

INTRODUCING CHILD THEOLOGY

By Haddon Willmer

Child theology is not a teaching, existing one authorised form, which I can expound to you.

Child theology is the label we give to an enquiry a little network has been carrying on for a few years now. It may become bigger and influential - I cannot tell. I am working away at my own lines of enquiry, exploring and imagining what excites me and seems to be worthwhile and all I can do today is to share with you something of what I think about child theology. I believe Keith White and a few other people are working on similar lines, but we do not always agree. I hope this presentation will serve to invite you to engage for yourselves in imagining and developing child theology – I am not interested in getting you to agree with me, or to adopt my views, but rather to **encourage you to think about God with the child as placed by Jesus in the midst.**

Matt 18 1-5

Jesus placed a child in the midst of the disciples who were in theological argument and going seriously astray

Neither their salvation, nor the honouring of Jesus their Master nor the kingdom of God was being helped by their theology.

The child as a converting corrective in theology: that is the view of CT.

We are concerned with theology – which is important and certainly inescapable in the long run of the church's service. (We do not dispense with theology, or think we have got free of it, as so much current interest in spirituality or new religion does)

The child was a converting corrective to these disciples partly because they did not expect the child to have anything to teach them, or anything to do with their concerns. **Theology** requires us to take note of much that we overlook or ignore – for it calls us to see the *world* in *God's* light, and God's glory in the entire world. God creates all things in love and treasures the beauty of all his creation: the sparrows have value in his eyes, like the angels who always behold his face. Theology is not a narrow teaching about God, isolated from the world, for that cannot be true to God who creates the world

Theology challenges us in several different ways:

When we leave God out of our understanding of reality, it challenges our godlessness, our practical or theoretical atheism;

When we install anything merely creaturely in the place of God, it challenges our idolatry;

When we are jealous for God, it challenges our hate, fear and engagement in holy war;

when we decide God may be felt, but not served by our thinking and speaking, when we judge God to be quite unspeakable, it challenges us with the Word and the words of God, warning us not to refuse him who speaks (Heb. 12.25);

when we focus on God in a way which takes us out of the world where God has put us, and deprives God of the particular world he has created in faithful love, it challenges us to a discipline of thought and speech which is open and receptive to the greatness and the presence of God, in the ways God chooses to be.

Child theology is a form of theology which specially responds to this last challenge, though it contributes to the all-round contribution of theology.

The disciples were in a quest for greatness, for a greatness that was genuine and could not be surpassed, since it was greatness *in the kingdom of God*. In their wisdom, real enough in its way, they judged that the child could not be a sign of what they sought nor a real competitor in the race they were running with each other. So they theologized, thought and spoke about God, without a thought for the child.

Jesus shocks them into a new way of seeing the kingdom, God and themselves. By placing a child in the midst, he undermines their conception of the kingdom and the greatness that was authentic within it.

Jesus tells them that **the child, who is not in the running to be great in the kingdom as they see it, is the clue to entering the kingdom.** The disciples' interest in greatness in the kingdom engenders ambitions and anxiety which puts them off the road to simply being in the kingdom: they need to think less about achieving or being rewarded with greatness in the kingdom, and more about how they might enter the kingdom. The child is given as the clue to how to enter the kingdom. Jesus teaches the disciples that they are in danger of not entering the kingdom. Only if they stoop to notice the little child, and only if they become as the child, will they enter the kingdom.

And he also teaches thereby, though it is not so noticed in most readings of this text, that the **kingdom of God is an order of reality where it is enough to enter**, to be received there, to have a place – the worst place in heaven is as good as the best place, and we can enjoy it free from envy and insecurity. Jesus says that the child properly belongs to the kingdom, and is the clue to entering it.

(When he makes the child a clue to greatness, the last who shall be first, Matt.18.5, this is not to be read as a mere reversal of status, with the humble taking the place of the great, for that would then play out the same competitive game, with players moved to different positions. The child's being great, or the servant or the last's being first, witnesses to a significant and decisive saving change, because it points to life together in freedom from considerations of great and small, from comparison and competition, from discontent and loss. [Matt 18.5 is not saying much if it is taken to mean that in the end the child wins the competition to be greatest as defined and run by the disciples – it remains a competition, but now directed to see who comes out on top in humility. When the child is the sign, to be greatest in the kingdom of God is not to win a competition, but is to be true to there being no competition and to living free of the competitive aspiration.] All share in the one

body, the one good community, in such a way that there is no more self-seeking, and no need for it, but all are free with each other to enjoy the community they make together. Whereas the reversal of status is not inconceivable as the goal of human social change, the community free of competition for greatness (or as we might say, celebrity) is very hard, if not impossible, to imagine at least in the form of an election manifesto: it can hardly be a promise leaders say they intend to keep when in power. We have here a vision that we see now only through a glass darkly, and a vision whose realisation we wait and pray for, as we do for the coming of God's kingdom. We have here a vision that becomes faint and fades away unless we believe, and can think and speak of, *God* the transcendent, to whom we look to do what is impossible with men. That God is able to promise this, and makes it real wherever he comes, and wherever he receives us, is something theology looks into and can go some way to explain, though it never gets beyond fragments. The child in the midst, as placed by Jesus, thus invites us to theology, maybe more seriously than we have hitherto regarded it.]

As CT has been developed in the last three years, it has been addressed explicitly to theology and theologians. A child is placed in the midst of theological thinking, expecting it to be changed thereby. But today, in CCCF, I recognise that your primary or major occupation is not theology, but child care. To be involved in child care, in its modern organisational and scientific mass – it is a huge network of enterprises – is to live and work within a practical, and largely secularised world, where theology has become not so much questionable and exposed as error as simply superfluous to requirements.

There is still Christian child care, and other religious communities are also active. But this does not produce or require much in the way of child *theology*. They are involved because people still believe and live in communities of faith; they want to bring up their children in their tradition; they want their faith and way of life to have public space, resources and expression, rather than being marginalised, disrespected and disempowered. So they want to be involved in child care without hiding their religious identity and the public status and interests of their group. But their sense of identity is derived more from communal cultural tradition, than from theological thinking, investigation and confession. Their ideas about good child care largely correspond and are articulated with secular expertise.

So in Christian child care practice, the child is placed in the centre – but not in the centre of theological argument. You receive the child as Jesus said we should, let them come to me. You do what he did, and seek to bless the child, but you do not put the child in the centre of theological argument, as the clue to getting it right. You are in the blessed condition of being able to do the right thing without needing to think and talk about it theologically.

You are not theologians – and you would regard changing your job to become a theologian, to spend your time thinking about what the kingdom of God means – as a poor bargain: you in practice receive the children; you do not simply talk about the significance of the child for our understanding of God. You deal in reality, where you serve real people in real need.

Some practitioners have heard of 'child theology' but sense 'theological sophistication' as one great leader in global Christian child care has put it, and so you are not interested in it – we want simple theology and as little of it as we can survive with while we get on with the real, necessary and obvious task of responding to children in need.

You are pretty sure, you certainly don't worry about this, that God will not set you a theological test you, now or at the end, but he asks you, and will ask, whether you received him when he was abandoned, abused, starving, badly educated, exploited, misled – and you know you are trying to be able to give a positive answer because in your caring for children, you are caring for him.

Matt 25 seems to be sufficient basis for your avoiding theology.

Some of you may be seriously interested in theology, but others may not; some may be hostile to theology, and some may be intimidated by what you think it is. So today I am trying a new way of presenting child theology, starting closer to where I imagine you are.

I would like to invite you to work at child theology starting from where you are. The presentation of child theology which has become conventional for me, through the last three years in the Child theology movement, has to be changed. And the key change is this – we still work with the story in Matt 18.1-5 and its parallels in the other gospels, but instead of imitating Jesus in putting a child in the midst of a theological argument, we reflect on **what Jesus said is the significance of receiving the child.** Receiving the child is of the essence of child care.

He said the child was a sign and clue to the kingdom of God. And he said that whoever received one such child in his name, received Him, (Matt 18.5) - and other texts, versions of the same saying or line of thought, go further, to say, whoever receives him, receives the one who sent him – that is, the Father (Mk 9.37; Lk 9.48; cf Matt 10.40; Matt.11.27=Lk 10.22)

Is it not obvious how this connects with those who care for children? The word 'receive' is a word for care.

This is what you are involved in. The word provokes reflection on your practice.

Does the word seem appropriate or useful, when compared with other words you use?

What **meanings** might it carry?

What **practices** might it cover?

What **discrimination** between good and bad does receiving require?

The possessive or ambitious parent receives the child.

The sweat shop employer and the pimp and the punter receive the child

The teachers in all their variety receive the child.

Various kinds of institution receive the child

The state receives the child, because population means power in the future

The market puts out its tentacles to receive the child.

Religions receive the child

And there are many ways in which the child is not received, not adequately cared for and not respected: but they should not be excluded here, as though they are merely the opposite of reception – they are often ways by which children are received by parents or agencies or societies, received as problems or nuisances, which have to be dealt with as cheaply as possible. Symbol: street children are shot, to tidy up the place. That is a *reception which is a rejection* – a rejection which in the most terrible way ‘takes’ the life of the child – whereas Jesus took a child to place her in the midst.

What is good receiving of children? What are we called to? What kind of reception is described and prescribed in the convention on the rights of the child, or in our various codes of good practice?

Theology has a contribution to make in our critical reflection. It widens the scope of our enquiry – in order to appreciate what reception means in relation to children, it may help to **let our vision and concept of reception to be expanded by being open to receiving God along with the child.**

And by the way in which God is believed to model receiving:

Receive one another as God in Christ receives you: Rom 15.7 welcome

Col 3.13 forgive, Eph 4.32

We often read such sayings with superficial theological confidence: God receives us, generously, unconditionally, we say; we are sure of God, the thought of his love is a warm glow – the only issue raised by these texts is how *we* can receive *others*. How can we show this welcoming spirit? What skills and power do we need to carry it through? These are big problems, which is why we want child care experts and practitioners, with resources, skills and training – but the theological side is no problem: it can be taken for granted that God is loving and kind and generous, God will forgive, that’s his trade, his expertise.

This theological confidence cracks up under various strains.

Many people do not find God so welcoming.

Is there a gracious God – the block of conscience?

Is there a reliable God for those who cry out for bread?

Is there a God who cares for children and who has a real kingdom to which they belong?

Is there a credible God for those with a sense of reality which has been built up by living in the world as it is? Is not this image of God illusory?

Is there a God who receives outsiders – or is the welcoming God known and celebrated by those who are somehow within the circle of faith, which seems closed and off-putting to those who are somehow outside? We can talk of God’s love within the church, but not to people outside, some tell us

When superficial theological confidence cracks up under strain, can we be helped by more serious theological work? Or should we abandon God, as many do?

Well, **we are here today as those who have not given up God.** There are great communities of faith, who represent God by welcoming one another, welcoming outsiders, welcoming children. **They bear witness to the truth that there is no God who will do it all for us, but there is God who calls us to do it with him in the world, so that when we receive the child, we receive Him with and in the child.**

If we find any comfort and encouragement for this work in thinking of and trusting God who welcomes the children, do we not need to be able to say so? Do we not need to say so in order to know who we are and what we are trying to do, as *Christian* child carers? Do we not need to ensure that we **speak honestly, with integrity** – and not to pretend that God in Christ is significant for us when in truth God is for us only a religious idea whose cracking under the strain is wall-papered out of sight by religious practice?

Do we not need to think more about God so that we can give a reason for the hope in us, to the intelligent and not so intelligent people around us who have abandoned God?

Do we not need to think more about God to be able to give a reason to ourselves, for in our own hearts and minds, often, God seems to die with the children who have no effective help in this so unwelcoming, unreceptive world?

Do we not need to think more about God and what his receiving such as children mean in order to work against child abuse even by people and institutions which represent God or bear his name? Is child abuse prevented merely by adopting secular standards and rules, not bothering to think the issues through within the vision and commitments stemming from God's way in Christ?

So far I have explored reception in the practice of child care, to see how this may be open to or reach towards theological thinking. Now I want to speak about it from the Gospel text, which is explicitly, inescapably and amazingly, theological.

Jesus says that when we receive a child in his name, we receive Christ and the one who sent him.

It may be that this is another way of pointing to the same reality as the earlier expression in which the child is 'of the kingdom of God' and so the clue to our entering it. We enter the kingdom only by the way signed by the child – and the kingdom is the joyful fruit of going the way of humility, the way of Jesus himself and the discipleship he calls us to. What is the reward of the kingdom? It can be pictured materialistically: everyone who has left houses or family including children for 'my name's sake' will receive a hundredfold and inherit eternal life (Matt. 19.29) But what is the substance within this picture? Is it not the heart of eternal life that we receive Jesus the Christ and the one who sent him? That is the offer of Christ. (cf John 17.3)

In John 17.3, eternal life is identified as knowing the only true God – and Jesus Christ sent by God. And there is no mention here of the child and its reception. In the Synoptic sayings, we start from the child in the midst who is to be received in the name of Jesus. That leads to receiving Jesus, and the

One who sent him: this is a very nice missionary way of referring to the mysterious source from which Jesus lived, the deepest companion of his life, the fullness of his meaning: the Father who sent him.

It is thus a key characteristic of Christian reception of the child, (a reception which is in the name of Jesus, in faith and obedience and fellowship) that the child and the disciples are together with God. Is this an imposition on an otherwise natural easy human relationship? Is it a religious intrusion which will distort the relationship unhealthily? We cannot deny the possibility. How many people bemoan their cramped or poisonous religious upbringing? But is it necessarily so? If we were at all true to the Name would it be so? In our time, amongst many people, the Name of Jesus and of God has become burdensome and frightening – almost as though merely mentioning it is a kind of child abuse. In some circles, including some enlightened child carers, it is a Name that provokes hostility.

There is need here for repentance and reform and recovery. As Christians, we seek reform which does not jettison the promise of God and his kingdom. **Spelling out the difference between the burdensome and the joyful Name of Jesus, as seen in action with children, is a task for theology.** If the reform is done without theology, the Name will be lost or further blasphemed by the reform itself.

That the receiving of the child is a receiving of the Son and the Father is a sign of life and joy and hope. Receiving the child with the Son and Father, receiving the child as we are received by God, and with the measure and grace that we have learnt from his receiving of us – all this enables us to give a positive account of receiving the child in the Name of Jesus.

Receiving the child, reflecting God's reception of us, is nothing like taking the child into prison, but **is liberation:** the child is received into space to play, to be, to grow, to relate. The child is received into something figured by the prophet's impractical vision of the New Jerusalem, where the snake's nest becomes a toy. It is the task of faith in its practical disciplines to find and share ways of living life in that spirit in the world as it is.

Receiving the child fits the natural, created condition of the child – and the natural condition of the child teaches us how to live as human beings and discloses that God lives the same way.

Children have a *natural necessity to be received*. If they are not received, they die; that is what happens to abandoned or seriously neglected infants. We like to think we get beyond that kind of dependence, that need to be received, as we grow older, but we do not. All human beings need to be received – we are not sovereign or self-sufficient, and the attempt to be so, distorts our humanity, however splendid may be the appearance. And God, for his part, does not stay in self-sufficient aseity: God chooses to be one who lives with his creation and in some sense requires to be received. Jesus comes representing God, and his being received is an important characteristic. (John 1.12)

Receiving the child is never a simple one-sided action, as though the child were inert, passive. It is relational. The reception of the child evokes and requires complex, mobile, changing interplay. The receiver of the child is almost immediately dependent on the child. Even before the child is able to receive others by social techniques (shaking hands and saying ‘you are welcome’) the child receives or does not receive people – and this reception by the child is powerfully illuminating for the receiver. Receiving and being received go together – and for those who like their theology to be Trinitarian and sophisticated to a high degree, perichoresis is to hand.

Receiving the child is significant for fulfilling what the text in Matt 18 asks for: to change and become as the children.

But how do we become as the children?

It is irresponsible for adults to attempt to be like children. You would let the children down if you became as a child. It is silly to attempt it literally, because it is impossible. It is self-centred, and contrary to a discipleship which starts in saying No to self, to try to hold on to or return to childhood. Adults have calling and duty: to be the receivers of the child, because the child needs receivers.

We are not to read becoming as a child in the modern self-centred away as though it is a good thing to search for, recover and cultivate the child within, to become a child again. We become as a child, by receiving real children, other than ourselves, and then living with them. As we live with them, travelling with them at their pace, we become as they are. The child received does all the ‘being child’ that is needed in the relationship – they can do it much better than we can – and we share in it by receiving them. We give them space and time to live life as it is given them, which is not as we may think it is, or should be, for it may be slower or less organised, or more trivial than we think life should be.

Since you are in this work of receiving children, and for their blessing, these are the terms in which I want to introduce child theology to you.

Do you appreciate that this is near the kingdom of God?

Do you experience how it leads you in the way of discipleship, as Jesus taught it in word and deed?

And that is something to share with children.