



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 A More Vibrant
Theology of Children
(*Children*, pp. 11-19)

What do you think?

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Christian Reflection

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A Vibrant Theology of Children

Many distorted and simplistic views of children see them as commodities, consumers, economic burdens, or only as sinful creatures that are 'not yet fully human.' In Scripture and Christian tradition we discover a richer picture of childhood that should inspire creative religious education and renewed commitment to serving all children.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Matthew 18:1-5; 19:13-15

Responsive Reading†

See Israel's gentle Shepherd stand
with all engaging charms.

**Hark! how he calls the tender lambs,
and folds them in his arms.**

"Permit them to approach," he cries,
"nor scorn their humble name;
for 'twas to bless such souls as these
the Lord of angels came."

**We bring them, Lord, in thankful hands,
and yield them up to thee;
joyful that we ourselves are thine,
thine let our children be.**

Reflection

Pointillist artists, led by George Seurat (1859-1891), achieved more vibrant hues by placing dots of contrasting pure color on the canvas rather than mixing their paints. The viewer's eye combines these bits of red against green, or yellow next to purple, into sparkling rich colors.

In a similar fashion, Marcia Bunge invites us to retrieve a more vibrant theology of childhood by holding in tension these six contrasting, almost paradoxical ways of describing children in Scripture and Christian tradition. She reminds us they are:

- ▶ *gifts of God and signs of God's blessing*, though they are *sinful and selfish*. They are "gifts" not only to their parents, but to the community. "Parents in the past perhaps wanted children for reasons we do not always emphasize today, to perpetuate the nation or to ensure someone would care for them in their old age," Bunge notes. "Nevertheless, there is a sense today and in the past that one of the great blessings of our interactions with children is simply the joy and pleasure we take in them" (see Luke 1:14; John 16:21). In contrast, the Bible also realistically depicts children as sinful moral agents (Genesis 8:21; Psalms 51:5 and 58:3; Romans 3:9-10).
- ▶ *developing creatures in need of instruction and guidance*, yet are *fully human and made in the image of God*. The Bible encourages adults to nurture children emotionally, intellectually, morally, and spiritually (Genesis 18:19; Deuteronomy 31:12-13; Proverbs 22:6; Ephesians 6:4). Beyond "providing children with a good education and teaching them skills that are necessary to



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earn a living and raise a family, adults are to instruct children about the faith and help them develop moral sensibilities, character, and virtue so that they can love God and love the neighbor with justice and compassion.” Yet, though they are developing, children are already created in the image of God; thus, “all children, regardless of race, gender, or class, are fully human and worthy of respect.”

► *models of faith, sources of revelation, and representatives of Jesus*, though they are *orphans, neighbors, and strangers* who need to be cared for with justice. Jesus praises children’s humility and says that by welcoming a child in his name, we welcome him (Matthew 18:1-5 and 19:14). How startling! “In the first century, children occupied a low position in society, abandonment was not a crime, and children were not put forward as models for adults. Even today, we rarely emphasize what adults can learn from children.” The Bible instructs us to care for all children, especially poor children who are among the most vulnerable members of society (Exodus 22:22-24, Deuteronomy 10:17-18 and 14:28-29).

Whenever we focus “on only one or two aspects of what children are,” Bunge warns, “we risk treating them in inadequate and harmful ways.”

Study Questions

1. In your family or congregation, do you emphasize some of these six aspects of children over the other facets of a biblical view? To which aspects should you attend more carefully?
2. Are any of these aspects of children neglected in our society? If so, does this lead us to treat children in harmful ways?
3. How might we mistreat children if we exclusively emphasize their sinfulness? Yet, toward what three important truths, according to Bunge, does this biblical view point?
4. How could a congregations’ religious education program for children and worship be shaped in order to respect them as moral witnesses, models of faith, and sources of revelation?

Departing Hymn: “We Come in Childhood’s Joyfulness” (verses 1a and 2)

We come in childhood’s joyfulness,
we come as children free!
We offer up, O God, our hearts,
in trusting love to Thee.

We come not as the mighty come:
not as the proud we bow;
but as the pure in heart should bend,
we seek thine altars now.

“Forbid them not,” the Savior cried,
“but let them come to me.”
O Savior dear, we hear thy call,
we come, we come to thee.

Thomas Gray, Jr. (1833) alt.

Suggested Tunes: AZMON or ST. COLUMBA

[†]“See Israel’s Gentle Shepherd Stand,” Philip Doddridge (1702-1751), published by Job Orton in 1755; alt.

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Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To introduce a rich understanding of childhood which combines six contrasting views of children in the Bible and Christian tradition.
2. To examine how some simpler, less complete views of children can lead to their neglect or even abuse.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Children (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the closing hymn “We Come in Childhood’s Joyfulness,” locate the tune AZMON in your church’s hymnal. An alternate tune is ST. COLUMBA.

Begin with an Observation

“Churches have not been consistent public advocates for children. Mainline Protestant churches support legislation to protect children’s health and safety, yet they hesitate to contribute significantly to public debates about strengthening families. Protestant evangelical and conservative churches, on the other hand, are more vocal in nationwide debates about marriage and the family. These churches sometimes focus so narrowly on the rights of parents to raise and educate their children without governmental intrusion, however, that they inadequately address the responsibilities of parents, church, and state to protect, educate, and support all children” (*Children*, p. 12). What explains the fact that Christians express many concerns about children today, yet lack consistent commitment to them?

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude with a prayer that members will discover in Scripture and Christian tradition a richer picture of childhood that will lead to their renewed commitment to serve all children.

Scripture Reading

Ask two group members to read Matthew 18:1-5 and 19:13-15 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

What explains the fact that we express many concerns about children today, yet in our society and even in our churches, we lack commitment to children? Bunge suggests that our lack of commitment flows from our lack of understanding of the complexity of children and their intrinsic worth.

Some dangerously simple conceptions of children are that they are “either all good or all bad; for instance, popular magazines or newspapers tend to depict infants and young children as pure and innocent beings whom we adore and teenagers as hidden and dark creatures whom we must fear. In the

Christian tradition, we have often focused on children merely as sinful or as creatures who are ‘not yet fully human.’”

Other views of children are inadequate because they do not emphasize, or even recognize, children’s intrinsic value. These views value children for the pleasures they bring or the services they provide. “In a consumer culture, the ‘market mentality’ molds our attitudes toward children ... as being commodities, consumers, or even economic burdens,” Bunge warns.

Bunge offers a more complex conception of children by combining six views of them from the Bible and Christian tradition. Though these views are in some tension with one another, she holds them together in order to point toward children’s complexity and intrinsic value.

Briefly outline the six aspects of her richer, more balanced view of children. Members can explore several of these aspects in other studies in this series. The aspect of guiding and nurturing children is the focus of “Beyond Noah’s Ark.” The aspect of learning from children can be explored in the studies “The Childhood of Jesus” and “Parenting Virtues.” Two studies, “Living in the Shadow of the Manger” and “Caring for Children in Crisis,” develop the theme of our responsibility to serve all children who are vulnerable in our society.

Study Questions

1. Encourage members to explore how children interact with adults in their families and congregation. How well is each aspect of children addressed? What forms of instruction and nurture, correction and advice, do children receive from parents and older siblings in the family or congregation? How do they experience respect and love from older persons? Are children encouraged to contribute to their family and congregation?
2. Members may brainstorm ways that each aspect is neglected in our society. Some examples: Does our focus upon genetically designing ‘perfect’ children neglect their being gifts of God? Do we sometimes take a ‘hands off’ attitude toward children’s moral formation, neglecting that they are sinful and selfish, or that they need instruction and guidance? Do we focus too much on our own children’s health and education, neglecting the biblical command to care for the orphans and strangers?
3. When we view children exclusively as sinful, we may be led toward severely punishing or even abusing them. This must be rejected in Christian communities. “Recent studies of the religious roots of child abuse show how the view of children as sinful or depraved, particularly in some strains of European and American Protestantism, has led Christians to emphasize that parents need to ‘break their wills’ at a very early age with harsh physical punishment” (*Children*, p. 15).

Bunge says the notion that children are sinful can helpfully remind us of three important truths: (1) children are born into a “state of sin” – their families and communities are broken, and there is brokenness and self-centeredness within children; (2) they have growing moral capacities and levels of accountability for their actions that are sometimes self-centered and harmful to themselves and others; and (3) children are not as sinful as adults, but are more easily formed in ways of righteousness (*Children*, pp. 15-16).

4. Congregations aren’t fully committed to children if they “lack a strong religious education program for children: the lessons are theologically weak and uninteresting to children, and qualified teachers are not recruited and retained,” Bunge warns. “If we truly believe, as Jesus did, that children can teach adults and be moral witnesses, models of faith, and sources of revelation, then we will listen more attentively to them and will learn from them. We will structure our religious education programs in ways that honor their questions and insights, and we will recognize the importance of children in the faith journey and spiritual maturation of adults” (*Children*, pp. 12 and 18)

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.