

## **God Gives Children As A Gift To Welcome And Nurture**

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It is a privilege to join with children in celebrating their uniqueness, embracing childhood as formative for all of life. Family, friends, church and the local community are responsible for creating an environment that promotes children's well-being.

God intends for children to thrive in stable and loving relationships.

Biblically speaking, what is the community's responsibility toward its children? What roles should the community play in the lives of children? Furthermore, are the roles of children limited to being subjects and recipients of care, and nothing more? Should children have responsibilities in the life of the community as well? In biblical, historical, and contemporary theological perspectives, children and their communities have related to one another in a variety of different ways. In the present day, Christians must learn from these perspectives to understand their implications for ministry to children, especially children at risk.

### **Theological Perspectives**

A community is more than a neighborhood, more than a group of people who live near each other. It is a theological concept, and it relates to God's intentions for the world. As has been discussed previously, God's gift of his image gives inherent dignity to each human being, but sin has marred that image. In God's redemptive plan, however, Jesus Christ serves as the ultimate image of God that makes possible abundant life both in heaven and on earth. This life is not limited to individual achievement and self-fulfillment.

Indeed, Jürgen Moltmann claims that Christian living in community is the fulfillment of the human destiny.[1] The image of God in each human being includes an innate concept of community. God lives in community in the Trinity, and his essence of love is fully realized in relationships between the members of the Trinity. As a relational Being, God created humanity to be relational as well. This relationship extends from a connection with God to a bond with other people. The Church as a community, then, must seek to live out God's intentions for his people by providing a network of support to children. With this in mind, let us examine what the Bible says about the relationships between children and their communities.

### **Biblical Perspectives**

In the Bible, children are presented as a gift to the entire community. They are called "olive shoots" (Ps. 128:3), a "heritage from the Lord" (Ps. 127:3), and "arrows" in a quiver (Ps. 127:4-5). Children serve as living testimonies to God's faithfulness and blessing. The messianic child serves as God's ultimate gift to communities – to all of the communities of the world! God gave his Son, Jesus, to the world as a child to promote justice and righteousness throughout the world (Is. 9:6-7).[2] Just as Jesus blessed the world by entering it, children bless their families and communities through their very existence.

Jesus took this point even further by teaching his followers to welcome children as welcoming God. Believers are commanded to show kindness and hospitality to one another (Eph. 4:32; I Tim. 5:10; I Pet. 4:9), and Jesus called his followers to welcome children in the same ways. "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me," he declared (Mk. 9:37; cf. Mk. 10:13-16). Jesus welcomed children as participants

in the kingdom of God and ministered to them as willingly as he ministered to adults. He did not despise or reject them because of their childlikeness, but praised their childlike qualities instead. He blessed them, used them as examples, and allowed them to praise him openly.

#### Historical Perspectives in Theology

Throughout history, children have been viewed in a variety of ways. Some thinkers had well-rounded perspectives of children, while others focused on several aspects of the nature of children. For example, children were viewed as weak and subordinate members of the community (e.g. Thomas Aquinas[3] and Martin Luther[4]), as mini-adults (e.g. Philippe Aries[5] and Augustine[6]), and as vulnerable and worthy of care (e.g. John Wesley,[7] A.H. Franke,[8] and Horace Bushnell[9]). These varying perspectives give helpful insights to our current understanding of children and community through both their weaknesses and their strengths.

#### Contemporary Perspectives in Theology

In fact, contemporary perspectives in theology have built on many of these historical views, placing children in a new range of roles from burdens and commodities, to victims, to intrinsically valuable human beings.[10] In some communities, adults view children as expensive, time-consuming, and irresponsible.[11] In others, children are ‘used up’ as possessions through labor and other forms of work and trade.[12] A very different, but equally fallacious perspective views them as helpless innocents who not only experience victimization at the hands of adults, but also lack the resources and abilities to defend themselves.[13]

A view of children as intrinsically valuable changes many of the negative implications of these perspectives. As a result, children are increasingly being viewed as “subjects of their own development, as potential agents of transformation.”[14] They are brought into the midst of the community, serving as examples and bringing a unique spiritual perspective into the life of the group as a whole.

Because these views lead to different ways of addressing, disciplining, and otherwise relating to children, they must be analyzed from a biblical perspective in order to draw accurate conclusions and build healthy relationships.

#### Conclusion

The roles and responsibilities of children and their communities are not one-sided; they are bidirectional and mutually reciprocal. As followers of Christ, we must seek to make the biblical ideal a reality in our attitudes, actions, and our very lives. In the contexts of our communities, we must practice and learn these principles more and more fully until the day of the coming of the Lord.

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[1] Moltmann, 16.

[2] See also Robin Maas, “Christ as the Logos of Childhood: Reflections on the Meaning and Mission of the Child,” *Theology Today* 56, no. 4 (2000): 456-468 and Jürgen Moltmann, *On Human Dignity: Political Theology and Ethics*, (London: Fortress Press, 1984), 89.

- [3] Cristina L.H. Traina, "A Person in the Making," *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 106.
- [4] Jane E. Strohl, "The Child in Luther's Theology," *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 134.
- [5] Richard R. Osmer, "The Christian Education of Children in the Protestant Tradition," *Theology Today* 56, no. 4 (2000): 507.
- [6] Martha Ellen Stortz, "'Where or When Was Your Servant Innocent?'" *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 82.
- [7] Pamela D. Couture, *Seeing Children, Seeing God: A Practical Theology of Children and Poverty*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 54.
- [8] Marcia J. Bunge, "Education and the Child in Eighteenth-Century German Pietism," *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 249.
- [9] Margaret Bendroth, "Horace Bushnell's Christian Nurture," *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 352.
- [10] Dawn Devries, "Toward a Theology of Childhood," *Interpretation* 55, no. 2 (2001): 161-173.
- [11] Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective*, (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 91.
- [12] Bryant L. Myers, "Strategic Trends Affecting Children," *Celebrating Children!*, eds. Glenn Miles and Josephine-Joy Wright (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster Press, 2003), 114.
- [13] Douglas Sturm, "On the Suffering and Rights of Children: Toward a Theology of Childhood Liberation," *Cross Currents* 42, no. 2 (1992): 149.
- [14] Myers, "Strategic Trends Affecting Children," 108, 114.