

An Introduction to Child Theology

The Significance of Theology

Whatever else Child Theology may be, it is theology. Theology has a bad name among many Christians, but it is indispensable to Christian faith. Christian faith is inescapably theology because it is not tongue tied or thoughtless. You are a Christian? Therefore you are already necessarily involved in theology: that is, in speaking and thinking of God. Even when we are thinking for ourselves, personally or privately, about God, we are thinking with others, past and present, who have provided the words, material and stimulus to think and talk about God.

Belief in God requires us to think

God in Christian faith is not like an obvious given, known without thinking, like a stone in the path one trips over without seeing, stubbing one's toe. Christians do not believe in God as an indefinable and unthinkable mystery: they believe and confess God in Jesus Christ by the Spirit. God is attested by Holy Scripture, and so they speak of God in a particular way, and this particular way is the product of thinking, over millennia. This thinking has been generated, guided, corrected, kept on track by God in his self-revelation, but his self-revelation has always provoked and required human thinking and speaking, our words. Theology is thus an indispensable part of our service of God, that thinking service of which Romans 12.1-2 speaks: "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. So do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will." (NIV)

The confession of God in Christ came from a long history of thinking about and with God. And it stimulates an unending story of thinking: what we hear amazes us, so that we ask: "How can this be?" It enlightens us, so that we look at all things in its light, asking, "What is reality if God is as he is in Jesus?" It calls us so that we have to think,

“What we are to do and to become, since God is God?” And it requires us to think so that we may be able to give every person who asks a “reason for the hope within us” (1 Peter 3: 15-16). The word “reason” in Peter’s letter is important: it is not an assertion, a recitation of doctrine, or an indoctrinatory manipulation.

Theology comes from God

Theology derives its character, methods and horizons from God who speaks his own word. Our concept of theology is not to be derived ultimately from what any special group, church authorities, academics, or media sensationalists, make of it. If we are Christians, then we should not make the shortcomings in their work an excuse for opting out of theology. Opting out of theology is a large part of much of the best and worst of Christianity, including Evangelicalism – but it is inexcusable. If academic theologians, for instance, don’t do it well enough, then our Christian response has to strengthen theological reflection, not to abandon it altogether. We are involved in theology because God is the first theologian, for God spoke through God’s own Word, looking for conversation with partners.

So we cannot avoid theology in one or another shape or form. And when we do theology, we have to find ways of speaking truthfully and respectfully of God. Here, we are speaking of “the First and the Last” (Revelation 1: 17). Theology is a form of the worship of God. It is thinking and speaking which seeks to let God be God. This is not as easy as it might seem. Because it is *our* speaking and thinking, the danger is ever present that our theology is no more than our speaking about our religious experience and ideas, which is much the same as speaking (about) ourselves, in a loud voice. Theology is always in danger of tailoring God to suit our tastes, needs, and concerns, and fitting God into the limits of what we can bear. This is how it was with Israel in the wilderness (Exodus 34).

Knowing the Invisible God

From a human point of view God was not only invisible, but also hard. It appeared that God no longer cared about his people: God was not providing for them, nor giving them their rights. All this was too much to take. Moses goes up into God’s invisibility (not the last of the prophets to do that), so that the people do not know what has become of him. He, their leader, has become inaccessible, out of touch (Exodus 24: 18). If we are seriously being concerned with God, then living life in

this world as the people of God, this inevitably puts us into the terrible anguish which leads us to ask: “Should we be loyal to God who turns out to be beyond our grasp and not much use to us?”

In such circumstances, some people become straight atheists but Israel then and many Christians now, don't go so far. They still long for god, and opt for religious leaders, who demonstrate their care for them and their felt needs. In such cases it is not atheism but idolatry that forms the essence of the solution. In the case of the Israelites, Aaron, who was Moses' brother and a priest, proved his priestliness by making idols for them (Exodus 32: 1-8), using earthy gold donated by the people to fashion a calf, a sustaining life-giving creature, to which they respond: “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.” And then the people play, just like children at a party.

Christian theology has no easy answer here. It certainly does not insulate us from the pain and puzzle of the invisibility of God. What is more it wrestles not only with the invisibility of God far up Mount Sinai: it also acknowledges that God is sometimes, if not often, invisible in the world of the here and now. One of the most challenging questions in the New Testament comes for the lips of Jesus and out of the darkness of Golgotha: “My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (This is repeated in three of the four Gospels: Matthew 27:45-46; Mark 15: 33-34; Luke 23: 44-45). Genuine theology must follow God where his love takes him, rather than fashion god to fit our protective self-interest.

There is no escaping it: theology is an indispensable, testing and difficult enterprise. But it is possible with the help of God. It can be exciting and fulfilling if it is part of the service of God who is the joy of all the earth.

Child Theology

Child Theology is part of this challenging adventure. And right from the start it is important to realize that: *in Child Theology the focus is not the child or children, but God.*

Child Theology in the form in which we are working at it is a kind of extended reflection on and response to what Matthew records in Chapter 18: 1-14 of his gospel:

- The story of Jesus
- who set a child in the midst of his disciples
- who were making a mess of a theological discussion and

- needed to be saved from some basic and dangerous mistakes – about God and his kingdom.

The child, so Jesus seems to have thought, would make a difference to the way they thought and spoke about God.

A Definition of Child Theology

Given that it is so early in a process that began in 2001 it is rather bold or risky to seek to define or pin down the content and process of Child Theology. However, at this stage of the journey, our working definition is the following:

Child Theology is an investigation that considers and evaluates central themes of theology – historical, biblical and systematic – in the light of the child standing beside Jesus in the midst of the disciples. This child is like a lens through which some aspects of God and his revelation can be seen more clearly. Or, if you like, the child is like a light that throws existing theology into new relief.

In other words, Child Theology stresses that the child Jesus placed in the midst of his disciples is not intended as the object of analysis or adoration, but as a sign or clue to a greater understanding of God and his kingdom. So Child Theology will not let go of the child lest it forfeits the very sign chosen by Jesus; but neither will it make the child or childhood the ultimate focus or boundary of its reflection.

Child Theology is wider than Children's Issues

Child Theology understood in this way, therefore, addresses not only issues regarding children but also major themes of Christian faith and life. Those Christians who are already committed to and engaged with children and young people are finding that Child Theology sharpens and throws light on their understanding of children and obligations to them. This is intentional and heartening, but it is not to be seen as the complete object of the exercise. Child Theology also challenges every Christian whether engaged in academic theology, pastoral ministry, church or mission to think again about every aspect of their life, faith and practice with the child placed by Jesus in view. This includes areas of ministry not typically associated with or informed by child-related issues.

Child Theology is also a Process

In some ways, this definition of Child Theology might be seen to refer primarily, if not completely, to the content of the discipline. If so, it is vital to recognize that it also has significant implications for the process. The way theology is done is critically important. In this, Child Theology has paid particular attention to the way Jesus lived and taught, as well as to the ways previous and existing theological movements have gone about their tasks. Thus, we have tried to promote an open-ended and inclusive process, respectful of all who take part whatever their formal status or training, and determined to involve male and female, practitioner and academic, ordained and lay on equal terms. The circle rather than the lecture room is the favoured setting for discourse and stories and questions are integral to discussion.

Emerging Themes

One emerging theme of Child Theology so far has been that of “child in the midst.” The phrase seems to have caught the imagination of some. Already there are books, for example Kathryn Copsey, *From the Ground Up* (Oxford: BRF, 2005), and courses like a proposed new degree in children’s ministry in the UK, that use this concept as the heart of their argument or a core theme. To date Child Theology has so far mostly presented itself as urging that the child be put in the midst of theological talk and thought. In attempting this it has been salutary to discover that the word “child” rarely occurs at all in many major works of systematic theology, despite the action of Jesus in placing a child in the midst of a theological discussion!

Making Children Visible

Child Theology is therefore acting as a corrective to this marginalization or making invisible of children in mainstream discourse. It argues Christians must follow Jesus and put the child in the midst of our theologizing, because this is integral to our being faithful and articulate followers of Jesus

But the story of Jesus doing theology with his disciples also makes another point, which might hit Christians working with children at risk and advocates of children’s rights much harder. Jesus put a child in the midst because the child, not least the child who was marginalised down there with servants, could serve God theologically. Indeed the child was precisely suited to that service. Jesus used the lowliness of the marginal

child to serve God by clarifying what God's way is like and what his kingdom is made of.

When we read Matthew's story we need to see that Jesus, by putting a child in the centre of attention, was here, like Moses, being faithful to God even in his invisibility – rather than Aaron who was making for the people a visible accessible god, making a god out of their own lives and substance, fitting to their concerns and sentiments. Jesus did not put the child in the centre so that the child could take the place of God for us. The child is not to be idolized or sacralised, a god made visible and accessible, but rather the child is like the mountain where God is in his true presence, giving the words of life but invisible.

Two Potential Dangers

There are two dangers that confront theology reformed by the child in the midst and it seeks to sail between them both, as between Scylla and Charybdis. On the one hand, it must never again overlook or undervalue the child. In case there is any doubt about this point let us underline that often children have been invisible and oppressed in human history. That is still the case today. Child Theology must keep in mind and hold up the value and dignity of children. On the other hand, a theology reformed by the child in the midst must also avoid idolatry of children. This is also a potential danger, especially for Christians who work with secular ideas and partnerships. These tend in their secularity to see the child as having in herself intrinsic worth, with no dependent or reverential relation to anything or anyone outside the self.

We would like to say more about the latter danger. Like Child Theology, organizations both secular and Christian that are committed to the well-being of children also put the child in the centre. Furthermore, Christians and those working in secular organizations both see children as full human beings of infinite value who have rights and who merit care and protection. However, Christians affirm this because children are made in the image of God. God alone is God and Jesus is unique. So they are willing to critique contemporary culture which makes much of children and the young. Biblical insights make it clear that it is wrong to let children grow up out of control, as those "who must be obeyed," who must be given everything they demand, or who are to be formed with a sense that they are the centre of the universe. Going further it is possible to see that affluent children may be abused by affluence itself. (This is the main argument of Dr. David Sims, "*The*

Child in American Evangelicalism and the Problem of Affluence", unpublished PhD, Durham University: 2005.)

Affirming Children without Idolatry

It is not difficult to see that this kind of child-centredness can be a form of idolatry, which is destructive both for children and for all of us. So it may be that we should at least be sensitised by the biblical question about theology and idolatry to examine our affirmations of children and childhood. The Bible and Christian history warn us that those who are devoted to God are in a place where they are vulnerable to falling into idolatry. True worship and idolatry are very close together. Because humanity is created in the image of God, it is easy to slide into caring for and valuing humanity as God. Because God became human, it is possible for us, in the wrong way, to treat the human as god. And it may then be that the marginal child, the child who could make and sustain no claim to greatness or importance, is a more reliable theological clue than the favoured child (whether favoured in practice or in documents concerning the rights of a child).

The disciples were devoted to God and eager for his kingdom. But their understanding of the kingdom was shaped by their ambition and self-concern, so that the kingdom was no longer the kingdom *of God*, but rather, the kingdom of a convenient idol. Jesus saw that clearly, which is why he could say to Peter when he refused the way of the Cross, "Get behind me, Satan" (Matthew 16: 23). This comes at a strategic point in the ministry of Jesus when he begins his final journey to the cross and models the kingdom of heaven in a variety of ways among his disciples (Matthew 16- 21).

Balanced Action for Children

Child Theology is, in one respect, a bit of self-criticism of all our wonderful activism for children. In our Christian care for children, are we true to God or do we take God's Name in vain, organising our action and feeling round the creature of the child rather than God? It seems almost impertinent in the current climate to ask such a question, but that is precisely the point.

We can try to evade this critical question. We can give one-sided emphasis to Jesus' telling us to welcome the child. Jesus did indeed say the child is a reliable clue to the kingdom of God, so that to receive the child is to receive Jesus and the one who sent Jesus (Mark 9: 37; Luke 9:

48). The child is a key representative of God in Christ, a representative but, and here we must be clear, not a substitute. This is a vital distinction made by Dorothy Soelle in her book, *Suffering: The Stauros Notebook* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975). It has far-reaching implications for child theology as for every other part of the theological spectrum.

The Child in Relational Context

To be a child is to be in relationship and so, to conceive of a child as intrinsically valuable is, in itself humanly speaking, a contradiction in terms. But to think of a child outside the context of her relation to her Creator and Heavenly Father is to go where angels fear to tread. As Christians, we do not actively or explicitly intend to idolise the child or our own humanity but we can in practice let the child, who is powerfully present for us, take the place of God and so we can blunder into error. The theology we thereby lose could have stood in the way, like the angel that hindered Balaam's journey, saving us from a terrible mistake (Numbers 22).

Theology reminds us that God relativises the rights and the worth of every part of His creation: even, though it may sound strange to modern ears, the rights and worth of the child. The rights and worth of the child, like all such rights and worth, are relative to the will, grace and faithfulness of God the loving creator and redeemer: God justifies the child and all marginalised, lowly, unworthy and alienated human beings: God puts them in the right, so that, if God be for them, nothing can be against them. We are not to despise any little one, because they are always represented in the open welcoming presence of the Father in heaven. The rights and worth of the child are real and really upheld *in the relation with God*, not autonomously.

Implications for Children's Rights

We are seeking to choose our words here carefully because we know they may cause concern, and in an ideal world we would be able to discuss what we mean rather than put it down in printed form. We are in favour of setting out some of the "rights" of children, and there is no reason for Christians to belittle the rights of the child, but we have to reckon with the profound difference between affirming rights as inherent in the independent being of the creature on the one hand, and rights as intrinsic to the relation with God, on the other. This is one of those points of difference from the rest of the world, where it can become practically and intellectually embarrassing to be Christian and to think

theologically: Christians hesitate to affirm the child in the unambiguous way that others manage. But God is God and child is child, and we are all but human creatures: it is not to be dishonour or belittling of the creature to be intelligently faithful to God in Christ, as attested in Scripture.

Christian children's advocates seeking to improve the situation may easily find their thinking squeezed into a contemporary secular mould that sees children as "intrinsically valuable." Child Theology draws attention to a distinctively theological and biblical perspective that rarely makes its presence known. In the relation with God, as it is worked out and revealed in Jesus Christ, God's fragile and wayward creatures are welcomed, affirmed and called to the service of God. They are loved and in that love called to love. The way is opened for them by Jesus, who did not hold on to what was his right, but took the form of a human servant and went the way of the Cross. Jesus called his disciples to the same way, through self-denial, and pointed not only to himself as showing the way, but put the child in the midst precisely because the child was not in their estimation a model of greatness or importance, nor an option for life.

The blessing of the Gospel, the kingdom of God, is not that we are given greatness, riches or power or even that we are able to be proud of ourselves, but that we are given no way except that of the servant. The blessing of God makes rich and he adds no sorrow with it (Proverbs 10.22). That is indeed so, but it is experienced only through paradoxical discipleship. In the Bible and in experience we see that the truth of it is only sustained through and beyond the tests of Job and Jesus and many others, by living with the God whose blessedness does not consist in his distanced immunity from sorrow but in his taking it into the totality of his being.

Implications for Theologians

Child Theology is at an early stage (would toddling be an appropriate metaphor?) and what growth and progress there will be we cannot say. We are trying to sow seeds. Whether they will become bushes or trees we do not know. But already questions are being raised that are helping theologians to consider fundamental doctrines and issues in a new light. Creation, sin, redemption, incarnation, eschatology are just some of the substantive issues that Child Theology has already begun to engage with and, as a result, there are important questions arising for systematic theologians. Church history and traditional commentaries are being

revisited with children brought in from the margins, and being recognized as part of the Covenant and agents, not simply objects, of God's Mission.

There is also the obvious issue of theological training. In the light of the significance of the action of Jesus in placing a child in the midst it will not be possible for it to continue with children and young people relegated to the margins or invisible. Consultations have been organized with this as a primary issue.

And as theology diversifies worldwide with local Christians engaging with the Scriptures and traditional theologies in their own contexts Child Theology could well find itself as a catalyst for communication between them. There is scope for new conversations between Roman Catholic and Protestant theology with a child in the midst and between Christians from around the world and from various cultural and historical contexts. It is going to require a very big shift in theology to accept Child Theology into its heart, but the time is coming when this will happen. At present systematic theologians have been under-represented at Child Theology consultations, but it is not expected that this will remain the case long-term.

Implications for Christian Activists

As always wrestling with the Scriptures and theology challenges and reforms existing perceptions and patterns, and the work and organizations seeking to help children in the name of Jesus are no exceptions. Christians are moved to act for children and their well-being by their faith. The Lord Jesus received and blessed the children. Jesus cannot be received as Lord unless we receive children and all other little ones. Christian activists are aware that what they do is true to God as revealed in Christ. Their activity for children is the obedience of faith and the demonstration of the good news of Jesus. The activity is justified by theology as it is already possessed. Or is it?

Real caring, unlimited concern for children shakes faith as we already possess it. What God, if any, is credible when the weight of the suffering of millions of children in the world comes home to us in any one child who is abandoned, abused, threatened in life, in spirit and in hope? This spiritual crisis cracks open the solid ground on which Christians activists seem to stand. Child Theology has, for example, taken seriously the hundreds of heartfelt questions asked by Christian activists at an international conference, "Cutting Edge" held in Holland in 2001. The