everything is created to praise the Creator: whether trees clapping their hands, seas roaring, or babies crying. This means that in seeking to understand children as part of the biblical witness we are not merely trying to understand better how children are made, what they are like, how they develop (although there is so much that we can learn about these things), but to understand more fully what children reveal to us of God and his purposes and nature.

If you can make this distinction with me you will immediately grasp the difference between a “theology of childhood” and “child theology”. This is not to say that they do not inform each other and overlap, but to point out the way in which Child Theology goes beyond the child as a child, in order to see the child in relation to God in Jesus Christ. It may be that a theology of childhood is a useful starting point. An excellent reference book if you are looking for an encyclopaedia of children in the Bible is the book: *Precious in His Sight*, by Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996). I always keep it beside me!

And if you want a summary of how Christian biblical scholars and theologians have interpreted all the references to children in the Bible I can commend to you the work of my friend and colleague, Professor Marcia Bunge in her paper “Historical Perspectives on Children and the Church” published in the *Houston Consultation on Child Theology Report* (London: CTM, 2005), pages 38-45. It may be useful to have a summary of her categories. She argues that they need to be held in tension if we are to strengthen our commitment to children. And I would argue that only if we hold on to them all can we begin to see deeper into the biblical witness to God and his faithfulness, justice and love.

Children in the Bible have been understood theologically as:

- Gifts of God and sources of joy
- Sinful creatures and moral agents
- Developing beings who need instruction and guidance
- Fully human and made in the image of God
- Models of faith and sources of revelation
- Orphans, neighbours and strangers in need of justice and compassion

I think you can see that rarely do we manage in church and ministry to hold all of these together. And it is not hard to see the problems that arise when we concentrate on only one of these perspectives. If for example we see children as simply gifts of God and sources of joy, we will not take seriously the challenges of motherhood, and will tend to have a sentimentalised and romantic idea of children that does not do justice to the suffering and oppression of children worldwide. If on the other hand we see them simply as sinful, parenting and teaching may not be open to what children have to teach as we seek to care for and teach them. There is work to do here for all of us, and these two resources are a real blessing as we set about this task.

2. Children as partners in God's mission

Last week I had the privilege of talking with an antique dealer who came from a family that had nothing to do with church or Christianity. Two years ago he started to read the Bible systematically using a reading plan that I had commended to him. Having read the whole Bible for the first time (he used to do this each morning starting at 4.00 a.m. when he told me it was quiet so he could concentrate) I was intrigued to know what overall impressions he had gained. There isn't time to tell you all that he said, but one thing surprised him above everything else: how seriously the Bible took idolatry. He said it seemed to run through every book and yet he had rarely heard Christians talk about it.

As one who has just completed a new edition of the Bible I am able to confirm that he is right on the ball: idolatry is a biblical way of seeing the whole of human and personal history unless our lives and communities are continually reformed, cleansed and renewed by the work of God through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

A few years ago I too read right through the Bible, but with a particular purpose in mind.

I was looking to see how, where and why children figured in the Bible. The result was a paper for a Cutting Edge Conference, “Rediscovering Children at the Heart of Mission”, now published in *Celebrating Children* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), pages 189-199. It was a turning point in my whole ministry, and could be said to have given birth to what we now call Child Theology. As I re-read the paper I am struck by how many insights I gained that had been hidden until that moment, but one that turned my whole understanding of children around was that children “performed some of his most significant acts and revelations through these children. Their faith and actions are critically important in the unfolding and outworking of God’s purposes.” (Page 190) Until then I think I had tended to see children as precious objects of care, teaching and ministry. They remain that still, but what I had missed was the fact that again and again the Bible tells how God used them as partners in His mission when adults and adult institutions had failed or gone rotten.

This insight helped me to see that it is necessary to ponder deeply the nature of God’s mission. He takes the weak things of the world, and reveals his strength in and through weakness. And I see that children are largely unconscious of the way in which God is using them: they are not trained agents of the Kingdom. Perhaps God is using us as individuals and a church in ways that we are completely unaware of. Do we stress conscious mission, objectives and outcomes, systems and models, when He prefers to work as quietly as yeast in the dough and a mustard seed in the garden? So perhaps you can see how this discovery has led me both to see my relationship to children differently, and also to reflect deeply on what all this has to teach about God, Jesus and the Kingdom of Heaven.

3. Child and childhood as God’s way of seeing all humans

Once you start reading the Bible with children in mind you quickly discover that many if not most of the references to children are not actually about children as young human beings at all but ways of describing adults and adult communities. In the Jewish Scriptures there is continuous reference to “the children of Israel” for example and, as we all know, this phrase refers to the whole of the Jewish community, male and female, young and old. Likewise in the New Testament followers of Jesus are referred to as “little children”, for example in the letters of John.

This is not the place to develop this perspective, but we can note that it has some important implications. One is that we must be careful in making distinctions between adults and children, lest we obscure the fact that God sees us all as his children. What if childhood, from God’s point of view, rather than being a temporary phase in human development before what we may think of as maturity or adulthood, is a description of the whole of our lives? When you pray, say: “Our Father”, not just while you are little children but as adult believers and followers of Jesus.

Allied to this is the recognition that some of the most important descriptions of what it is to be a Christian relate to processes that we usually associate with children and childhood. Two obvious examples are Adoption and being Born Again. Whatever Paul and Jesus mean when they use these symbols they are not calling adults to cease to be responsible adults. But at the same time it is clear that unless we hold on to the child in the midst we, as adults, lose a vital sign of the Kingdom of God.

4. The Messiah as child

One of the umbilical links between the Old and New Testaments is the child foretold in the prophets, notably Isaiah, and the birth of Jesus, the promised one. I invite you to ponder afresh the passages in Isaiah which speak of this child (Isaiah 7: 14; 9: 1-7; 11: 1-11) to see what they reveal of God’s nature and his Kingdom. And then to read afresh the two birth narratives of Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. There is something distinctive and vital about the fact that God is revealing himself, coming among us, as a baby: “This will be a sign to you: you will see the babe, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.”

Jesus does not refer to his childhood in his adult ministry and we must be careful not to build theology where he chooses not to do so. But he does draw attention to the importance of the cries of newborn babies in Psalm 8: 2. And although we know that salvation comes to us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, rather than through his childhood, we should be careful not to overlook Jesus the promised child.

When thinking about this in Malaysia a year or two ago, I preached on the subject “child in the midst” arguing that God had chosen to place a child in the middle of human history and that the immediate reaction was that this divine child was placed in a manger because there was no room for him in the inn. Still I wonder whether we make sufficient room in our theology, biblical studies, worship, and pastoral work for the baby Jesus.

In very practical terms I am suggesting that Christmas is rightly seen as a very special festival and that it should not simply be seen as a prelude to the later ministry of Jesus. In this little baby God is revealing deep things about himself and, as we grasp them, we will see differently both our Father God and little children. (I commend to you the book by David Jensen, *‘Graced Vulnerability’*⁵ which takes this as one of its starting points.

5. Child as Representative of Jesus and Kingdom

As some of you know I have been working with my friend Haddon Willmer for over three years on a book that expounds the encounter between Jesus and his disciples in Matthew 18 where Jesus places a child in their midst as a sign of the Kingdom of Heaven. This has led us both to realise that neither we nor our theological and biblical colleagues have given sufficient attention to what this child in the midst teaches us about Jesus, the way of the Cross and the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus is clear that there is a risk of his disciples missing out on the Kingdom altogether if they do not heed the sign of the child but subsequent church history does not suggest we have seriously heeded his action, teaching or warnings.

I do not intend to summarise our findings because if I try to do so we might never get out of this session! But let me give you a flavour of our exposition. We see the disciples engaged in an argument which is essentially theological. And it is about arguably the most important matter of all: what the Kingdom of Heaven means. That is what it really means to follow Jesus all the way with integrity and commitment. Jesus has tried to explain the nature of the Kingdom and the way of the Cross in a number of different ways: stories, signs, examples, actions and specific teaching. But they have not even grasped the most basic idea of this Kingdom. So, as he begins his final journey to Jerusalem and the Cross, he places a child in their midst to provide a completely unexpected clue or key to the Kingdom.

As we have considered this deeply and at length we have come to believe that the passage has considerable insights for us all into the heart of God, the way of the Cross and how we are to relate to children and to Jesus.

One crucial discovery for us concerns the use of the term “representative”. Others have talked about the way Jesus identifies with little children in this and a later incident when he took little children in his arms and blessed them. Clearly there is a close link between children and Jesus. We have come to see the word “representative” as crucially important here, leading us to see in a fresh way how Jesus represents us on the Cross. He holds the space open for us so that by his Spirit the time comes when we are really “in him in his death” and therefore raised with him to newness of life. The child and Jesus are not interchangeable, any more than Jesus and his followers are interchangeable, but they and we are representatives.

I think I will need to leave it at this point but would of course be happy to discuss things with you and hope it will not be too long before this book is available in print.

6. The Child and Systematic Theology

At this stage in a seminar you do not want me to introduce another huge topic, so I will be very brief. Our biblical reading depends on a framework of theological understanding that is often called systematic theology. However hard you try you can’t get away from it. This was what Calvin the great biblical scholar meant when he penned his Institutes. Rather than keep on repeating himself in every commentary he tried to sum up some of the truths that underlay everything he was finding in the Scriptures.

Those of us who have studied systematic theology with a child in mind find that children are usually marginal if not completely invisible in all that has been written so far. (Others have noticed before that the poor, women and black people have also been noticeably absent in what is written and have started to put that right.)

As we begin to re-read this theology we find that new insights are dawning and new questions arise about: Creation, the Fall and Sin, Redemption, Church, Christ, the Kingdom of Heaven, the Resurrection, the Last Days and so on. The most obvious example is the way in which a child helps us to understand the “now” and “not yet” of the Kingdom of Heaven. This is a big enterprise but we are making a start. We do not know what we will find but, taking our clue from Jesus, we know that we can do no other, so help us God.

Marcia Bunge and I have been discussing the possibility of a book by international writers looking afresh at a number of key theological issues with a child in the midst of their thinking. We are looking as I speak for those from South America who might be willing and able to join others from every continent in the enterprise.

⁵ Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005

Our response to children

As we close, let us draw out the meaning of Matthew 18 for us all, whether theologians, pastors or parents and children's activists. Child Theology is not interested in part-theology: it is determined to facilitate practical/operative theology. So here is a summary of some of the practical implications of the journey so far.

A richer and fuller understanding of the nature of children and childhood

So those working as teachers and advocates have a more theologically informed framework in which to work.

New understandings of church and mission

Children are seen as nearer the heart of worship and ministry, not just as hearers and learners but as those who teach and lead by their very presence. This is good news for those working alongside children because there could be a sea-change in the understanding of the people of God about children's ministry.

A prophetic role for those engaged in children's ministry

Our engagement with children of all sorts leads us to discover truths that must be shared with the wider Christian community. Children's ministry must not be seen as a separate and discrete area of ministry.

Rethinking education and faith formation

Those engaged in Child Theology have begun to look with critical eyes at some of the 'taken for granted' assumptions we have about the nature and purpose of education and how children learn, whether about life or faith. The significance of the cries of babies and infants tends to be overlooked in church and school.

Parenting

It takes a village, a church community to parent.

Adulthood

Perhaps one of the greatest contributions of Child Theology is that adulthood is seen differently!

Conclusion

This is work in progress and I hope you will have much to add by your suggestions and critical observations. The process of discussion and conversation is vital to all that Child Theology is and does. That is how we believe it began when Jesus entered a theological discussion and this consultation is part of the very same conversation that others have joined around the world.



Seeing God in the Child

Carlos Queiroz

Introduction

My community of faith is a group of 16 or 17 children that go to my house and there they evangelize and humanize me. I meet with them with the feeling that they are going to reveal God to me and not the opposite. However, we cannot take the risk of turning the child into an absolute revelation. What I present here are not notes but some scrawls badly prepared.

We have a formed holistic vision of adults and we want to speak about children from within that perspective. Nevertheless, the child is a focus of theology. If we point out Psalm 8 we will see the figure of the child being used as an example of how to praise God. When we think about perfect praise, we think about liturgy but the Psalm points us to children - who are not even announcing God's glory yet! The child is a projection of the incarnation, of the image and similarity of God in a more original form. He or she learns while he or she plays. We learn while working, using our rationality. The child worries more about relationships, about affection - interpreting scenes and faces and deciding whether they express belonging or rejection. We read from texts and not from the child. Our Christianity has space for children when it baptizes them (obviously, in the Christian groups that baptize children), which in fact is a space complicated to talk about to children. Any religion that becomes big is made rationalistic, bureaucratic and liturgical and consequently marginalizes the popular classes, such as the poor and, in this case, children. However the Christian faith has a much bigger space for the child. The child recognizes the Messiah kicking inside the belly of His mother (like John the Baptist did in Elizabeth's belly). Only Matthew says in his gospel that there were children who recognized Jesus as the Messiah. Matthew's account is not liturgical.

A hermeneutic question

To say that the child is not just another but an absolute revelation would commit the same mistake as liberation theology. The child cannot be made sacred as liberation theology did with the poor. Jesus started to be seen only as a poor person that died wrongfully and who suffered more than others. This ended up rejecting the expiatory sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Jesus in His teaching on God's kingdom takes the child as a model, as a major indicator of humility, of simplicity, of absolute confidence in God. In this sense, while we should recognize the purity of children we must absolutely affirm that they cannot be made sacred. We cannot stop recognizing that some children act with cruelty, precociously acting like adults. But at the same time we have to recognize that there are adults who, by God's grace, live like children. The child then must be seen as an important mediator of revelation and not as an absolute revelation herself. As a matter of fact, I think that the child should be taken as a most important mediation of the revelation.

We are going to consider a hermeneutical question. Depending on the biblical text that we analyse, the child can be used positively or negatively. For example, from one side, when Jesus takes a child and says: "Whoever receives one of these children in my name is receiving me" (Mt 9.37), he illustrates a theme. The theme is not the child, it is the Kingdom of God and the illustration is humility, a condition of entry into the kingdom. He makes the child an illustration to show the need for humility to enter into God's kingdom. The lesson is "simplicity", the total surrender, the full confidence in God.

On the other side, children can be used as negative examples. Paul does so when he says: "I could not speak to you as to adults, but as to children" (1 Co 3.1). There is a danger in interpreting an analogy contained in a text and losing the idea. For example: "You are the salt of the earth". This is a very rich figure. The salt serves to preserve the food; then we say that the disciple serves to preserve the society. The salt serves to give taste; then the disciple serves to give taste. However, too much salt spoils the food; then we would have to say that too many disciples would be a destruction for society. And this is not true. The idea of Jesus was about virtue and he gives the illustration of the salt to communicate this idea. But sometimes we lose the idea and instead we interpret the figure. The same thing can happen with the figure of the child. Therefore it is important to notice the intention of the idea when we use an analogy, in order to not devalue or overestimate the analogy.

In the case of Matthew's text, I presume that we overestimate the child because Jesus was speaking about the kingdom of God and of the necessary humility to enter in the kingdom. He presented the child as a great illustration. Jesus, at another time, used the analogy of the Samaritan to talk about a good attitude. We should not interpret the analogy and conclude that all the inhabitants of Samaria were very good people!

Looking at the biblical text, I believe that God wants to teach us that the child, the poor person and those who are on the margins of society have a bigger probability of manifesting God because they have been looted, because of their inner condition, because of the pressure of society. In this sense, they are a more pure demonstration of the human being. In other words, when we see a child we do not see the position, the power, the bank account.

A challenge

The biblical text is the testimony of a given revelation. The demonstration of God's word comes before the text. In other words: God revealed himself, then someone wrote. First there was the revelation, then there was the register, the attempt to interpret the revelation. This is the text: "From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise" (Ps 8.2). Before the text the narrator had an experience, a glance of a child at the breast. This scene revealed something to the writer and gave him a perception which he registered. The revelation was before the text. In other words: the text is the evidence of the revelation.

Before registering the experience of Hagar with her son in the desert, someone first perceived it and only then registered it. The subjective, sensory perception precedes the text. The real life event reveals God and someone registers it. Moses had an experience of speaking with God in the desert. The experience is previous to the text and the text naturally refers to the experience. When we refer to the child, we affirm that, in general, the biblical accounts are preceded by the child himself. The child is the form of the revelation. For this reason, I have difficulty in saying which is the priority, if it is the child or the text. But it is clear that the child is the means of revelation. And so it is very clear when Jesus puts the child in his lap and says "who receives this child receives me and who receives me receives the Father who is in heaven" that he is talking about the attitude of welcoming the child, and about the child as God's message for all of us.

Theology is part of life - the theology of life or a theology with life. In this sense the child both announces and denounces. The difficulty and the suffering caused to our children very often creates an indignation. The history of children, the account regarding them, creates in all of us an indignation and a desire to do the will of God. The reality of children today and the facts about the situation of children that are presented to us systematize a real fact that is already denouncing us and announcing what the will of God is for society.

The child as a projection of the human creature

"The child, being at the beginning of her existence, represents the projection of the human creature in its most original and pure phase. Using the same language that the divine Spirit used in the book of Genesis, it usually affirms that the newly born child is soaked by the gracious breath of God. If we do not care well for this contact with God, time gets in charge of snatching from our hearts the gracious taste of the divine breath". This sentence comes from my article in the magazine *Mãos Dadas*. I feel that is what happens with me. I distance myself as I become an adult and lose the divine breath.

It is exactly what also happened in Genesis when the crown of creation stopped being a child. They began to realize their nakedness and thought of clothes as a power, the necessity of garments to appear like adults. So, in this sense, 'child' is not only a chronological age, it can also be a paradigm, a way of seeing life and a way of being seen as a human being. The idea of the nakedness of the child is something very interesting. The fact of an adult seeing him or her, giving him or her a bath, touching him or her, does not inhibit her. (Of course, I do not refer here to the opportunists, to exploiters). The child, in this condition of naivety, of simplicity, is the demonstration of this original purity that we are losing. (I hope the naturalists do not listen to me on that!) This nakedness is a deeper purity of the child. Then in this sense, the wise men of the Orient recognized the Messiah before he had done any miracle. Jesus had not done anything spectacular when they came and adored the baby. And the child

was wrapped only in cloth. You have the demonstration of the adoration of the child, a simple glance, looking at the boy.

However when we write about adoration, we generally content ourselves with the liturgy. When Paul says “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - this is your spiritual act of worship” (Rm 12.1) he talks about worship as a person. He does not talk about liturgy. He says that we are a worship to God. In other words, when we live, walk, work, we are worship. We are a reason of adoration. When we walk, talk, or practice any other action, other persons see God in us. This is an adoration: to show God in existence. The child is, in himself, this constant adoration. When we look at Psalm 8, for example, we see that the child is also a demonstration of perfect praise. We realize that this subjective demonstration which is not liturgical nor bureaucratic is what adores God and that says who God is. Jesus did something very interesting, which leads me to realize adoration is shown in the playful way of children. I refer to the entry of the donkey into the temple. This is something a mischievous boy might do! In playing, children see God manifested. That is difficult in our times, in our worship services and in our liturgies. The boys have no chance to be mischievous. John the Baptist plays football in the womb and his mother, Elizabeth, adores in the kick! The boy shudders and she worships God. This is a very maternal experience.

The child is a paradigm. I presume that Jesus divided human adults into two groups: those who are children and those who are not children. If so, as the children favor more joy than sadness and produce more life than death, so will be also those that become children. They produce more joy, they produce more justice and they produce more life than death. For the rest, who are not children, from Jesus’ point of view, death approaches, cruelty approaches, bringing with them everything that provokes pain and sadness. As we distance ourselves from the childlike being, we lose the fragrance of God and come nearer to death. We might call that precocious and voluntary aging. Happy are the men and the women who, receiving a child or in familiarity with children, are invaded again by the divine spirit and enjoy life again, in its most original and singular projection, through God’s grace, in the children whom God favors to reveal this mystery of his presence.

Paying attention to children

My father was a very simple man and he had a rule: “if I communicated it in the church so that the children understand, others will understand everything”. And he used to do everything that he could. A boy, my friend, who belonged to a family that were very resistant to the Gospel, was helping in the worship service. He was a little boy and used to assist the service seated in the window. When he became an adult, during college, he told me: “Carlinhos, I used to go there because when your father was speaking, I could understand everything but when it was another person I could not understand anything”. My father had this way of speaking so that children could understand.

Thinking about that, one day I asked my son and my daughter, if they would quickly check whether I had prepared my sermon in such way that it could be understood by children. I would be going to preach on the blind man of Jericho. Well in the introduction, I said that the blind man was in the entry of the city, with a bowl in his hand, begging from people. Then I was interrupted: “Father, do not speak on that. If you speak on that, you are going to be embarrassed”. I asked: “Why?” “Because I remember one day when I was with you, you were going down from the pharmacy where you had made a few purchases and the shopkeeper had given you the change. When he finished, a woman approached and asked you for some money and you said that you had no money but you had seven bills of ten Reais that I saw in your pocket. If you had given her one of those bills, you would have kept six and would have given her only one. Then do not go to speak there in the church, because I am going to say: people do not believe in what this Pastor is saying. No!” My children made hard work for me!

Another time, Kelvinha, when she was quite little had been naughty. When I arrived at home, she began to cry and said: “Father, mother caught me doing something and gave me a few slaps”. I said: “Look, if you do the same thing I would also give you a few slaps”. My intention was to reaffirm what the mother had done. Then Carlos Filho, little one, said: “Father, you two so big, with a slipper in your hands against such a tiny Kelvinha. This is a lot of cowardice!”

How can we hear our children more? How can we understand children? Naturally, I have to discern that probably he was defending his space. But what he was denouncing was true. When we assume the

institutional power of father, we do not respect any more the son and the daughter because we have power. But the truth is that, even though we have authority, we do not have the power in our hands. I think that we need to sharpen our eyes and open our heart to see this manifestation of God in the life of a child.

A Triangle of revelation

I think that we could build a triangle of revelation: the text, this community of adults and children and the collective production. There is no theology produced individually, it must be the result of a community and of our reality.

I find two texts in the Bible that help me in this. There is that moment in which they brought a woman caught in adultery. The accusers bring in the biblical text but the biblical text in that circumstance is not God's answer, nor was it God's word. It was the letter that kills. Then we have the moment where Jesus welcomes the woman into his community. And we have the context that Jesus observes: reading the heart of the individuals; reading what they are thinking; reading the perversity. In the interaction of these three axes you can find the revelation. At Pentecost we see a phenomenon in the community. And the phenomenon is not - Pentecostals forgive me - because they were speaking and were not understanding but quite the opposite: they were speaking and they all understood. The phenomenon is not the same as 1 Corinthians 12 and 14. Since here we are hearing in our own language but only because we have interpreters, we have to imagine the people in that context, who did not need interpreters. There is an external reality that raises the question: "what does this mean?" and Peter goes for the biblical text. There is an interaction between the biblical text and the community. Before the answers of an external necessity, the revelation is shown.

In Child Theology, we see in the child's perspective a holistic vision of the world, like a paradigm, and not only the chronological age. We can think about adults as organic and physiological formations but with this lively, full child inside.

Sin

My father was a widower who married a second time. Then I was born into a family of 14 children. My father was a Pastor who had been converted in the Assembly of God. When I wanted to do something foolish, my oldest siblings would not allow me. When I was with the youngest ones, they would go and tell our father. When I turned 18 years old, I began to work with young persons who were drug addicts. I lived at their home with them. The young guys were telling their histories and I was finding myself the holiest person in the world, because I had not done the foolish things that they did. Then I realised that I had not done the foolish things because my brothers did not allow me, not even my father, not even the church. It is not because I did not have sin in me.

We are saved by God's grace. The child is potentially vulnerable to practice sin but I cannot find that a child of one or two years of age has committed sin. Therefore, when one talks about children's sexual exploitation, in other words an adult from the outside exploits the child, we must recognise that the child in this situation still has no capacity to decide on this. I am not saying that she is not born in sin, because of the fall, and that she does not need the salvation and the grace of Jesus. I recognize that she has sin in herself. Likewise, the poor person needs salvation as any other. This is the difference that we make between liberation theology and the more orthodox evangelical theology in respect of the salvation in Jesus. We are not saying that the child is holy and pure. We need to be careful not to create a condition or an absolute category within a certain chronology of our existence.

Jesus calls a child who participates in his kingdom. Besides saying that the child is an owner of the kingdom, he uses her to teach the disciples who dispute about power. If you want to know if the church is only a great business, ask how many children participate in its activities. Because the child does not contribute money and does not pay towards the accounts, she is not interesting as a business client. So, a large number of participating children shows that God's kingdom is different.



The Child Theology Process

Keith White

[This paper was given after the first visit to the children]

Introduction

Child Theology is about rethinking the content of biblical and systematic theology; about reflecting on and enhancing Christian child-related activity. It involves deep thought and discussion. But it is also about a process of facilitating the best forms of theological reflection. We cannot simply give a definition of the content without marginalising the importance and significance of the process: the way we are doing this theological reflection. (Possibly Christians have missed out on understanding the Kingdom of Heaven because we have focussed on content and definition at the expense of process, and the way we do things if we are following Jesus faithfully.)

So the Child Theology Movement is careful about who is invited to consultations; about how we sit; about how many there are; about the importance of a balance between thinkers and practitioners, male and female and so on. We have tried to be attentive to other processes including black, liberation and women's theologies in order to sift out what is best for our own particular purposes.

Child Theology "Experiments" so Far

One of the ways we have tested the process out is by doing what we have called Child Theology experiments. You will find them described in the consultation reports.⁶ I would like to summarise for you two of these experiments. In **Cape Town** we explored our understanding of *Sin and the Fall* by using the imagined presence of a child soldier and child prostitute in our midst. In **Penang** we tried to see how our *understanding of church* was modified when we placed a little Muslim girl in our midst: a girl who wanted to become a Christian and a member of the church in a country which forbade such conversion.

The process we have tried has three main stages

- First the members of the consultation are invited to identify key aspects of their personal understandings of the theological subject being explored. These are written down and shared with others in pairs or groups.
- Secondly the consultation finds a way of placing a child or children in the midst and listening carefully to their stories, experiences and thoughts with particular reference to the theological question in mind. This part of the process does not require actual children in the midst: it can involve acts of imagination, stories and the sharing of personal experiences of children and childhood in a particular culture.
- Thirdly, the group goes back to the beginning and re-examines the understandings of the theological subject with which it started. What difference did we notice between our starting positions and how we now thought about it after this full and sympathetic attention to the child and children? At this stage the process is working in two directions: the child is interpreting theology and the theology is interpreting the child.

Outcomes

The findings are recorded in the Child Theology reports and we hope that there will be a booklet outlining the process and findings so far⁷. In Cape Town the central question was whether it was possible to arrive at a fresh and faithful biblical understanding of sin outside of the Augustinian tradition which sees sin as the condition in which all children are born, so that even babies are sinners. We did not record the starting points in the report but the discoveries are fully noted including a

⁶ In Cambridge we tried to identify our real working, operative theologies (not the formal statements of belief of our churches or organisation). In Houston we imagined a girl in our midst: a teenager who was a rep for a fashion magazine and company and began thinking about how liberation or salvation from consumerism might be achieved.

⁷ Now available from CTM; see www.childtheology.org

diagram. We pondered at length the harsh and sad realities of sin in the lives of a child prostitute and a child soldier. These children are affected by sin in a number of different ways.

Brasil

As we come to apply this process here in Brazil, let us be clear that we are trying to do theology. The theological subject needs clarification. The general issue is to do with children and the city: urban child theology perhaps. But this is a potentially huge field of study. We could be thinking of a theology focussing on urban poverty and the poor; of eschatology which begins with biblical visions of the new creation focussed on cities embodied in the New Jerusalem; we could be thinking of the effects of sin; we could be centering on salvation and liberation; we could be realising that hope is at the heart of all of this; and so we could go on.

We have started with meeting children and asking three questions. We have some of their thoughts, feelings, questions and pictures. We are trying to digest these. What are they really saying and why? How do we understand? What is the important issue? We are beginning to think about how we respond to them when we see them tomorrow. So we are doing things ostensibly in a different order to Cape Town and Penang. This is fine because theological reflection is a messy business. There is little that is neat about it. Paulo Friere would be pleased that we have tried to start by sitting on the ground with children and seeking to hear what they are trying to say!

A Suggested Process

Each group now needs to get together and identify the single theological issue that they feel they should wrestle with. What are the key biblical and theological resources? Obviously these will depend on the question the group identifies. Don't worry about the shape or form of a response at the moment. Let's be practical and use what each group has, rather than start a search of the internet for theological libraries and systematic theologies. Let us be vulnerable and weak.

We will reconvene as a plenary group to share the questions but primarily to clarify the next part of the process. After that the groups can meet again to ponder the children's contributions again in the light of the question. Only then should we begin to consider our response to the children. Please make careful notes of the content and the process. Let us not be concerned about neatness or answers. How do we feel we should with integrity and sensitivity respond?

Tomorrow, we will go to meet the children again. We will share with them. What will we share? Cookies? Words? Pictures? Questions? Empathy? And we will come back together to reflect on the whole process.

An Example

Perhaps the process will become clearer if we try a practice example, a brief experiment. In it we focus on worship, or if you like a church service. First, think about a service or act of worship where a child or children have been in the midst for you. This might be in a sermon, songs, dance, prayers, readings, testimonies, offering and so on. Discuss this and summarise the experiences of your group. What was it that made such a difference?

Then try to think how a service might be different if we tried to see a child in the midst as a sign of the Kingdom of Heaven. What readings would we choose? What might the sermon focus on? What songs and hymns are available? What about changes might there be to the seating, the process, the leading of the worship?

Finally as individuals reflect on how being part of this process is likely to effect the way you seek to follow and serve Jesus in the coming week.

Either by speaking to each other, or by recording our notes, we will try to synthesise the results of the process.

Theological Conversations with Children

Perhaps it is useful if the reader imagines the conversations as being in the figure of a spiral: we were always returning to the "urban child" who had been our starting point. We reflected

on our experience in our local churches, of God, our ministries, our children and even our childhoods. After each visit, our conversations returned to the starting point but we returned with new words, new concepts, new impressions and, who knows, something new to modify our theologies.

Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5
Bráulia Brook	Tsuruko Masuko	Gladys Lopes	Elsie Gilbert	Terezinha Candieiro
Karen Wondracek	Sueli Catarina	Cida Mattar	Neuza C. da Silva	Nilza Valéria
Yolanda Miranda	Cilas F. Gavioli	Carlos Caldas	Jörg Kühnapfel	Carlos Más
Cláudia Mércia		Keith White	Silas Totes	Alcir Almeida
Tércio Sá		Johannes Lukasse	Débora Fahir	Klênia Fassoni
Ismael Santana		Henry Terena	James B. Gilbert	John Collier
		John Francisco	Welinton Peartree	
		John Esvael		
		Carlos Queiroz		

Group 1 - Visit to a PEPI class with children from 4 to 6 years

The group was very well received by our group of small theology teachers from whom we learned so much. They stirred us to reflect deeply during our visit. We felt comfortable among them as they were playing next to us and we were asking ourselves the question “What is good in this neighborhood?”. The first answer was the one that attracted our attention most and that was the starting point of our reflection: “The good thing here is Gustavo”. After a time of conversation about this question, many different people gave interesting answers and we asked them to illustrate the subject: “If God was the mayor here what would he do?”. Aspects that represent union were recurrent in the drawings; there always appeared a scheme of union of two or three figures. In the end, however, when we asked them to give us their drawings, they began to cover their drawings with other colors and to scribble. One child even stopped drawing when we said that. Perhaps they felt exposed or some anguish had been woken there. It was also something for us to think about.

1. What is the principal theological question taken by the group?
 - Theology of the glance.
2. What is your final theological declaration?
 - The glance of the child is as God's glance, a glance that does not judge it does not even condemn, and being looked by them we are transformed into God's image.
1. Who is the single child that you met that you would like to share with the whole consultation?
 - Paul was hospitable and receptive toward us.
3. How was the process special for you?
 - The breaking of the paradigm that we were going to offer something to the children. On the contrary, we received and were instructed by them.

Group 2 - Visit to the children playing in the street of the Slum Capivari

The group had the challenge of hearing children in the community. There was no organized group, the children were found running free in the street and they were playing. Each one of the group talked with a different child. The answers were interesting.

We asked Paulo, a 6-year-old, “If God was the mayor of the city, what would he do?” and “What if you were the mayor?”. To the second question, the child answered that he would do the same things that he had listed in the first question. Perhaps he identified with this (imaginative) demonstration of God; in other words, what God would do, it is what I can do.

Another participant asked the same questions to a girl. She answered that God would build an orphanage, because where she lives there are many orphans. She said that she would like to work in that orphanage.

The theological question that motivated the group was “Does God play?” The children taught us in a very spontaneous way that God plays, that he participates in all the fun. Wellington, who is 7 years old, told us that God plays tag and soccer, he plays with animals and tells stories. In a game of soccer God plays all the positions, attack, defense and goalkeeper. God as goalkeeper was not going to let anything pass because he flies! He could be a judge, since he does not make mistakes. The children taught us that theology is something practical, simple, part of daily life. When one plays, body and soul participate in an integrated way. There is no separation between daily life and the sacred. We should always adore and worship God. The children taught us how to break the paradigm in which adoration happens only in the moment of worship. It happens in every moment.

The group of children whom we found consisted only of boys, so we asked about the girls. Kaíque, 9 years of age, answered that God plays with the girls with doll houses. There is no discrimination, since boys and girls are partners of God when they play. In play, a relationship is established with the other. There is interaction, respect, limits and rules. We returned to the thought that theology is part of life, of our day to day activities, and reflected on the Word that became flesh; it became a physical body. A child's space in the church has to express life, freedom, movement, joy, pleasure, and not only words. The city for Wellington, Marcos, Paulinho, and Davi, had to have a place to play, where the persons play together. “God will call more friends”, said 10 year old Marcos. It is necessary to have feelings and emotions.

Child Theology must be an instrument for the church and for the people of God to create a new type of relationship between people and with God himself. It should be a way of doing things differently, with more participation, more involvement. There is still much to hear and to learn from the children. This was the beginning of an experience in which God himself mediates our relationship with the child.

1. What is the principal theological question taken by each group?
 - The God that plays.
2. What is your final theological declaration?
 - God participates in the life of children and plays with them.
2. Who is the single child that you met that you would like to share with the whole consultation?
 - Davi was playing with stones and he told us that one day God played with him throwing stones.
3. How was the process special for you?
 - That they did not find the idea of God playing with them strange.

Group 3 - Visit to the children at Belém Home (Vale da Benção)

We tried to begin with a dynamic activity but one of the children simply refused to participate. We began to insist but then we realized that to force participation would be disrespecting a child that we had the intention of helping. She had the right to not participate and that had to be respected.

As for the question “What would be the perfect city?”, the children's descriptions always made use of the negative, using the word “not”, as in “there will not be this or that”, telling about the things that are not good. The answers were more or less like this: “Without theft, without death, without pollution, without violence, without corruption, without drugs, without arms”. It called our attention very much to the repeated occurrence of the negative in the description of the city in the Apocalypse of John.

When we brought up the question: “If God was the mayor of the city, how would it be?” The general idea of the answers consisted of: “The city would have love, communion” (they were older children, therefore they had capacity to think more abstractly). Other answers: “If God was a mayor there would not be detours in the city” (the parties in the city are very noisy and fill the night air); “He would give houses to the ones who don't have one”; “The statues would be removed” (there exist several statues of scrap metal of iron in the city, as an effort of the Mayor in self promotion).

A child who was very extroverted and cheerful, when he discovered that Henry was Indian, began to speak with him in Guarani, because he had come from Paraguay (Guarani is the second language of that country). Henry is a Terena Indian and his language is different from the Guarani but even so they managed to communicate.

Afterwards, the children drew the perfect city. A boy explained that in his drawing the person fallen in the street was someone whom he would take care of and take to the hospital. Another boy placed himself in the drawing very satisfied: “Mayor Valdinei”. And the name of the city would be Rio de Janeiro. He explained that his city would be completely colorful, because the mayor of the city where he lives paints almost everything with green and yellow (colors of Brazil). In other words, if God was the mayor of the city, He would be going to use all the colors, not only green and yellow.

In this first visit we noted that the theological questions brought by the children concerned the concepts of peace and justice. After that, we discussed these concepts and tried to apply them to the context of the houses. When we placed the children in the middle of our symbolic wheel of reflection, we realized the situations of abuse and violence had revealed their sense of justice. We worked on the following biblical references: Jeremiah 29:4-7 and Isaiah 1:26. From these texts we decided to prepare a playful activity (theater), to present our response to the children.

In the end, we can say that this experience was real because we participated with them, with their reality. It was surprising, because it was not any different than the idea that God plays with them and it was special because they received us, they gave a place for us. We were interrupting their fun to ask them questions but even so they were happy to help us.

1. What is the principal theological question taken by each group?
 - Justice and peace.
2. What is your final theological declaration?
 - Peace is the result of a process of justice through anguish and pardon.
3. Who is the single child that you met that you would like to share with the whole consultation?
 - Samuel in his drawing showed he is concerned with the neighbors, from the necessities that he observed, demonstrated actions of compassion.
4. How was the process special for you?
 - The transparency of the children and their possible indifference with so many people visiting the group was distressing for us. And it was surprising to see the potential of the children.

Group 4 – Visit to the children living in Betânia House (Blessing Valley)

The group arrived at Betânia House, one of the houses of Children’s City, in the Valley of Blessing project. We met in the living room with the social mother and ten children between 8 and 14 years old. We did some fun activities so that our group and the children could get to know each other. We made a circle and sang the song “If this road were mine”. Then we replaced the word “road” in the song for “town”, so that we could introduce the theme. We asked the children to help us to understand some things and we started to ask questions.

We asked what the perfect city would be like to them and what needed to be done to build it. Some of the answers were:

- ☺ “Turn the city up side down”;
- ☺ “Have more houses, take out the buildings or make smaller buildings”;
- ☺ “Have a sweet shop for each person”;
- ☺ “Have less pollution”;
- ☺ “Not have thieves”;
- ☺ “Open toy factories”;
- ☺ “It should have everyone working”;
- ☺ “Give more houses to those that don’t have one”.

The answers to the questions that followed were similar and expressed the idea of a city at peace with its inhabitants and with nature. One child said that in his/her city “the poor and the beggar would be able to go to church”. Another said that the children would be allowed to get dirty, sing, dance and sleep. A word that was repeated a lot by the children was “house”. They repeated it several times.

At the end of the visit we asked what they would like to know, if they had the opportunity to ask God. We realized that what they said wasn’t with the intention of seeking the right answer but it was spontaneous and sincere. Their questions:

- ⊗ Why doesn't God let us go back to our families?
- ⊗ Why doesn't God take the Devil out of the world?
- ⊗ What do we have to do to take the problems out of our life?

After debating we got to the conclusion that the children's questions were related to belonging. They didn't want to stay there in the Valley of Blessing, they wanted to go back to their families. We think that the second question has to do with the problem of evil and human suffering: if God is Almighty, He should take the Devil from the world and in this way children will have no more problems.

We could have worked with the matter of who this God is or the matter of belonging, what makes us part of a family. We chose to work the matter of belonging to a family, particularly to God's family. In the second visit to the house, we shared with the children our thoughts. But we were very surprised with the answer we received from them. When we said good-bye, we asked what would stay in the memory of each one. An older boy said "It was good of you to come here and ask what we think rather than tell us what we have to think".

1. What is the main theological question brought up by the group?
 - Belonging to God's family.
2. What is the group's final theological declaration?
 - To belong to God's family is to feel taken care of by each other.
3. Who is the single child that you met who you would like to share with the whole consultation?
 - Henrique. He changed our adult way of thinking, He showed a critical vision.
4. How was the process special for you?
 - At the beginning, the affection and receptivity of the children.

Group 5 - Visit to the children at the Children's Association of Belém

The structure of the institution and the diversity of the children who attended there were outstanding in this experience. We experienced the solidarity, communion and very real acceptance among the children, which promoted a very fraternal and very calm environment.

The children were very kind to us and they received us very well. All of them were anxious for the visit and for what we were going to talk about with them. To create a relaxed atmosphere we did a fun dynamic activity. Then we asked, "What would a perfect city be like?". We notice that their answers were coming from their longings, from their life experiences. Also the experiences that the children had with God were notable in their answers. Several of them spoke about the wish and the necessity of having a good and pretty house to live in, work, justice, joy, and peace. They raised issues of urban infrastructure: to play in a street without garbage; to take care of the plants; to have no thieves. One of the boys still felt sad because they had killed the horse which he was taking care of. He was always speaking about not killing the animals and that in a perfect city there were animals. Other answers mentioned amusement, parks, joy, pleasure and security. Jesus also was part of their answers - in a perfect city the people have Jesus in their lives. We realized that for them a perfect city has joy, amusement, security, peace, tranquility, belonging {refuge}, relationships and Jesus.

To the question "And what if God was the mayor of Sorocaba?", we got the following answers: There would be no poor people in the streets, patients would be treated, the people would be revived (mostly "Pentecostals"); Life would be healthier. There would be more education, more work. There would be houses for all the homeless and there would be no drugs or other bad things.

At the end, the third question: "And if you could build a new city, what would it be like?"- They would have houses for everyone, food for everyone, more churches, more hospitals. One of them said that it would have more flags of Sorocaba around the city and another said, they would have more evangelical shops where the people could buy CDs and Bibles.

Afterwards, they were asked to draw the "desired city". They talked about their dreams with their drawings and even presented them to us. There was a drawing that showed clearly that the perfect city is under the sovereignty of God. Another had a person throwing a gun in the garbage. Another drawing showed the importance of the presence of nature in the city.

One of the questions that impacted us was one that a boy asked Welinton, “What are you going to do to remember us when you leave? You come on Thursday and then you go away. What are you going to do in order that you do not forget us?”

In the second visit, we made jokes, sang and shared prayer requests with them. In our reflection we remembered Isaiah 11 and saw how the prophecy described the reign of the Messiah and his future government. We encouraged them to pursue their dreams and wishes. We had the opportunity to take a simple snack to them, which helped us in our relationship with them.

It was a short time, but they left deep marks on us regarding the needs of the children we had heard, loved and also how we could learn many biblical truths through them. It was surprising and special that our group observed the reverence of the children, the value that they have because they exist and the necessity of being together with us.

1. What is the principal theological question taken by each group?

- Relationship is a standard of existence in the kingdom.

2. What is your final theological declaration?

- The church is an instrument in the transformation of the city in the existence of effective relationships taking the child as an indicative parameter.

3. Who is the single child that you met that you would like to share with the whole consultation?

- John Vitor is from a privileged economic situation but he is connected deeply with the other children.

4. How was the process special for you?

- To observe the respect of the children for us and the value that they gave to the fact of existence and the need to be with us.



Appendix I

Feedback - Individual responses from the Participants

A sentence expressing your feeling regarding the experience of the consultation:

“It was a lesson in humility.”

“I must pattern my life as a child, looking at him or her for inspiration to survive in God's kingdom.”

“Child Theology is to bring the child to the center of our attention and to try through him or her to know God better.”

“To renew a feeling of hope together with the children.”

“Some confirmations and new challenges. Feeling of smallness and hope.”

“God joined, here in Itú, his prophets and the prophecies talking to us about children. And now we have the mission to announce all of this to Brazil and to the world”.

“Excellent time for reflection and to take a position.”

“An opportunity to look at the children, in reality with their needs and spirituality, and from this glance to understand that it is urgent to place the children in the center of the circle, rebuilding values and principles for society.”

“The child in the middle of the conversation.”

“Excellent!”

“Reconstruction is the key word for my life and ministry regarding the consultation of Child Theology.”

“Frustration because I know that there is so much to be done and how few people to do it.”

“Child Theology is a new challenge for the people of God, a tool for the construction of the kingdom of God.”

“A door that opened in my heart and in practical psychological and theological ministry”.

“Who would prioritize life must be on the children's side first of all.”

“The communion was good, new contacts were made and the consultation helped us to see children from a different perspective.”

“Very good. It brought God's great revelation and a new hope to the theological courses.”

“My feelings are of great identity with the subject and a satisfaction mingled with gratitude by the possibility of participation in this consultation!”

Evaluation of the consultation done by the participants:

“At first I felt very unsatisfied and fearful but with the development of the program there was opportunity for growth and for establishing relationships.”

“Excellent initiative, which must be continued. Congratulations to the organizers and promoters.”

“The meeting was a great opportunity for rethinking about the child, to re-evaluate my positions before him or her. The integration and exchange was gratifying among (studious) theologians and those who are working with children.”

“The meeting was very good to expand my vision of serving the child. Throughout the years I saw myself ministering to the child. Today I understand that God has been using the child to minister to me. I liked participating in this meeting very much. It was worthwhile!”

“Shorter lectures and more group work.”[Answer to the question of content of the meetings '.]

“The meeting could have been shorter or perhaps it could have been possible to have asked the participants if they could stay to the end.”

“A good opportunity for prophets to think together about this subject, with our community of faith. It was worth the apprenticeship. And may God help us to meet this new challenge.”

“We had a great opportunity to relearn many things. It was a very tasty environment of communion.”

“The available time seemed to me extensive. It might have been less time with more concentrated activities.”

“We should have visited projects nearer to the city in which we meet. We might end with Holy Communion.”

“The length of time of the consultation might be shortened, with more intense activities, perhaps from Tuesday to Thursday.”

“I would like more participation of the people. Some did not participate in the conversation at the big table.”

“I think that the division of the time was not ideal, perhaps because of the time spent traveling. We didn’t have much time to do the reflection.”

A last reflection on the process

The unanimous observation was that we needed more reflection time even to form all the theological questions raised by the simple exercise of having begun conversations with the children. The questions that the children brought up, their observations, the simplicity and depth with which they were expressed brought us an enormous wealth of thoughts, emotions and memories. We believe that these children will continue to impact the way in which we think about God, his world and the mission that he has given each one of us. We believe also that this process of reflection seems essential if we want to help the children at risk socially in Brazil. This report was written for the intention of stimulating more conversations like these.



Appendix II

The child as a hermeneutical key – a psycho-theological approximation

Karin Hellen Kepler Wondracek⁸

My door to Child Theology has two keys – which only happens with important doors... I have carried them both on my “hermeneutical keychain” and both of them open the door which gives access to a beautiful house - the house of the child in relation inside of me.

The first key was forged on Biblical readings - first because it is the older, because its construction started when this child listened to her mother’s voice telling stories bedside. The voice of mom, telling her own story, with intonations and accents of her own parents and grandparents that told the same stories and which were passed onto me – consciously and unconsciously – a precious role emotionally and informatively. Contact with the Bible, word of God – father and mother, and contact with my own mother that calmed those fears of night and placed me in the arms of God to sleep. Probably because of this that Psalm 131 has always been my favorite – and here is where I would like to use the first key:

Ps 131

*My heart is not proud, O LORD,
my eyes are not haughty;
I do not concern myself with great matters
or things too wonderful for me.
2 But I have stilled and quieted my soul;
like a weaned child with its mother,
like a weaned child is my soul within me.
3 O Israel, put your hope in the LORD
both now and forevermore.*

(NIV)

Here we have the attitude of a child that knows its size and fragility – and we could talk for pages over the vulnerability of childhood that requires an adult protector – we are born vulnerable, and one of our life tasks, according to Freud, is to accept the vulnerability that makes up our childhood matrix but that also manifests itself in adulthood – when faced with the forces of nature and when faced by death, where we have no control. I think that the acceptance of vulnerability in the presence of God is one of the doors that open up this Psalm.

I would like to spend time on verse 2 and what I am learning with the Jewish tradition⁹, which opens for me two possibilities to interpret it, without deciding on one of them. My key created on the Biblical reading receives here a psychoanalytic call:

Psychology and Theology of breastfeeding

“Like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me.”

The first possibility is that this child was recently weaned - and because of this, is in that delightful apathy of being full. In this case - God-mother feed me, God filled me, in Him I have my filling along with cosy satisfaction. What satisfies a baby is the combination of being fed and cared for – “with sugar and with care” – and there is where our theology can learn that, beyond good nutrition, it has to become caring and loving.

⁸ Psychologist and psychoanalyst, professor at EST and doctoring at IEPG (São Leopoldo).

⁹ This is how I see the philosopher Lévinas do with the creation of the women in Genesis “An God created the women” – IN: E. Levinas. Do sagrado ao santo: cinco novas interpretações talmúdicas. Rion de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2001. P. 133-159.

I found in Winnicott (1896-1971), that is before paediatric psychoanalysis, one of the best reflections about the relationship between a mother/caretaker and baby and the importance for the constitution of the self¹⁰.

One of his most significant affirmations, which is also important for our hermeneutical key, is that there does not exist a child without a mother: *“Not one psyche can be understood as if it existed in isolation. The development of the self of the baby will only prosper in an environment of play, of love, and above all, the reflection of the attention of the mother”*¹¹.

For Child Theology, the child in the lap of the mother records that we do not exist without our God - the relationship with him is, since Adam and Eve, the foundation of our being. The child's dependency exhorts us to always remember this fact, and inspires us to “be born again” and allows us to recreate ourselves in the dependency of God. The mystic Brother Lawrence, in his letters written mostly in the monastery kitchen, expressed that *“the habit most holy and necessary for our spiritual life is the presence of God. This is to sense the constant pleasure of his company, to speak with him humbly and lovingly in every occasion, in every moment, without limiting the conversation in any way”*¹² (My translation from the Portuguese).

Nourishment is presence. In the chapter “Nourishment of the baby”, Winnicott affirms that *“the nourishment of the child is a question of the relationship mother-child, the act of putting in practice the relationship of love between two humans”*¹³.

Nutrition, in other words, is the practice of the relationship of love, of one body that gives itself for the other need body – and here is the matrix that is profoundly redefined in the “This is my body” of the Lord's Supper. Jesus Christ occupies the fundamental relationship – the mother that gives her own body for the baby – the institution of the most important Christian ritual, and with this connects with the most primitive experiences of the human being.

And more: in breastfeeding, by the concrete fact that the baby participates in/with the maternal body while in a satisfying relationship, develops a scheme/ matrix for all the types of experiences it will participate in. That is, the Psalmist is directly making the bridge between the experience of breastfeeding and the experience of God – “like a child...” the original beatitude turned into the matrix for the experiences of relationships with other humans and with God.

But Winnicott also notes that nourishment is not only beatitude - the baby, when it feels hungry and uncomfortable, ‘attacks’ ferociously the breast and fantasizes that it is attacking the breast, and later discovers that “it attacked” its own mother: *“there is a very strong aggressive element in the primitive impulse of love, that is the impulse to suckle”*¹⁴. In other words, the state of the post-feeding beatitude also comes from the perception that the mother also survived the hungry attack, and continues loving and intact. In this way, the mother reassures her baby that its hunger was not excessive, overwhelming, and that she is able to cope with the intensities of her body and psychic. To experience grace and forgiveness can also be anchored here.

¹⁰ I think that this author should be approached by Child Theology, that is, in part based on the observation for the theoretical, and what kept the words of this movement simple from the beginning. Cf. *A criança e o mundo*, that were registered on radio programs on the BBC with counselors for fathers and mothers. One brief summary of his thinking can be found on FADIMAN & FRAGER *Personalidade e desenvolvimento humano*. Porto Alegre, Artmed, 2004 e na Revista *Viver Mente e Cérebro*, Coleção Memória da Psicanálise, n.5. São Paulo: Duetto, s.d..

¹¹ FADIMAN & FRAGER, 2004, p.83.

¹² Irineu Lourenço, A prática da presença de Deus. São Paulo: Candeia, 1996, p. 54.

¹³ D.W. Winnicott, A criança e seu mundo. Rio de Janeiro, 1966, p. 31.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 59. Note that the first 100 pages are dedicated to breastfeeding - a rich treasure of reflections to be related with Child Theology.

Psychology and Theology of weaning

The second interpretive possibility of the state of the baby in Psalm 131 is that the psalmist is referring to a child a little bit older that is going through a situation like weaning.

“like a weaned child with its mother”

In this case, the mother’s body no longer nourishes the baby, and the child needs to contend himself or herself only with the loving care. He or she has had to pass on to other nourishment, no longer does he or she have that perfect paradise at the beginning of life, where both of them were satisfied. In this case, the Psalmist is referring to a situation of respecting, of renouncing, and of reconciling with the “less”.

We have here a bases for those experiences when God does not give me what I want – those extraordinary things – that require that I calm myself down internally - *I have stilled and quieted my soul* – This is hard work, for myself I should cease to want the “sky” and be content with less, and as with all good works, bring forth fruit from my experience and from the other. For Winnicott, “in the experience of weaning, it is an important fact that the mother resists all the sentiments associated with weaning, and this resistance is because, in part, the it protects the child and, also in part it protects herself”¹⁵. In-other-words, to pass through the weaning crises without “destroying” the other provides a first experience of overcoming a crises, and more: gives mutual growth. The baby and his or her mother learn to deal with frustrations and to survive without the intervention of the breast (The word *seio* can have a double meaning in Portuguese; breast and means, in this case it could be translated without the intervention of another means).

Theology needs to rescue this model of survival in crises to help people preserve their relationship with God **before** receiving the “extraordinary things”! All of the neurotic fear associated with “sinning against the Holy Spirit”, demonstrate that there are fantasies that their relationship with God will not survive the attack of the angry Christian. As with a child (poorly) weaned from their mothers lap, imagines that the mother might not survive the attack. On the other hand, there are Christians that understand sickness or accidents as punishments from God for sins committed, as if the mother retaliates and because of this the baby gets sick.

Moderate frustration is the engine for growth, says Freud and Winnicott, and makes possible the construction of provisory satisfactions through fantasies, and that these are acceptable in place of the best. The towel and the bottle’s nipple take the place of the breast, and the baby with them can imagine the return to paradise. To fantasize is the engine of creativity, and in the security of the soul the child plays, the adult works, the poet composes and the gardener plants. And everyone, with jokes, songs, poems and works, bring about the creative gesture by which we participate in the activity of God, and allows us to continue on with our life.

To help with the conversation, I think that the contributions of Winnicott and of other theorists, when they are invited to illuminate the child as in this Psalm, encourages theologians to consider the relationship mother/father – child as a hermeneutical key to the relationship God-human being. Not only the child, but the relationship with your providers should be considered, here is where we encounter the foundation of being human. And also there are other challenges:

To observe babies systematically could be a big enrichment for Child Theology. Not only the older children but a little one can also be “put in the middle” with much to learn from.

As psychoanalytical contributions can also help not to “idealize” the child being the ideal. With this, we can also learn about the natural human and their intense love and aggressiveness,

¹⁵ Winnicott, p. 61.

already present in the little ones, and we can learn about the mercy of God for all, great and small.

This would be a good place to remember a part of a card from Oscar Pfister to Sigmund Freud, in which he relates the theology of grace with the attitude of parents with their little child:

In the true conception of Christian grace, which can be seen in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15), what evidently happened was a regression back to the infant stage, in which the child is not treated according to the rule of good or bad, but simply is treated with love and goodness¹⁶.

I think of this letter as my precursor to Child Theology in dialogue with psychoanalysis, the axis in which to forge my keys for these reflections.

The Second key: theology of human development

It is now time for the second hermeneutical key, forged in three movements: its essence comes from the reading of psychoanalytical theory, receiving its finished surface from the observation of babies and its “usinagem¹⁷” formation from theology, starting from in particular the work of theologian James E. Loder¹⁸. This Princeton theologian, also schooled in psychoanalysis, researched and systemized the relationship between psychological development and spiritual development of the human being. In summary, I present here his commentaries about the first 18 months of life¹⁹

Psychological development: The foundation of the ego

The human spirit, for Loder, is in the human being from the beginning and constitutes “the inner dynamic of what it means to become a person”²⁰. The birth is the first experience in which the spirit shows its force, and this experience can be re-appropriated late in life, as the “*new birth*’, a spiritual transformation that restores life in the face of death”²¹. The human spirit is a prototype or form “that presses through time toward completion”²².

Loder does not agree with the theories that say that everything is already determined in human development, that is it is conceived open-ended. The human spirit is the creator power that fights for, against chaos, to construct a order. For Loder, there exists a sequence of stages inaugurated in the conflict of birth and that repeat themselves at each critical development, at each transitional stage:

1. The phase of conflict and chaos,
2. The search to comprehend the situation and a way out;
3. Freedom from tension with new strength at hand;
4. Advancing ahead over the newly created order.

This means, development is not continuous or ascending; the very difficulties can be ways to new achievements. After the crisis of birth, there are other critical stages that follow this pattern, and the human spirit is forced to lead with the inner development and to rise above the

¹⁶ Letter from Pfister from 31/7/1930. *Cartas entre Freud e Pfister: um diálogo entre a psicanálise e a fé cristã*. Viçosa: Ultimato, 1998, p.

¹⁷ Dicionário HOUAISS: “usinagem: talhar, dar forma a (peça bruta, matéria prima) utilizando máquina-ferramenta”, p. 2815.

¹⁸ Especially from the book *The logic of the spirit: human development in theological perspective*. São Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998. For almost two years the group “Grupo de leitura de Loder” have met bi-weekly, with whom I am grateful for the fellowship of: Agnes Seewald, Claudio Kupka, Daisi Pontuschka (in memoriam), Deborah W. Gehres, Jarbas Machado, Letícia N. Cartell, Priscila Brust, Roseli K. Oliveira. Doravante, Loder's book will be abbreviated LS, followed by the referenced page. This text is a summary of a paper of the author, done for the Doutorado em Teologia no Instituto Ecumênico de Pós-Graduação, São Leopoldo, 2005.

¹⁹ I make this note because in our Grupo de Leituras de Loder, we worked with an original and creative approach – theology starting from a baby!

²⁰ LS 89

²¹ LS 85

²² LS 89

chaos. To understand the stages, Loder anchors them in the ideas of psychoanalyst Rene Spitz: the foundation of the ego is brought about through the four **organizers** that occur during our first eighteen months of life. It is through these, the baby develops in relationship with people and the environment, and through this relationship comes about the stages described above, and this is how internal structures emerge from chaos and the babe is capacitated to attend to his or hers vital necessities.

1. The first of these organizers is the **mouth**, in which the baby receives the means of surviving and experiments the world. This happens though the multiple reflexes and actions – sucking, tasting, sensing the breast and other parts of the maternal body and other objects. That is (porém), the reach of relating orally is much greater, that is “the mouth begins to do in a primitive way what the ego will eventually do in a much more complex and sophisticated way: serve the drive for survival and satisfaction”²³. For the rest of its life, it is the ego that will enter into contact with reality, and decide on which way it will relate to it.

For Christian theology, it is necessary to record that the Lord’s Supper, instituted by Christ, is embossed on the first psychic organizer, that is, referring to the most archaic elements of our structure. If it is by the mouth that initiates the ego, then also it will be by the mouth that the Christian will be organized in communion with Christ and his body.

2. From three to six months, there is a new organizer: in front of a real face the baby reacts with a smile. This phenomenon is so important and normal that it functions as an imprinting (gravação)²⁴ on what it means to be a human being. It is a “mirror relationship between the adult face and the child’s face, the smiling child and the return of that smile from the adult”²⁵.

The reaction of the smile to the face is not a simple residue of the capacity to relate oneself with a loved one. For the baby, the holding and the mother gazing at him or her is the proper cosmic order, in which the baby feels inserted into and has its identity confirmed.

Loder comments that it is not hard to imagine the **transfiguration** before that presence to see how the *imprinting* of the face is “implicitly religious and an incipient sense of the presence of God”²⁶. The face of the mother is the “primal prototype of the religious experience” with the face of God. If the baby has the face of the mother in front of her or him, it knows what species she belongs to, we can see that this will be the paradigm in which the human being recognizes itself in the new creation, in the encounter its place as the unique being and at the same time belonging to a greater order:

Universality and particularity, individuality and belonging, deep subjective satisfaction and a sense of the ultimate objective order: all combine in a single living, harmonious presence²⁷.

3. Around six months, the third organizer appears: **anguish**. The human baby, born in relation to the mother and fused from the beginning with her, experiments the anguish of her possible disappearance. Anguish functions as an alarm to prepare the ego for this

²³ LS 90

²⁴ Termo cunhado pelo etologista Konrad Lorenz (1903-1989) para definir o processo pelo qual filhotes, logo que nascem, tem a prontidão para seguir a mãe, ou até uma falsa mãe. Os sinais visuais e auditivos do objeto “mãe” são gravados e provocam uma resposta de acompanhamento que depois vai afetar o adulto. Internet, www.cobra.pages.nom.br/ecp.-lorenz.html. Pesquisado em 15.12.05.

²⁵ LS 90

²⁶ LS 91

²⁷ LS 91

possible, that is “the six- month-old child is learning to understand and anticipate the parental ‘no’”²⁸.

The possibility of this “no” (which already appeared in little experiences of not getting feed when she wanted, not being held, being left alone or with another person, for example) creates an internal sensation of absence, the void and negation. In extreme cases, this could impede the composition of the baby’s self and awaken the intense sensation of annihilation: “When the face that organized the personality with potentially religious proportions seems to go away, it is a matter of existential significance”²⁹.

During the first times, the baby expresses his or her anguish by crying and other reactions of psychosomatic displeasure (agitations, sleep disturbances, pain, diarrhea and skin rashes, for example) . But, around fourteen months, the ego of the bay is capable to react defensively when confronted with anguish, through the mechanism of defense which Freud call the **reactive formation**. This consists in the capability **to feel, to say or to do exactly the opposite** of what one desires, with the energy that will be used for an initial impulse. When faced with the feeling of anguish through the possibility of a “no” from the parents, a child reacts contrary to its own desire and is capable of saying “no”, with energy and determination, **before** they do it.

4. The **no** is the fourth interpersonal organizer. That doesn’t mean the imitation of the parents, but of an acquisition of the ego that turns itself into the base for discrimination between the child and the world. The mechanism of negation is one species of specialization of the reactive formation, and saying “no” the child establishes boundaries and delimits space. As a negations functions as a separation, it helps the ego of the child to distinguish himself or herself from the mother, other objects and its own desire to fuse; and this creates distances and becomes more objective in its relationships with people and things.

The acquisition of the no, for Loder, is a **spiritual movement** of existential proportions, for it gives the foundation for the separation between the conscious and the unconscious and between the internal and the external. The author concludes that, with the ego appears the beginning of the defensive movement faced by anguish, the identity of the person is also initiated by a defense. However creative that this development might seem, it has unfortunate consequences:

First of all, whatever may be understood as “development” is underdevelopment of the ego. As the origin of the ego is fundamentally defensive, based in the “no”, it gets to the point of ironic that it values as the highest psychic acquisition a structure founded on no and repression. “First, all subsequent so-called normal development is ego development, so it takes place on the basis of repression, that is, on the basis of “no”³⁰.

The second “unfortunate” consequence is the burial of the loved face. Even though it is a magnificent movement from a defensive stand point, it means that “the power and significance of the face as the imprint on what it means to be human is buried under the repression”³¹.

The result is an ego **incredibly competent** in surviving and maintaining balance between pleasure and displeasure, but at the cost of support, egoistic underdevelopment and fencing

²⁸ LS 92

²⁹ LS 92

³⁰ LS 94

³¹ LS 94

in all its realizations, a profound sensation of cosmic emptiness. Loder comments that apparently negation triumphs:

The human spirit has been forced by the sense of dread, the “anxiety of non-being”, to contradict itself and lose touch with its original creation, the face phenomenon, and its power to shape human destiny in the direction of the divine³².

The cosmic loneliness decorrente will show itself in different form throughout a life. Established in the time of the baby, this loneliness returns strongly in the adolescent years, during middle age and “the final years of life”. In all of its searches and realizations, those intellectual acquisition and in the creation of culture, the restless human spirit seeks out means to overcome the profound rupture at its base. This is one evidence in which Loder concludes that “**there is something theologically abnormal about so-called normal ego development**”³³. This staying away from the face is near to the concept of sin. In the theological understanding of Loder, based on Pannenberg and Kierkegaard, **sin** does not acquire moral connotations, but after developmentalists, that is, “[s]in is to be understood as the perversion or turning inward of the human spirit, producing internal conflict, anxiety, and self-destructive behavior”³⁴.

But, what was “held-up” by negation and repression tries to return: “What we lost internally bursts forth... to make everything understandable and thus tells us who we are within ourselves which in another form would be vast emptiness of space in expansion” [my translation, could not find the quote page 94]³⁵.

The cosmic loneliness “hidden” desire of the spirit **is for a face in which it can overcome who it is**, where it came from and where it will go. “Thus, there is a deep longing for a face that will do for the adult person what the mother’s face did for the child, a longing for a face that will not go away”³⁶.

The psychic life as a whole will be marked by the search for solutions to negate the power of negation hanging over human existence and rescues the presence of a permanent face, putting life in relation with the One that is the cosmic order, which is the self-affirming presence. This is the place of human development theology, and, in consequence, one proper place for theology that starts with the child.

In this form, we understand that, from very early on, the human being searches for that face which will reveal what race it belongs to, and that will be a “face that will not go away”. The Spiritual Presence of God reveals this human condition and simultaneously offers a real alternative to mend this rupture, with Jesus Christ the Face of God.

To be the recognition that the face of God is revealed in Jesus Christ provokes the transformation towards His resemblance, that is, the “Transfiguration of *imprinting*”³⁷. Contemplating God’s Face as it is revealed in Jesus Christ, the human being knows what species it belongs to, as the apostle Paul wrote:

We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it while the radiance was fading away. But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because **only in Christ is it taken away**. Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever

³² LS 94

³³ LS 94

³⁴ LS 29

³⁵ LS 94

³⁶ LS 94

³⁷ LS 121

anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. *And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*³⁸

These fundamental theological patterns are not limited to one stage, but are present in each stage and in each one, indicating the theological dimension of human development. In each age, there is a psychological and theological percurso to observe and to rescue, for the understanding of the love of God and for each human being and manifestation of each age.

For Child Theology, there remains the challenge to look at the first months of life, and from this point to uncover all of the possible consequences that indicate the readiness of a human being for a relationship with God, as well as how to defend oneself, from sin. The two movements encounter themselves present here, and this observation helps us understand the depth of the fall, but, even more, the depth of love revealed in Jesus Christ, “the face of God that does not go away”.

³⁸ II Corinthians 3: 13-18. Emphases are the author's. NIV.

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