Pastoral Care of Childhood. Assessing models of pastoral care in the light of a developing theology of childhood – Peter Ackland

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**Biblical Perspectives**

I Innocence of Childhood

I advocate for innocence in childhood. The Ancient Hebrews saw children as innocent (Deuteronomy 1:39; 11:8 Isaiah 7:16). Every new life is surely pure and holy at the start (Psalm 51:5-6).

There was abuse of innocence in the Bible and the results are more than tragic. They question God's intent (Jeremiah 6:11; Lamentations 2:19).

Samuel was dedicated to God before conception (1 Samuel 1:11b). How he felt about this is not known to us. The unsaid stories of children's thoughts reflect the mystery of childhood. There was a time in Samuel's ministering before God when he did not yet know God (1 Samuel 3:7). He began to lose his childhood innocence after he discovered God (1 Samuel 3:17).

In the gospels, Jesus used an innocent child to answer a theological question on how to enter the kingdom of God (Matthew 18:2,4; Mark 9:36; Luke 9:47).

II Salvation of Childhood

To the primitive Israelites, children were their immortality and resurrection (Levenson, 2006).

God freed the Israelites from the bondage of slavery, and God took the *slaying and saving* so seriously that all future generations had to redeem their firstborn (Exodus 13:15,16).

The girl Miriam, Moses' sister, and Naaman's slave girl were used by God to save. Children were saved by Elijah and Jesus. Many Bible stories show that children are holy to the LORD and reflect God's serious regard for them.

III Blessing of Childhood

Jesus blessed a group of children (Matthew 19:13-15; Mark 10:13-16; Luke 18:15-17). It is a relief for the church to have a biblical story so explicitly pro-children. Jesus blessed all children that day.

God blesses us with children (Genesis 33:5b; Exodus 1:17b; 1:21b). Children were like arrows in the hand of a warrior (Psalm 127:3,4). God's ultimate gift was a child born to us (Isaiah 7:14; 9:6).

Blessings came through learning of God (Exodus 13:14; Deuteronomy 4:9; 31:12; Psalm 71:17). This learning can begin at *infancy* (2 Timothy 1:5; 3:15).

Children bless the Lord with awe (Isaiah 29:23). From the mouths of *children* and *sucking babes* God is praised (Psalm 8:2; Matthew 21:16). God has hidden mysteries from the wise and learned and revealed them to children (Matthew 11:25,26; Luke 10:21). Children were made to be holy (1 Corinthians 7:14b).
Historical Perspectives

I Theological Perspectives

Saint Augustine (354-430) took Paul's writings and led many theologians toward a polarised 'low view' of childhood (Stortz, 2001).

John Calvin (1509-1564) wrote that children are not begotten by chance but are gifts of God (Commentary on the Book of Psalms, Vol. V). He saw the raising of children the responsibility of the family, church and state.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) had a ‘high view’ of childhood. Children were born sinless but became evil as they grew up in the world (Berryman, 2002).

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) urged nurture of all children to safeguard their innocence for as long as possible (Asbridge, in Richards & Privett, 2009).

Horace Bushnell (1802-1876), an American Congregationalist minister, spoke out against the Christian revivalism of his day when it came to children needing to be 'converted' (Pridmore, in Richards & Privett, 2009).

Maria Montessori (1870-1952) adopted developmentally appropriate methods to aid children's learning. She quoted: 'I don't need to teach anything to children: it is they who, placed in a favourable environment, teach me, reveal to me spiritual secrets as long as their souls have not been deformed' (Berryman, 2002).

Sofia Cavalletti (1917- ) initiated the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd teaching that children want just enough help and guidance and no more than that in order to find God for themselves. Her use of wooden figures in a sand tray touched a deep chord within the children (Carter, 2007).

Jerome Berryman trained under Sofia Cavalletti (in the 70's) and reinterpreted her work making it more user-friendly developing the Godly Play teaching method.

David Jensen in Graced Vulnerability: A Theology of Childhood (2005), focuses attention on children in theology and church. The vulnerable child is found in the image of God. Children are full and complete citizens of the kingdom of God.

Bonnie Miller-McLemore in Let the Children come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective (2003), critiques the cultural views of children as innocents, depraved, or victims. She views children as agents of God, valued as gifts, and fully respected as persons. Adults are encouraged to think this way.
Il Developmental Perspectives

Erik Erikson described eight stages: infancy, toddler, preschool, primary school, adolescence, young adult, mid-adult, and late-adult. If we live a full life, we are expected to experience each stage before death.

James Fowler described six stages of faith development: intuitive/projective faith, mythic/literal faith, conventional faith, individuative/reflective faith, conjunctive faith, and universalising faith. Each level is arrived at through a transforming crisis and many people do not proceed beyond the conventional faith level.

However, Marian Carter who has written on children's faith perception is concerned that Fowler has allowed the cognitive theories to dominate his stages and has missed the potential for children's deep spiritual thinking (Carter, 2007). This is a strong caution.

Guidance and nurture of children must be sensitively tailored because attitudes vary with age, gender and religious affiliations (Worsley in Richards & Privett, 2009).

III Theological Perspectives

A Innocence

When college chaplain Emma Percy surveyed children under seven years of age on what sin was, none of them knew (Percy in Richards & Privett, 2009). Learning to accept our helplessness and vulnerability is part of learning from the open and innocent child. Children teach us much about facing sorrow and death (Drane Flemming Drane in Richards & Privett, 2009). Children teach us unconditional love and trust. Though profound insights have been lost as we grow, they not retrievably lost and can be found “through human love and having children” (Richards in Richards & Privett, 2009).

B Salvation

The Bible stories may stand alone without distortion and help children 'understand their own stories in light of God's story' (Beckwith, 2004). Children are willing and open to engage with mystery, to actively explore for meaning (Carter, 2007). Children save us from the confines of language and knowledge to discover new frontiers of spiritual awareness. They are invited to play with the Scriptures, and encounter God (Carter, 2007).

Gone is the emphasis on redemption and ransom. Today, salvation has to do with life in its fullness and experiencing God's abundant grace (Shier-Jones in Richards & Privett, 2009). Instead of desiring to 'save' a child, it is the adult who needs to be 'converted' to a child's way of receiving God. (Pridemore in Richards & Privett, 2009).

C Blessing

Blessings will flow abundantly when God's love is modelled well and children' thoughts are anticipated and accepted for the great value that they are. Church has a privileged opportunity to creatively care for the souls of children (Beckwith, 2004). Here is a place where children can feel they belong (Asbridge in Richards & Privett, 2009).

Children are experts at leaving the past behind and as a result intuitively explore the possibility of transforming it (Millar, in Richards & Privett, 2009). The way children and young people talk to and about God is very revealing and more often reflects God’s grace in their lives (Shier-Jones in Richards & Privett, 2009). Answered prayer is a revelation of God and a blessing for enduring faith and peace.

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Pastoral Care Perspectives

I propose that pastoral care at its essence is helping people become all that they were meant to be, so let us inspect some models of pastoral care\(^1\) that are used in churches, to consider how they might perform in the context of children.

An interventionist model focuses on helping the sufferer to regain the level of equilibrium they were enjoying before the unexpected crisis. We must trust in the children's God given wisdom to cope in the crisis and be truthful and attentive toward them.

A program model is based on program activities and through these people experience care. This model will work well in an intergenerational setting. If children’s inquiry and contribution is not acknowledged they will likely become blasé (Carter, 2007).

A welfare model has a focus on the underprivileged in our society. This model has a lot to do with how we view our world, and our attitude to others. It is very much centred on the teaching of Jesus.

A therapeutic model has a focus on alleviating suffering to soften the fall. Be willing to journey with children in pain. On our shared journey we may centre on experiencing God through a sense of wonder. It is a position that relies on God as therapist.

A spiritual appreciation model has a focus on listening and learning what Christ has been doing in the lives of children. We are called to tread carefully when describing God to children. With a (religious) mother tongue and with open seeking we find the pearls. If we believe we have arrived at the truth the conversation is finished (from a children’s spirituality seminar, 1 August 2009, at the Carmelite Library, Middle Park, Melbourne).

A healthy Christian family and community model is founded on enduring and accepting relationships. Children share their journey at an intergenerational level through the ups and downs of life and they are recognised as contributing and valued individuals by the community. Parents need the active, generous and creative inclusion of the faith community to amplify an alternative message.

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Bibliography


