Theology has always reflected the perspective of the theologian, almost inevitably male, and always adult. Childhood has either been ignored or dealt with by applying propositions about adults to children, whether that was appropriate or not. Passages about children are construed as referring to disciples, and in some cases are even translated to disguise the reference to children. Consequently, children are devalued in Christian theology, and conclusions drawn about them often contradict specific scriptural references to them.

When I first started to study the theology of childhood I was assured by several Bible scholars that it was a waste of time because the Bible had almost nothing to say about children. What they meant was that the Bible has little systematic theology about childhood. But children pepper the biblical narratives and there is a clear biblical understanding of, and attitude to, children. The other thing I was told was as a warning, that the theology of childhood challenges every doctrine and practice of the church.

Foolishly I persisted, and twenty-four years later I am still wrestling with the implications because, while the assurance was wrong, the warning was not. However, today I will only identify a few themes where, if we include children in our frame of reference, we are confronted with challenges. These are exemplary, not comprehensive. The themes are:

- The nature of faith;
- The nature of worship;
• How to live as a Christian;
• Children’s relationship to God;

To understand these themes, we must identify whom the biblical authors considered a ‘child’.

**Who is a child?**

Biblical childhood was functional, based on dependence on the direction and nurture of others, rather than being between birth and some particular age. The terms for children describe a characteristic (like ‘toddler’) or limitation (as ‘pre-pubescent’).\(^1\) Children lacked moral discernment, ability to understand, practical sense, ability to express themselves, and power.\(^2\) It is childlike to ask, to trust that your needs will be met, and to have God meet them.\(^3\) Paul assumed ‘openness of mind’ was characteristic of childhood.\(^4\)

That is, children are those who cannot exercise mature competency, or lack the capacity to act effectively on their own behalf. They are necessarily under care and authority, and they identified with, and shared common fate with, adults, especially their parents, unless God directly intervened on their behalf. Because they had no-one to defend them, God became “father of orphans, defender of widows”.\(^5\) God’s special concern for the parentless child gives an assured status in the faith community to children without familial status.

‘Child’ encompassed those who shared such characteristics either involuntarily, as the retarded, the possessed, and even the helplessly ill,\(^6\) or

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1. *ben* and *yalad* - descendant; *brephos* - newly born; *huios* - acknowledged inheritor; *nepios* - limited in speech; *olel* and *ul* - suckling; *paidion* - little, or under authority, or requiring direction or education; *taph* - little; *teknon* - born; and *zera* - progeny.


4. 2 Corinthians 6:13

5. Psalm 68:5; also Exodus 22:21-24

6. Mark 2: 5
voluntarily, as disciples were urged to do. Childhood ended when the person demonstrated the ability to act as an autonomous spiritual entity, most clearly evident when they rejected the ethical or religious demands of their household and community. So, a child is a person of any age, though normally young, who is unable, for any reason, to exercise autonomous competence but relies on others to take care of, and decide for, them.

The nature of faith

Let’s start with an event in the life of Jesus, one of a few that deal specifically with children.

So he called a little child to him and set the child in front of them. .....Anyone who welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But anyone who is an obstacle to bring down one of these little ones who have faith in me would be better drowned in the depths of the sea with a great millstone round his neck. (Matthew 18: 2, 5-6)

The most obvious reading is that these ‘little ones’ are children. Jesus describes them as those “...who have faith in me”. This is only ‘incongruous’ if one’s theology, by requiring a level of understanding as the basis for faith, denies the possibility that children can exercise it. The phrase has two possible meanings. It could differentiate ‘faithful’ children from ‘unfaithful’. This is hard to reconcile with the child Jesus called to him, whose faith was not apparently ascertained, and it means Jesus excluded most children from divine concern which contradicts other statements he made. That faith in Jesus is characteristic of children is a claim of great gravity. Harkness says: “When Jesus challenged adults to

7 Typical of the need to avoid applying the passage to children is Pridmore who sees this statement both here and in Mark 9 as the early church applying a saying originally about children to disciples. [Pridmore, J. S. (1977). The New Testament theology of childhood. Hobart: Buckland, p.125.] Yet, if Mark is the oldest synoptic gospel, the reference to faith is in the earliest document and must have been removed by Luke. This contradicts Pridmore’s account of increasing reference to disciples by the early church. Matthew focuses the passage on faith being in the person of Jesus, the only Synoptic to do so, but why this should “make plain” that Matthew was thinking of “weak Christians” is unexplained. Argyle sees the reference to children as inescapable and therefore concludes that, “...these little ones are old enough to be believers”. [Argyle, A. W. (1963). The Gospel according to Matthew. Cambridge: The University Press, p.138.]

welcome children, it was because in children he saw qualities which are marks of the ‘faith-ful’ person, but which tend to be ‘enculturated out’ of people in the course of their cultural conditioning.”  Aleshire shares this viewpoint: “…children’s faith is not unerringly wonderful. It has fault lines and pitfalls, just like the faith adults have. Children’s faith is not magically pure. They quickly learn about sin and the shadow side of self. But children can be - are - people of faith.”

Faithfulness is not lasting for all children because they can be “brought down” (18:6). This is not faith that endures; ‘saving faith’, as Salvationists use the term. Yet Jesus asserted that some manner of faith, fundamental to childhood, was important to God. Gower explains this as grace: “Only if God abolishes means of approach to him through merit, qualifications, qualities, deeds, are all men equally able to approach Him, and that which all men, women and children are able to exercise quite simply, is faith.”

What challenge does this pose for our theology? Does it suggest that association of faith with beliefs is ill founded? Does faith transcend the limits of the Christian community as far as children and those like them are concerned? What is the nature of this faith that all men, women and children are able to exercise? If children are ‘faithful’, what do they teach us about the nature of what is required of the faithful person? How does the faith of childhood mature yet remain child-like?

The nature of worship

In the final week of his life Jesus defends some children.

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11 Gower, R. R. (1971) Child development and its relationship to children’s evangelism. Unpublished manuscript, pp.1, 3. This is difficult to reconcile with his later demand that faith requires “an element of understanding”.
At the sight of the wonderful things he did and of the children shouting, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David’ in the Temple, the chief priests and scribes were indignant. ‘Do you hear what they are saying?’ they said to him. ‘Yes,’ Jesus answered ‘have you never read this:

*By the mouths of children, babes in arms,*

*you have made sure of praise?’* (Matthew 21: 15-16)

Matthew’s narrative begins with a parade during which Jesus gained a retinue of children who, like most children, lacked a proper sense of decorum. The adults stopped when they reached the Temple; their children did not. We can imagine children crowding around the centre of attention, wriggling their way to the front and, after each healing, renewing the chant they learnt during the parade, saying precisely what the adults said (21:9,15). They did not understand the historical, political and theological implications of acknowledging Jesus as the Son of David. Their praise was spontaneous for person and occasion; not considered for content.

Jesus responded to the priests’ indignation by quoting the Septuagint version of Psalm 8:2. Rather than the immediate children, he referred to the youngest possible: *nepios*, (pre-verbal child) and *thelazonton*, (sucking ones). His opponents complain about children’s noise in the Temple but the One the Temple honoured ensured himself of praise by giving voices to those too young to forms words. Considering the range of sounds which infants make, their theological sophistication, and stability of their faith commitment, God’s conception of praise is confronting. The ability to respond to God is not contingent on language, understanding, conviction, nor even decorum. Children’s responses are not insignificant; their source is in God. Rather, children’s praise “…doesn’t need maturing, it doesn’t

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12 The Hebrew reads: “Above the heavens is your majesty chanted by the mouths of children, babes in arms”. Jesus quotes the Greek: “Out of the mouths of infants and sucking ones you prepared praise”.

13 Schweizer diminishes this teaching about children, by interpolating regularly the phrase “little ones”, which is elsewhere used of disciples, but is not used in this passage at all. [Schweizer, E. (1976). *The good news according to Matthew*. London: SPCK, pp.407-409]
need refining, it is ‘perfect praise’ just as it is now.”14 This also contradicts any theology that asserts that children are born so marked by sin as to be unacceptable to God.

How can the praise of the church reflect praise that God finds acceptable? What have we to learn from children about the nature of perfect praise? What do we say when we send children out from worship because they disrupt adult worship? Could seeking order and decorum in worship militate against those for whom such characteristics are alien?

How to live as a Christian

‘... the disciples came to Jesus and said, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ So he called a little child to him and set the child in front of them. Then he said, ‘I tell you solemnly, unless you change and become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. And so, the one who makes himself as little as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.’ (Matthew 18:1-4)

The relationship between God and children is not a marginal adjunct to adult relationship to God. Rather, it specifies the relationship with humans that God desires. A Psalmist takes the trustful contentment of the young child in its mother’s arms as his desire. (Psalm 131) Relationship with God is not characterised by adult sophistication.

Jesus identified children as models for adults to emulate if they were even to enter the Kingdom. (Matthew 18:3) This compels us to consider how adults are to imitate children. Egger’s suggestion that Jesus meant “as one who has neither obedience nor obligation to the Law”15 is interesting but contradicts his attitude expressed elsewhere (Matthew 5:17-20; Luke 16:17) and ignores the detail of what Matthew records. His audience would interpret this as narration of an event, not as text. Rather than talk about

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children as an abstract category; Jesus insinuated a very concrete child into
the discussion. Disciples were not to become “like children” but “as this
little child”. (18:4)\textsuperscript{16} Moreover, he was quite specific about the similarity
required. Adults must become “little” (tapeinosei),\textsuperscript{17} which carries the
sense of status or estate rather than mere size. For disciples concerned
about status, Jesus took a specific child as an example of those who have
no power, no rights, and no position, and can only approach God as a small
child approaches their father. Pridmore helpfully calls attention to Jesus’
own habitual and unprecedented use of the Aramaic infant term “Abba” to
address God.\textsuperscript{18} “We must forget our Christian and romantic views of
childhood and realise that, at the time of Jesus, children were pieces of
property without any rights, powerless to defend themselves, they had to
totally rely on others.”\textsuperscript{19}

Is the view that adults are more fully spiritual than children sustainable? Is
Christian education that suggests children learn spirituality from us
allowed? What are the implications of saying children are the model of the
spirituality God desires of all people? Will adults only achieve mature
spirituality by emulating the spirituality of children? Can we only foster
children’s spirituality by ourselves adopting the humility and spiritual
helplessness that comes naturally to children?

\textsuperscript{16} McDermott deals with an abstract child who admits their faults, learns in silence and accepts ‘discipline’ for
signs of true spirituality}. Downers Grove: IVP, pp.167-168.]

\textsuperscript{17} Pridmore follows older translations in seeing tapeinosei as a reference to the subjective quality of ‘humility’ and
therefore has to divide 18:4 from 18:3. [Pridmore, J. S. (1977), op. cit., pp.149-151.] The Jerusalem translation,
by capturing the alternative sense of the child’s objective state, is both consistent with Jesus’ argument and
allows the more likely conclusion that consecutive verses are related.

\textsuperscript{18} Pridmore, J. S. (1977), op. cit., p.154. The closest English equivalent is ‘Dada’. There is an echo of Psalm 131.

Children's relationship to God

This theme cannot be exemplified by a single biblical passage. Instead I offer the outcome of two decades studying all the Biblical passages that refer to children as part of my doctoral study of children's spirituality. I present it in depth in my book on children’s spirituality but in this address I can only state my conclusions and ask you to explore them with me later. I offer a series of assertions, some of which have sub-conclusions.

Children share a distinct relationship with God simply through being children.

- All children belong within the Kingdom of God in their own right;
- The existing relationship between children and God is the model of a desirable relationship between adults and God;
- The spiritual obligations of children are limited and directly related to their characteristics as children;
- God shows interest in the lives of individual children.

God’s acceptance of children is unconditional.

- God is well disposed towards children regardless of accidents of birth, membership of a community of faith, or rites related to that membership;
- God’s acceptance of children is independent of any faith commitment they may or may not make;
- Children are not held responsible for their own or humanity’s sin.

Children’s encounters with God’s Spirit have impacts upon them consistent with their nature as children.

- Children are open to being controlled by God’s Spirit to fulfil its purposes,
• Spirituality totally pleasing to God is fully consistent with any phase of childhood and may be marked by evidence of the Spirit’s work in their lives.

• Spirituality develops as children mature and children are active participants in that development.

Children’s spirituality is usually mediated rather than through direct encounter.

• The household, and especially those who fulfil parental rôles, are central to the children’s developing spirituality;

• The spirituality of parents is imputed to their children;

• While children are not held responsible by God for sin in which they are involved, they are identified with the spirituality of their households and local community and share the immediate common consequences of that identification;

• Sources of spiritual encounters other than household and community (e.g., media, education) also mediate spirituality to children.

Children encounter spiritual evil and cannot resist being influenced to their detriment.

Each of those assertions requires unwrapping, and if we take them seriously, they would require us to rethink much of our teaching and practice. But the critical question is whether they reflect what the Bible and, particularly, what Jesus, teach us about children and, through them, about what God requires of us as individuals, and as churches.