

***Understanding God's Heart for Children: Toward a Biblical Framework***, edited by Douglas McConnell, Jennifer Orona, and Paul Stockley. Colorado Springs, Colorado, USA and London, Authentic Books /World Vision, 339 pages, 2007. ISBN: 978-1-934068-47-2. Reviewed by Donald Ratcliff, Ph.D., Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois, U.S.A. **To be published in *Transformation*, vol. 24, issue 4, October 2008.**

Interest in the theology of the child emerged in the last decade—technically re-emerged, as it is an extension of the work of several key theologians over the centuries—providing a theological context for the care and nurture of children. This theology is *not* the child's theology—as interesting as that can be—but rather the theology of the church about children. Curiously, professional theologians have tended to be rather quiet about this topic for quite some time, and thus today child theology is dominated by non-theologians. Part of this trend is what is called the child theology movement, which was launched in 2002 and emphasizes placing the “child in the midst” to inform theology in general. Interest in the theology of the child has particularly been fuelled by Christian organizations serving at-risk children in non-Western countries, most of those ministries being affiliated with the Viva Network.

My first detailed exposure to theology of the child/child theology (some people use the terms interchangeably) was at the Houston consultation, led by most of the current leaders in the movement today, and hosted by Jerome Berryman, director of the Center for the Theology of Childhood and creator of “Godly Play.” Those who attended the consultation were carefully selected participants in what was essentially a several-day combination of brain-storming about theology and reacting to several speakers. At the time I sensed this was an important movement, but in its infancy. I recall Marcia Bungee, editor of the landmark volume *The Child in Christian Thought* that summarizes many of the theologies about children held by church leaders through the centuries, provided some of the most mature thought during these sessions, undoubtedly because of her deep acquaintance with the past theologians. While very honoured by being asked to participate, I left the consultation wondering if the movement would survive, and whether it would move towards maturity if it did survive.

*Understanding God's Heart for Children* is an indication that the movement is thriving, even if still largely unknown to the general public and equally unknown among professional theologians. The movement is growing, even if not yet fully mature. That only one professional theologian—Marcia Bungee—is represented among the 45 authors is disappointing, and one wonders why others who have been actively involved in the movement in the past were not included (such as Bonnie Miller-McLemore, Haddon Willmer, Dawn DeVries, and Judy Gundry-Volf). There are many possible reasons.

But the work done here, some of it by Christian educators and much of it by child-care practitioners and administrators, is a major advance from the scattered articles and books that have predominated to date. Arguments are more nuanced than in some of the previous work, such as comments that take seriously the sin nature doctrine—which tended to be dismissed

in earlier work—and taking seriously the image of God in children without idealizing them.

The book is organized according to seven affirmations that were drafted by “several members of the network” in 2004. Those affirmations became a focus for the fifth “International Cutting Edge Conference” in 2005, and the chapters of this book were derived from presentations at that conference.

Chapters range from good to strong—I did not see any that were inappropriate, although a few emphasize needs and activities on the field more than theology. I was particularly impressed with the final chapter by Paul Stockley, who made every word count and communicated many of the major ideas of the 300+ page book in a mere seven pages (plus four lines on an eighth page).<sup>1</sup> Stockley, a development worker in Oxford, summarizes the book in a single sentence: “[The seven themes] are: the child's uniqueness, need for parental care, gift to family and community, flourishing in society, a hope for one generation to another, participating in the family of faith, and partnering in the mission of God” (p. 299).

Each of the themes is considered using this schematic: (1) a brief summary, (2) one or more quotations, frequently that of scripture, (3) an essay reflecting upon biblical perspectives of the theme, (4) an essay on critical issues related to the theme, (5) a response by a practitioner, (6) a case study, (7) an essay on practical implications, and (8) a list of discussion questions related to the theme. With some exceptions, the case studies and practical implications sections tended to be thin on theology, while other chapters were more likely to include biblical and theological content.

The strengths of this work surpass the few weaknesses noted above, and along with Marcia Bungee's book, this work can be considered the best representation of theology of the child movement to date. I am sure other volumes marked by even greater maturity will be forthcoming, but this book is the one to read to understand this area of study as it is today. It is a substantive book, yet clearly written and easily comprehended. The arguments for the value and importance of children are compelling, as is the call for the church to not only understand the theology of the child but to act upon it in the many practical ways suggested—particularly in the world arena with at-risk children, but not to the exclusion of other youngsters. Children are not just the job of the church, they *are* the church. Are they taken seriously in your church, and does your church (and you!) act decisively in a manner that benefits children that need help the most? Do the pastor and the church program emphasize the needs of children, as Jesus did, and do they take practical steps toward meeting the needs of at least some children that are in desperate need around the world? Jesus equated himself with children (Mark 9:37). Should not our theology, as well as our practice, reflect an equal valuing of children?