A close-up, high-resolution portrait of a young African girl with dark skin and hair, smiling gently. She is wearing a green sweater with a white collar. The background is a solid blue color.

Theologies of Childhood and the Children of Africa

Edited by
Jan Grobbelaar • Gert Breed

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■ Research Justification

The purpose of this book is to combine perspectives of scholars from Africa on Child Theologies from a variety of theological sub-disciplines to provide some theological and ministerial perspectives on this topic. The book disseminates original research and new developments in this study field, especially as relevant to the African context. In the process it addresses also the global need to hear voices from Africa in this academic field. It wants to convey the importance of considering Africa's children in theologising.

The different chapters represent diverse methodologies but the central and common focus is to approach the subject from the viewpoint of Africa's children. The individual authors' varied theological sub-disciplinary dispositions contribute to the unique and distinct character of the book. Almost all chapters are theoretical orientated with less empirical research, although some of the chapters refer to empirical research which the authors have done in the past.

Most of the academic literature in the field of Theologies of Childhood is from American or British-European origin. The African context is fairly absent in this discourse, although it is the youngest continent and presents unique and relevant challenges. This book was written by theological scholars from Africa, focussing on Africa's children. It addresses not only theoretical challenges in this field but also provides theological perspectives for ministry with children and for important social change.

Written from a variety of theological sub-disciplines, the book is aimed at scholars across theological sub-disciplines, especially those theological scholars interested in the intersections between theology, childhood studies and African cultural or social themes. It addresses themes and provide insights that is also relevant for specialist leaders and professionals in this field.

No part of the book was plagiarised from another publication or published elsewhere before.

Prof. Dr Andries G. van Aarde
AOSIS Chief Editor: Scholarly Books

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List of abbreviations appearing in the Text and Notes

AAR	American Academy of Religion
CTM	Child Theology Movement
ESV	English Standard Version
HCD	Holistic Child Development
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
INFEMIT	International Fellowship of Evangelical Mission Theologians
MGM	Male Genital Mutilation
NoNACYR	Nordic Network of African Childhood and Youth Research
NOSEB	Norwegian Centre for Child Research
STDs	Sexually Transmitted Diseases
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

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Preface

Africa has so many children that it is the youngest continent in the world. Many of Africa's children suffer from various forms of trauma. This situation creates a huge missional challenge to the church and theology in Africa. In particular, it challenges African theologians to become involved in the global discourse on children and childhood from an African perspective. Against this background, it is alarming that the African context and African theologians are fairly absent in this global discourse. Much of the literature in the field of Theologies of Childhood is American or British-European in origin.

At a conference which was held in Potchefstroom, South Africa, in 2014, a few theologians decided that it was time to address this gap in African theological literature. The Faculty of Theology at North-West University and Petra Institute for Children's Ministry took the lead in addressing this need. From this initiative, two academic publications were born concerning theology and children as an expression of an African voice in this emerging academic field. This book, *Theologies of Childhood and the Children of Africa*, is the first of these.

This book is relevant to scholars across theological disciplines. It was written from a diversity of academic perspectives: practical theology, systematic theology, New-Testament studies, childhood studies in theology, historical studies and ethics. The coherence lies in the general argument that it is necessary to consider children in theologising.

All the authors come from a Reformed background, and the Reformed orientation, ideas and language are obvious in their contributions. This was a deliberate choice, motivated by two reasons. Firstly, we want to stimulate the academic discourse within the Reformed tradition and motivate more African Reformed theologians to become involved in the global discourse on children and childhood. Secondly, we want to formulate some Reformed perspectives on this discourse to enhance the discourse between different theological traditions in Africa and globally. It is, therefore, an open invitation to other theological traditions to take up the discourse with us to enrich each other's theological perspectives.

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The approach is not only theoretical, but it provides suggestions for concrete practices, for ministry and for social change. It presents particular and utterly relevant challenges for the African continent. The chapters on the Old Testament book of Proverbs and Shona culture and the chapter on male circumcision address concrete and relevant issues and offer useful ethical and pastoral exploration. Our intention is that the book will be useful for those academics interested in the intersections between theology, childhood studies and African cultural and social topics, for practitioners and leaders in congregational and non-profit ministries who are involved with children, for child-care workers and specialists in social work. We hope that the insights in the book can assist many people in broadening or renewing their theological perspectives on children and childhood as well as their practices with children.

The first chapter, written by Jan Grobbelaar, gives an overview on important research developments and key resources developed in this research field during the 21st century. The focus of this overview is not only theologies of childhood but rather the broader field of theology and children. It gives the reader a broad orientation to and understanding of this field. The chapter makes it possible to identify immediately the most important work done in this field of study. In Chapter 2, Jan Grobbelaar addresses various problems in connection with the language used in this field of study. The creation of an understandable grammatical structure for using the vocabulary of theology, children and Africa is the focus. It gives a broad orientation to an understandable use of these concepts from an African perspective. This is followed by a chapter written by Marcia Bunge, an internationally esteemed scholar in the field. She discusses the concept 'theologies of childhood' in more detail. She pays special attention to the task, sources and significance of this field of study. The next two chapters approach the topic from a biblical perspective. In Chapter 4, attention is given to the Old Testament book of Proverbs. In this chapter, Sam Ndoga discusses the theme of childhood in Shona proverbs in light of the perspectives on childhood in the Old Testament book of Proverbs. Chapter 5 moves to the New Testament. It attends to Jesus' interaction with children in the Gospel according to Matthew. In this discussion, Jan Grobbelaar pays attention to the role that the concept of childhood played in Jesus' conversation with his disciples in Matthew 18:1–14 and Jesus' blessing of the children in Matthew 19:13–15. In Chapter 6, systematic theology is drawn into the conversation. In this chapter, Nico Vorster attends to the reformer John Calvin's theology of childhood. A historical perspective on the topic is opened in Chapter 7 by Hannes Knoetze. In his contribution, he focuses on the history of theologies of childhood

in African churches. The following two chapters were written from a practical-theology perspective. In Chapter 8, Alfred Brunson addresses the dangerous rite of ritual male circumcision, which is partly influenced by a specific perspective on childhood that is deeply embedded in many African cultures. Although the author gives his view as an outsider who did not experience this ritual first hand, his view is based on good empirical research done in Kenya and South Africa. In the last chapter, the African concept of childhood is challenged to include the agency of African children, especially in the church. The author, Gert Breed, in this chapter, emphasises the importance of welcoming children to the *diakonia* [service work] of the congregation.

Making this book a reality was a team effort. I want to extend a word of thanks to everybody who were involved in the planning of the book, especially Marcia Bunge, who was always available to advise us on this journey. Without authors who committed themselves to this project, it would not have been possible to conclude this publication. Thank you, everybody, that children are so important to you, that you made the time to reflect theologically on children and childhood from an African perspective. A special word of thanks to my co-editor, Gert Breed, who contributed so much in finalising this publication. I also want to thank Nadine Havenga for her dedicated administrative support for this project. In any publication, much of the hard work is done by the publishing team. In this case, the services of all the staff members of AOSIS were excellent and deserve a word of the utmost gratitude. I had the great privilege to work closely with Andries van Aarde, the Chief Editor: Scholarly Books at AOSIS. Thank you for all your support and good advice, and thanks for believing in this project from the first moment we made contact. At different stages in the writing-process, different reviewers were involved. We appreciate the time you spend on evaluating the proposal and the manuscript. Thank you for all the good suggestions to improve this work.

This book is dedicated to all the children of Africa from whom we can learn so much of living life amidst all the challenges of the African context.

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Resources on Theology and Children

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Introduction

During the 20th and 21st centuries, a growing awareness of, an interest in and a concern for children and their diverse living contexts arose globally. An important stimulus for this development was the adoption by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)¹. In this global context, expressions like children's rights, children at risk, child abuse, child soldiers, child sexual abuse (and even child prostitutes), HIV+ infected children, AIDS orphans and child-headed households, child protection and children's agency came more and more to the fore, both in the public debate and in scientific research. Many research

1. <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/crc.pdf>

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projects regarding children and childhood were undertaken in different academic fields, and a growing number of publications on children were published. These developments raise the question: How are religion and theology involved in all of this, and what does it contribute to this growing awareness of children and their plight?

■ Research problem

The above question is very broad, and therefore, the area of investigation for this chapter has to be demarcated. In the first place, the focus will be only on what Tracy (1981) calls the second public of theological engagement: the academy. Therefore, only the scientific intellectual context, dialogue and research about theology and children will be explored. The area of investigation is further demarcated by focussing more on initiatives undertaken from outside of the more traditional scholarly domains in practical theology that focus on children, namely religious and Christian education as well as family, youth and children's ministry. Sometimes, an initiative or resource is on the borderline of this broad distinction, and whether a certain initiative or resource should be included here or not could be the subject of debate. The criterion I used for my decision of referring to a certain initiative or resource was my personal conviction that the particular initiative or resource contributes to this emerging new field of interest in theological research and is noteworthy for anyone who is interested in research in this field of study. I also decided not to include unpublished dissertations or theses in this research. The period of investigation is also demarcated to publications published between 2000 and 2015. The nature of the study is explorative and descriptive. It will be an orientation to and description of the field of interest and the academic resources published in this regard rather than a thorough scholarly evaluation and an in-depth review of each publication.

To be more precise, the research question addressed in this article is: Which initiatives, driven by the academe from a religious and theological perspective, from outside of the more traditional scholarly domains on children in practical theology, namely religious and Christian education as well as family, youth and children's ministry, were undertaken to promote the development of resources on religion or theology and children in the 21st century?

In answering the above research question, the religious and theologically driven initiatives undertaken will, firstly, be situated in the broader context of global initiatives to promote the understanding of childhood and the welcoming and caring of children in this world, especially as seen in developments within the academic domain of childhood studies. Thereafter, the initiatives of academic societies, significant research projects and the publication of books and articles in academic journals within religious studies and the different sub-disciplines of theology will be discussed. This study does not claim to include all initiatives and all available resources, but it aims to include the most important initiatives and resources available, albeit according to the subjective opinion of the author.

■ Childhood studies globally

The systematic study of children and childhood, which actually started during the 19th century in Europe and North America (Kehily 2013:loc. 93–94), has a lineage that includes 'ground breaking research on or about children by intellectual giants including Sigmund Freud, Maria Montessori, Jean Piaget, and Margaret Mead' (Bowman 2007:loc. 244–245). A growing body of research and literature from numerous disciplines such as the fine arts, history, education, economics, psychology, medicine, law, anthropology, sociology, social work, philosophy and religion contributed

to the establishment of childhood studies as a recognised academic and research field during the latter part of the 20th century. James and James (2012) phrased it as follows:

The key conceptual and analytical catalyst ... which was largely responsible for pulling together and exploiting the synergy between these different disciplinary perspectives initially, came from within sociology and social anthropology. (loc. 667–668)

Because of the complexity of this field of study (James and James 2012),

[A] comprehensive understanding of childhood cannot be achieved by applying any single epistemological or disciplinary perspective ... so the study of childhood must be understood as a multi- and interdisciplinary activity. (loc. 656–658)

This factor led to the growth of many different multi and interdisciplinary research programmes in childhood studies around the world. Because of its interdisciplinary approach, scholars from religious studies and theology were included in some of these projects. It is impossible to discuss every initiative taken in this regard. Therefore, only research undertaken by three institutions is discussed.

The Norwegian centre for child research

The Norwegian Centre for Child Research (NOSEB) was established at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology at Trondheim in 1982. Since then they undertook various research projects, including the following:

- Effects of civil societies' activities related to early childhood care and development in Ethiopia and Zambia.
- The integration for improved public health.
- Refugee children as receivers of health care.
- The modern child and the flexible labour market: institutionalisation and individualisation of children in light of changes in the welfare state.

- Children as new citizens and ‘the best interest of the child’: a challenge for modern democracies.
- Consuming children: commercialisation and the changing construction of childhood.
- Children, young people and local knowledge in Ethiopia and Zambia.
- Day-care centres in transition: inclusive practices.²

NOSEB, in cooperation with Sage, has been publishing the quarterly interdisciplinary and peer-reviewed academic journal *Childhood: A journal of global child research*³ since 1993. Articles from different geographical regions, disciplines and social and cultural contexts related to children’s social relations and culture, with an emphasis on their rights and generational position in society, are published in this journal.

The also formed the Nordic Network of African Childhood and Youth Research (NoNACYR) which

[A]ims to enhance collaboration among scholars in Nordic countries who carry out research and teaching in childhood and youth studies focusing on the African continent. The Network comprises key research groups and PhD students from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. Its task includes promoting interdisciplinary dialogue on empirical research findings, collaborative research and publication, and academic and policy debates on research on, about, and/or with children and young people in Africa.⁴ (n.p.)

University of Oslo

The University of Oslo presented a conference on childhood in 2005. In one of the sessions, the focus was on ‘spirituality and religions in the

2. <https://www.ntnu.edu/noseb/research/projects>

3. <http://intl-chd.sagepub.com>

4. <https://www.ntnu.edu/noseb/research/projects>

context of children's rights' (Wyller & Nayar 2007:13). In this session, the central question was: 'How to develop a religious language where the otherness of the child is respected and given dignity?' (Wyller & Nayar 2007:13). This discussion led to the publication in 2007 of the book *The given child: The religions' contribution to children's citizenship* in which contributions from four continents were included. One of the sections is titled 'Reports from the world religions', and it consists of the following reports (Wyller & Nayar 2007):

- Beyond children as agents or victims: re-examining children's paradoxical strengths and vulnerabilities with resources from Christian theologies of childhood and child theologies.
- Submission and dissent: some observations of children's rights within the Islamic edifice.
- Construction of childhood, interactions and inclusions: growing up in a family with Hindu-values orientation. (p. 5)

On the question 'Can religions contribute to an improvement of children's rights and citizenship worldwide?', the answer of all the authors is 'yes' (Wyller & Nayar 2007:8). However, they also add a parallel answer:

Religions can contribute only if they focus on situated, social practice and take special notice of the intersubjective relations in their own practice. Religions do not contribute positively to children's rights if they continue to claim abstract principles regarding children. (p. 8)

Another project by the University of Oslo called 'Tiny voices project: New perspectives on childhood in early Europe' is currently underway (2013–2016). The focus of this research is on the lives of children and the attitudes towards childhood during antiquity and the early/high Middle Ages with an emphasis on the period from the 1st to the 8th centuries.⁵ According to Aasgaard (2012), the aims of this research are as follows:

5. <http://www.hf.uio.no/ifikk/english/research/projects/childhood/>

(1) to retrieve central aspects of childhood and children's life in the interface between the Greco-Roman heritage and nascent Christianity, and, later, Islam; (2) to study the ways in which notions of childhood were utilised for other aims, for example, as a reservoir for metaphor, but still convey important insights into children's life (3) to reflect on modern perceptions of children and childhood, using the ancient material to throw contemporary ideas of humanity and human values into relief. (p. 2)

Asgaard (2012) states that the project concentrates especially on three types of sources:

Stories about the childhood of Jesus and his mother Mary from late antiquity and the early medieval period, focussing on the apocryphal infancy gospels of Thomas and James.

Literary sources which originated amongst the cultural and religious elites, for example, philosophers, theologians and politicians, and which played a major role in the development of European culture.

Varied material that give insight into real children's lives and experiences, for example school exercises, papyri letters from children to parents, graffiti, drawings, toys, clothes, children's graves, sculpture and paintings. (p. 5-7)

Both the initiatives to enhance childhood studies as academic discipline described above originated in Europe. However, there was also an initiative, originating at Rutgers University in North America, to take cognisance of.

Rutgers University Camden

In 2007, a Department of Childhood Studies was founded at Rutgers University, Camden, USA. The webpage of the department states:

Through a multidisciplinary approach, the Department of Childhood Studies aims both to theorize and historicize the figure of the Child and to situate the study of children and childhoods within contemporary cultural and global contexts.⁶ (n.p.)

6. <http://childhood.camden.rutgers.edu/>

Since the inception of the department, various conferences were organised, for example on ‘Children and war’ (2009), ‘Multiple childhoods/multidisciplinary perspectives: Interrogating normativity in childhood studies’ (2011) and ‘Visions and voices of childhood’ (2012).⁷ The department also started The Rutgers University Press Book Series, which is the first multidisciplinary book series in childhood studies.⁸ The series reflect on our past and present understanding of children and childhoods globally. At least two important books for theology and religious studies were published in this series, and they can be seen as companion volumes.

The first one, *Children and childhood in world religions: Primary sources and texts* under the editorship of Don Browning and Marcia Bunge, was published in 2009. For the first time in history, the theme of children in major religions of the world was explored in a scholarly way. The book contains six chapters, each one focussing on one religious tradition: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism (eds. Browning & Bunge 2009:v). Each of these chapters begins with an introduction on the relationship between children and the specific religion. It is followed by selected primary texts in this religion, ranging from the ancient to the contemporary. Different genres are included: ‘legal, theological, poetic and liturgical’ (eds. Browning & Bunge 2009:6). A range of topics are addressed, guided by the following six themes (eds. Browning & Bunge 2009):

1. The nature and status of children. ...
2. The gender and sexuality of children. ...
3. The role of children in central religious practices. ...

7. Cf. <http://childhood.camden.rutgers.edu/conferences/>

8. <http://rutgerspress.rutgers.edu/Catalog/ProductSearch.aspx?ExtendedSearch=false&SearchOnLoad=true&rhl=Rutgers%20Series%20in%20Childhood%20Studies&sf=ss=Rutgers%20Series%20in%20Childhood%20Studies>

4. Obligations of parents and children. ...
5. Communal obligations to children. ...
6. Moral and spiritual formation of children. ... (pp. 5–6)

This book is a significant contribution to the understanding of the different religions' constructions of childhood and the role that the primary sources and texts played in the formation of these constructs. Because of the huge role that religion plays in the formation of culture and society, this work helps to create a better understanding of the position of children in different religious contexts. It also indicates how child-focussed advocacy and programmes can address more effectively the various challenges of the risk factors for children in each religious context.

The second important book in this series, also published in 2009, is *Children and childhood in American religions*, edited by Don Browning and Bonnie Miller-McLemore. The book contains a collection of ground-breaking essays by leading scholars, investigating 10 different religious traditions in the United States' understanding of childhood and the ways in which they use their different traditions to guide children amidst the challenges of the American culture (Browning & Miller-McLemore 2009:1). Amongst other topics, the book devotes a chapter each to both the mainline and conservative Protestants, the Roman Catholic Church, Judaism, the Black church, the Latter-day Saints, Native American religion, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism (eds. Browning & Miller-McLemore 2009:v–vi). In these chapters, questions are addressed around four main themes: 'formal doctrinal and institutional beliefs and practices, relationship between parents and children, formational and developmental growth, and relationship between religions and the wider culture' (eds. Browning & Miller-McLemore 2009:4).

This collection enriches the scholarly discourse on children and childhood, in America and wider, by including the field of religion as a

partner in this conversation (eds. Browning & Miller-McLemore 2009:20). It also ‘provides a partial bridge to help close the gaps in and between pastoral theology and childhood studies’ (Campbell-Reed 2011:10–11). Central themes in this book are parenting and religious education.

A staff member of the Childhood Studies Department at Rutgers University, John Wall (2010a), published a book with the title *Ethics in light of childhood*. In this book, Wall rethinks ethics in the light of the experiences of children. The book is divided into three parts. In part one, Wall examines the history of Western thought about children that still influences ethical thinking today. In part two, he constructs a new childism moral theory, and in part three, he further explores this moral theory in relationship to three specific areas of life: human rights, family life and ethical thinking. Wall’s contribution with this publication is that he not only applies ethics to childhood in a new way but that he even goes beyond that. In a very convincing way, he also applies childhood to ethics. In the process, he develops a new way of ethical thinking.

He argues that a new form of childism is needed to transform not only our moral thinking and practices but also our societies. He is of the opinion that, if we do not take up this challenge of rethinking ethics in the light of childhood, ‘children themselves will be increasingly marginalized and societies increasingly dehumanized’ (Wall 2010a:loc. 48–49). He, therefore, makes the following plea (Wall 2010a):

[That t]he experiences of children need to become new lenses for interpreting what it means to exist, to live good lives, and to form just communities – for the sake of children and adults both. (pp. 26–27)

According to Wall (2010a:loc. 42–43), such process will create a child-inclusive society in which children and adults are not only equals but in

which the foundations of society are transformed in accordance ‘to what makes children distinct’.

The developments discussed above show that, in different ways, religious studies and theology became more and more involved in research in childhood studies. However, according to Cooey (2010:1), only a ‘[f]ew scholars attend to the value, status, and role of children in religious contexts as bearers of an emerging religious agency’. This situation brought to the fore the question: Which intentionally driven initiatives from within the academic domains of religion and theology were undertaken during the 21st century? This question is addressed in the following section.

■ Academic initiatives from within theology and religious studies

Although not totally absent in theological thinking before the 21st century (cf. Anderson & Johnson 1994; Bailey 1995; Clark 1994; Cray 1995; De Villiers 1979; Du Plessis 1989; Estes 1991; Faber Van der Meulen 1996; Francis 1996; Pais 1991; Prest 1992; Scalise 1994; Stockton 1983; Strange 1996; Sturm 1992; Van Aarde 1991; Weber 1979), it seems as if children and childhood were marginalised topics in serious theological thinking for most of the time. Until very recently, interest and inquiry in this area was seen as of importance only for those people involved in ministry to children and families, for example pastoral counsellors and religious and Christian educators (cf. ed. Bunge 2001:3–4). In a 2001 issue of the journal *Interpretation*, Dawn DeVries (2001:162) stated: ‘[U]ntil very recently, the field of systematic theology in the twentieth century has been largely silent on the question of children’. Miller-McLemore (2003) even pronounced that:

‘[r]eal’ theology in the last century focussed on adults. After Horace Bushnell, well known for his mid-nineteenth-century theology of childhood, the door slammed shut on children as a respectable topic. (p. xxii)

Although the implications of the theology of Karl Barth and Karl Rahner for our view of children and childhood are discussed in the book *The child in Christian thought* edited by Marcia Bunge (2001:386–445), the actual attention they give to children is minimal and is rather an illustration of how unimportant children were in serious theological reflection in the 20th century. In 2006, Marcia Bunge (2006a, cf. ed. 2001:3, 2004:43) came to the following conclusion:

Despite the rising concern for and curiosity about children, scholars of religion, theologians, and ethicists across religious lines have had little to say about children, and they have had little to contribute to the growing political and academic debates about children or our obligations to them. Many have not treated childhood as a topic meriting serious attention. (p. 551)

Six years later, Bunge (2012b) expressed this view again by stating the following:

I am also an historical theologian, and I have noticed in the fields of theology and ethics there is little serious theological reflection directly on children or parenting. Many theologians and ethicists have treated the subject of children as ‘beneath’ the serious theologian and as a subject only for religious educators or youth pastors. Few contemporary theologians and ethicists have devoted their attention to child-related issues. (p. 4)

With specific reference to the biblical scholars, Bunge (eds. Bunge, Fretheim & Gaventa 2008) is of the opinion that they neglected the themes of children and childhood. She also wrote the following:

[T]hey have rarely focused their attention directly on references to children and childhood and uses of child-related terms in the Bible. Furthermore, they have not explored how attention to children might shed light on other significant aspects of biblical texts. (p. xv)

If this is true of the situation during the 20th century, the following question needs to be asked: Did anything changed during the 21st century?

■ Some developments in the 21st century

□ A growing awareness

It seems that, since the beginning of the 21st century, the influence of the international developments around the scholarly study of children and childhood in other scientific domains has started to influence research in theology and religious studies. A new trend of interest in children began to emerge from within theology and religious studies.

□ Academic societies

A growing number of academic societies in theological and religious studies, for example the American Academy of Religion (AAR), The American Historical Association, the Society of Church History and the Society of Christian Ethics, began including papers and discussions about children and childhood in their national meetings (Bunge 2006a:559). In 2002, the AAR started a new programme unit on Childhood Studies and Religion (Bunge 2006a:559). According to their web site, they have the following aim:

The aim of this group is to investigate the complex and multifaceted relations between religion and childhood, in all their historical, cultural, ethnographic, psychological, ethical, theological, spiritual, gender, class, ethnicity, race, and other dimensions.⁹ (n.p.)

The group has the following goals:

Providing a forum for focused interdisciplinary and interreligious dialogue about the diverse relationships between children and religion.

Heightening academic interest in childhood studies in all fields represented in the AAR.

Preparing scholars in religious studies to contribute to wider academic discussions about children and childhoods.

9. <http://childhoodreligion.com/>

Enriching teaching in all areas of religious studies to include attention to children's agency and diversity.

Lending the voice of the academy to current questions of public policy and child advocacy.¹⁰ (n.p.)

Another initiative was the establishment in 2008 of a programme unit on Children in the Biblical World as part of the work of The Society of Biblical Literature (Bunge 2011:17). According to their website¹¹, this programme unit explores the child characters in the Bible and the lives of children in the ancient world. It also attends to how children in the post-biblical world were affected by biblical texts.

At the biannual conference of the International Society of Empirical Research in Theology in 2012, children and religion received much attention. It was held at Nijmegen with the theme 'The concept of religion: Defining and measuring contemporary beliefs and practices'¹². One of the keynotes, delivered by Friedrich Schweitzer of the University of Tübingen, focussed on the theme 'Religious development: Concept and method in studying religion in childhood and adolescence'. A few of the collegial sessions also focussed on aspects of the relationship between children and religion. Some of the themes discussed were the following:

Spirituality and school leadership in private Catholic schools in South Africa.

Religiousness from late childhood to adolescence – the image of God amongst Finnish 6th, 8th and 9th graders.

Assessing pupil attitudes toward religious diversity: the distinctive contribution of church-related schools.

Measuring the contribution of Anglican schools to students' religious, personal and social values.

10. <http://childhoodreligion.com/>

11. https://www.sbl-site.org/meetings/Congresses_ProgramUnits.aspx?MeetingId=25

12. <http://www.isert.info/earlierconferences/2012-nijmegen/>

Measuring the contribution of independent Christian schools to students' religious, personal and social values.

Storytelling in school-organisations.¹³ (n.p.)

Empirical research on theology and children is sorely needed. Hopefully, more and more theologians, and not only from the discipline of practical theology, will accept the challenge to do empirical research on children.

□ Research projects

Several research projects on religion, theology and children were also initiated. At Emory University, the Centre for the Study of Law and Religion started a project on 'The child in law, religion and society'. This project is described as follows:

[It is a]n interdisciplinary exploration of children, with focus on birth, naming, and growth; children's rights and rites; education and formation; child abuse, poverty, and homelessness; juvenile delinquency, violence, public policy responses, and reforms.¹⁴ (n.p.)

In the series 'Emory University Studies in Law and Religion', a book was published in 2011 under the editorship of Timothy P. Jackson with the title *The best love of the child: Being loved and being taught to love as the first human right*. It is described as follows:

This volume offers a comparative analysis of the 'best interest of the child' principle in law and the 'best love of the child' principle in theology and the social sciences, with an argument that the first right of the child is the right to be loved and to learn to love others.¹⁵ (n.p.)

13. <http://www.isert.info/earlierconferences/2012-nijmegen/>

14. <http://cslr.law.emory.edu/research/the-child-in-law-religion-and-society/>

15. <http://cslr.law.emory.edu/publications/publication/title/the-best-love-of-the-child-in-theological-ethical-and-legal-perspectives/>

Another important research project also focussing on children and religion, and based at Valparaiso University, is ‘The child in religion and ethics’ project. According to their web site, the aim of this project is the following:

[T]o strengthen theological and ethical understandings of children and our obligations to them, thereby enabling theologians and ethicists to contribute more effectively to contemporary discourse on children within religious communities, the academy, and the public sphere.¹⁶ (n.p.)

The project was directed by Marcia J. Bunge, and under her leadership, at least two very important academic books were published: *The child in Christian thought* and *The child in the Bible* (cf. the section on academic books below).

□ Academic journals

This new academic interest in religion, theology and children and childhood is also reflected in the publication of more and more articles on these topics in academic journals (cf. Andersen *et al.* 2003; Berryman 2007; Blevins 2008; Csinos 2007; Frambach 2005; Knoetze 2015; Mountain 2011; Noval 2013; Orsi 2002; Salvesen 2006; Thatcher 2006; Traina 2001; Wall 2004, 2007). Some journals dedicated whole issues to these topics, for example *Theology Today* 56(4), 2000¹⁷; *Interpretation* 55(2), 2001¹⁸; *Conservative Judaism* 53(4), 2001; *Christian Reflection*, 2003¹⁹; *The Living Pulpit* 12(4), 2003; *Journal of Christian Education* 47, 2004; *Sewanee Theological Review* 48(1), 2004; *African Ecclesial Review*

16. <http://www.valpo.edu/childreligionethics/>

17. <http://tj.sagepub.com/content/56/4.toc>

18. <http://int.sagepub.com/content/55/2.toc>

19. <http://www.baylor.edu/ifl/christianreflection/index.php?id=14742>

46(2), 2004; *Journal of Religion* 86(4), 2006; *Handelingen* (1), 2008²⁰ and *Handelingen* (4), 2015²¹. In 2010, a new free electronic journal, the *Journal of Childhood and Religion*, was launched. It ‘provides an interdisciplinary forum for scholars representing a wide range of research fields, interests, and perspectives that relate to children and religion’.²²

Most of the articles published in these different journals are theoretically orientated and not based on empirical research. A search in the *Journal of Empirical Theology*²³ for articles based on empirical research with children did not find many articles fitting this category. The following two articles are the most relevant for the topic of this chapter:

- An article by Kay and Ray (2004) about the influence of age and gender in the forming of a child’s concept of God. They analysed the drawings of 135 children, aged between 4 and 11, in a Church of England primary school. Their conclusion was that the influence of gender should receive more attention in religious education.
- Another article by Dubiski, Maull and Schweitzer (2012) focuses on how children in a multi-religious context deal with the differences between religions. They interviewed 140 children (mean age 4.9 years) who attended kindergartens in Germany. They present their findings about aspects like the knowledge, experience and attitude of

20. <http://www.handelingen.com/index.php/jaargangen/30-2008-jaargang-35/87-2008-1-theologiseren-met-kinderen>

21. <http://www.handelingen.com/index.php/jaargangen/2015/178-2015-4-theologiseren-met-kinderen>

22. <http://www.childhoodandreligion.com>

23. <http://www.brill.com/journal-empirical-theology>

the children who are exposed to different religions in their context. They gave special attention to how children perceived God, or rather different Gods.

□ Academic books

The growing interest in the religious and theological importance of children came also to the fore in the publication of a growing number of important academic books since the beginning of the 21st century. Relevant chapters were also published in books which were not solely devoted to this topic (cf. Allen 2008; Blevins 2012; Brown 2012; Bunge 2004, 2006b, 2012a, 2012b; Campagnola 2004; Crabtree 2008; Dodd 2012; Dorf 2012; Issler 2004; Jeyaraj 2009a, 2009b; Korneck 2012; Mercer 2006; Shire 2006; Sisemore 2008; Stonehouse 2004; Wall 2012; Werpelowski 2012). In this section, the focus will be on books and not on individual chapters in a compilation.

□ Historically orientated publications

The most important stimulus for this trend was the publication in 2001 of *The child in Christian thought*, edited by Marcia Bunge. It offers the first major survey of the history of Christian thought on children. Primarily, it examines the diversity of views regarding children and childhood expressed in the works of various theologians. In chronological sequence, it spans the New Testament Era right through to contemporary feminist thought. It includes essays on theologians like Chrysostom, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Simons, Wesley, Edwards, Schleiermacher, Bushnell, Barth and Rahner. In each chapter, the authors grapple with the question: What can this specific theologian contribute to a sound contemporary view of childhood? Various

themes and some quite controversial subjects come to the fore in these discussions. Some of them form a sort of a binding chord between the discussions. The most prominent amongst these is the notion of original sin. The various and sometimes quite opposite ways in which different theologians understood this doctrine in relationship to children emphasise how problematic this issue was through the ages. In many ways, the discourse in this book lays a foundation for developing more meaningful Christian views of childhood for our time and for dealing with the accompanying challenges for ministry with children.

In 2009, a similar work with the title *Children and the theologians: Clearing the way for grace* was published. In this work, Jerome Berryman guides us through the lives and writings of 25 theologians, grouped according to six historical periods. Each account examines what a particular theologian thought about children and the experiences upon which these views were based. A final chapter gives a cursory orientation to the contributions of six contemporary theologians of childhood: Marcia Bunge, Bonnie Miller-McLemore, Joyce Ann Mercer, David Jensen, Kristin Herzog and Martin Marty.

From this historical overview, Berryman identifies four traditions that have shaped our attitudes about children in the church. According to his analysis, Berryman (2009:8–9) labels the first three as high, low and indifferent views. The high view ‘respects children and what they can teach us about mature spirituality’. The low view ‘sees children as getting in the way of adults’. The indifferent view ‘pays them no mind for the moment because of other concerns’. The fourth view understands children ‘as a means of grace for the continuity of Christ’s presence in the church as a source of wonder and creativity’.

Berryman (2009:230) identifies himself with this last view and calls it a 'sacramental view' of children. In the last chapter of the book, he works out his proposal for a formal doctrine of children (Berryman 2009:227–256). With this publication, Berryman challenges theology and the church to revisit their theologies of childhood and to welcome children in their midst as God's graceful way to change adults into heirs of God's kingdom (Mt 18:1–5).

Two other historical works, focussing on developments in early Christianity, were also published. The first one, *When children became people: The birth of childhood in Early Christianity*, was published in 2005. In this work, Bakke focuses on the growing awareness of children in Patristic thought and in the church's developing doctrinal commitments. His research focussed primarily on answering the following two questions (Bakke 2005):

- (1) What did Christians think about children and about the nature of children, and what qualities did they ascribe to children?
- (2) What did they say about the treatment of children, and how did they treat children de facto? (p. 9)

In the process of answering these two questions, he compares the Roman and Christian attitudes towards the practices of abortion, the abandonment of infants and child prostitution, the moral upbringing and education of children and the participation of children in liturgy and church life. With this comparison, he shows that Christianity brought about significant new understandings of childhood which had positively influenced the lives of children within Christian families and church life. He shows convincingly that the early church had a remarkably high regard of children in comparison to the surrounding Greco-Roman culture.

The above publication was followed in 2009 by the work of Cornelia Horn and John Martens titled *Let the little children come to me Childhood*

and children in Early Christianity. The authors explore a vast body of early Christian literature in different languages, including the New Testament, sermons, letters, theological treatises, poetry and pedagogical manuals. They state that the goal of their research was to start ‘telling the story of children through the first six centuries of the Christian era, with a particular focus on the life, experience, and perception of children within the Christian community’ (Horn & Martens 2009:ix). The guiding question throughout the book is: How did Christianity change the lives of children in the ancient world? Different themes concerning the real world of children are addressed: family life, marriage, celibacy and asceticism, violence perpetrated against children, the role of gender in education, discipline, work in which they were involved, games they played, their place in the church and their experiences of martyrdom. This book brings to light various aspects of the lives of early Christian children and is a worthy companion of the abovementioned work by Bakke to open up the study of childhood and children in early Christianity.

Publications by the biblical sciences

The biblical sciences did not lag behind historical studies. Several publications saw the light since the beginning of the 21st century. A foundational work in this regard is *The child in the Bible*, published in 2008 under the editorship of Marcia Bunge, Terence Fretheim and Beverly Gaventa. The purpose of this anthology is to ‘provide a highly informed and focused study of biblical perspectives on children and childhood’ (eds. Bunge *et al.* 2008:xviii). Divided into three sections, 18 biblical scholars foreground the presence of children or childhood in selected biblical texts and themes. It is accompanied with a very useful introduction by Bunge on the overall theme of the book. This study of the Bible through the lens

of the child guides the reader to gain more insight into the significant role that children played in the biblical texts.

Another publication to take note of, *The children of Israel: Reading the Bible for the sake of our children* by Danna Nolan Fewell, was published in 2003. This work explores how an imaginative reading of selected biblical texts might inspire adults to take their ethical responsibility towards children more seriously. Fewell introduces a new postmodern method of reading the Bible through the eyes and needs of the marginalised children in society. She describes this reading strategy as an interruption of the text, rather than the more traditional way of just 'watching' the text. 'As a strategy of reading, interruption is a way of stopping and questioning the text – of recognizing that, ethically, something is amiss in what we are being told' (Fewell 2003:33). However, it is not only a strategy for reading. It is also a strategy for living. 'To interrupt means to question the story being told, to imagine the story being told differently, and likewise, to question one's life and to imagine life being lived differently' (Fewell 2003:34). The challenge of this interruption is to start living and acting in a new way on behalf of the marginalised and forgotten children of this world. In the first chapter of this book, Fewell discusses her approach to scripture. In the next seven chapters, she demonstrates the use of this interrupting process. This is an unsettling work, and it challenges biblical scholars to develop a credible ethical way of reading the scriptures that can create a vision and inspiration to improve our caring involvement with children.

In *Valuable and vulnerable: Children in the Hebrew Bible, especially the Elisha cycle*, Julie Faith Parker introduces another methodology of reading the biblical text for the sake of children. Parker (2013) says that her goals with this book are fourfold:

First, to help fill a void in Hebrew Bible scholarship, especially in English. Second, I will show that children were recognized as different from adults in the minds of the biblical writers. The Hebrew Bible contains awareness, and therefore concepts, of childhood. Third, this book offers and demonstrate an interpretive approach and methodology by which scholars might examine biblical stories with child characters, especially those who appear in the text briefly and are easy to bypass. Fourth, I seek to convince readers that appreciating these young characters enriches our understanding of the Hebrew Bible. (pp. 8–9)

Parker (2013:86) calls this new methodology a ‘childist’ interpretation of the text in which she combines literary insights with social-scientific evidence. She illustrates her approach by applying it to the Elisha cycle and its 49 child characters. By doing so, she demonstrates clearly that children played critical roles in the world of the text and actually shaped the stories of the biblical writers.

In 2013, Laurel W. Koepf-Taylor, in *Give me children or I shall die: Children and communal survival in biblical literature*, added another perspective on the biblical texts about children. She (Koepf-Taylor 2013) states that her approach is as follows:

[A] child-centred interpretation of several texts from the Hebrew Bible, pointing to the impact attention to children and childhood can have on contemporary readers’ understanding of the ancient context of this powerful cultural text. My goal in doing this is to reveal how attention to the particular understandings of childhood as essential aspects of ancient and modern life can help scholars avoid projecting anachronistic assumptions onto the ancient texts that are our focus. (loc. 100–104)

With this ‘child-centred socio-historical hermeneutics’, Koepf-Taylor (2013:loc. 104–106) uses childhood studies as her tool to engage with the text. Using the notion of childhood as a social construct, she emphasises the changing value of children over time and try to establish what the biblical text wanted to communicate by using children as literary device in its own context. She illustrates her approach by contrasting the notion of childhood in the subsistence-agricultural

environment of Israel where child labour was important for the survival of the community with privileged Western contexts which see children as dependents. With this study, Koepf-Taylor convincingly shows how important it is to take the ancient constructions of childhood into consideration when reading the Bible within modern contexts.

In another work published in 2013, *Kids and Kingdom: The precarious presence of children in the Synoptic Gospels*, James Murphy focuses on Jesus' healing narratives and his teachings that involved children. He pays attention to texts like 'The child in the midst' (Mk 9:36–37 and parallels), 'One of these little ones' (Mk 9:42 and parallels), and 'Let the young children come to Me' (Mk 10:13–16 and parallels). These texts are compared with the sayings of Jesus which relativised family ties and also the lifestyle indicative of Jesus' radical call to discipleship. Through a deconstructive literary approach, Murphy (2013) highlights the tension and ambiguity between these two groups of texts as follows:

[T]he inclusion of non-adult children in the kingdom of God presented in the Synoptic narratives is tempered by images of household disruption and alienation of children as a consequence of Jesus' eschatological gathering of followers depicted in these three gospels. (loc. 117–120)

Although the tensions between these texts are not resolved, the discussion demonstrates how important it is to make children visible in our interpretation of biblical texts. Murray also succeeds in this study to enhance our concern for the issues surrounding children in our world.

Another important book, *The Bible and children in Africa*, was published in 2014 under the editorship of Lovemore Tongarasei and Joachim Kügler. It was published as part of the series *Bible in Africa Studies* of the University of Bamberg Press. This series evolved from

conferences on the use of the Bible in African Christianity, organised by Joachim Kügler. In 2012, the topic of the Bible and children in Africa was addressed at a conference held at the University of Botswana in Gaborone. The focus was on two main perspectives (eds. Tongarasei & Kugler 2014:7), namely children in the Bible and African children of today and the Bible.

The papers presented at that conference form part of this publication. It is an attempt to ‘help develop ways child theology is to be understood and practiced today’ (eds. Tongarasei & Kügler 2014:7). Therefore, these contributions made a serious attempt to discover what the Bible says about children. In some of them, important markers for an African theology of childhood are indicated. In this regard, Tongarasei and Kügler (2014) make the following important remark:

[W]e must recognize that there is a development within the Bible and have to decide which kind of biblical child concept is more helpful for us and our children. And we have to learn that some of the texts in the Bible are not meant to teach us how to act, but to tell us what we should *not* do and how we should *not* see and understand things. This hermeneutical problem since long is debated in feminist biblical studies but it seems quite new in child theology. (p. 9)

Because of the fact that the series *Bible in Africa Studies* uses a contextual approach to scripture, this publication addresses serious issues in connection with the settings in which children live in Africa today. Amongst them are chapters on the interaction of the Old Testament and Shona traditions on children; the Bible, Africa and family planning; and our biblical responsibility towards the effects of migration on families and children in Namibia (eds. Tongarasei & Kügler 2014:5, 9–10).

The most important contribution of this publication is that it expresses, for the first time in one volume, a diversity of African voices on child theologies and theologies of childhood from a biblical perspective.

Publications on theologies of childhood

Another important group of publications pay attention to the construction of theologies of childhood.

In 2003, the book *Let the children come: Re-imagining childhood from a Christian perspective* written by Bonnie Miller-McLemore, was published. In this publication, Miller-McLemore struggles with the question about the characteristics of faithful Christian parenting in a complex postmodern society. In trying to find a solution, she (Miller-McLemore 2003) came to the realisation that she has to attend to the following important questions:

What are the dominant cultural perceptions of children, including religious perceptions, with which parents much deal? Are there better alternatives? How should people rightfully view children in a time of great transiution and turmoil? (pp. xix–xx).

In attending to these questions, she expresses the opinion that new visions of childhood are necessary that take seriously her main thesis that ‘children must be fully respected as persons, valued as gifts, and viewed as agents’ (Miller-McLemore 2003:xxiii). According to Miller-McLemore (2003), this can only be achieved under the following conditions:

[W]hen religious communities help by supporting these visions, and when care for children is viewed as a practice of the entire community, not simply of parents or mothers alone. Child rearing and responsibility for how children are viewed belong to all Christians. (pp. xxiii–xxiv)

In this publication, one of Miller-McLemore’s important contributions is that she gives a clear description of how adults think about children in a postmodern society as well as a prescriptive view of how adults should think about children.

Two years later, Joyce Ann Mercer (2005), writing from a feminist practical-theological perspective and relying on Reformed theology, published the book *Welcoming children: A practical theology of childhood*. Mercer (2005) states that she aimed to achieve the following with this book:

This book is my search for a child-affirming theology and for a church that genuinely welcomes children, cares about their well-being, and advocates for them in situations in which they are marginalized or harmed. (p. ix)

In this search Mercer (2005) embarks on a journey to answer the following four questions:

[W]hat is the theological meaning of childhood? How can the church best affirm and celebrate God's gift of children amidst all the complexities and difficulties they bring? What practices of our faith communities will support and nurture children to grow in Christian faith that rather liberates than oppresses? And how can we advocate for the well-being of children oppressed by violence, poverty, and the absence of caring adults in their lives? (p. x)

In the process of finding answers to these questions, Mercer's (2005) central theoretical argument is that, in the consumer culture in which we live, children are predominantly seen as consumers. Her (Mercer 2005) opinion is that

Christian theology can offer an alternative vision of the meaning of childhood. This vision will provide alternative practices that compose a way of life for children and for adults who accompany them. (p. 5)

After explaining her way of doing theology of childhood in Chapter 1 (Mercer 2005:1–42), Mercer unpacks her central theoretical argument in five chapters. In the last chapter, she draws together her arguments by formulating her explorations into the following five theological commitments (Mercer 2005):

1. Parenting is a deeply religious practice of gift stewardship, involving care and nurture of children as divine gift.

2. Welcoming children means welcoming those who care for them.
3. Children are already fully human, whole yet broken people.
4. Children are part of the purposes of God, given to the world and the church so that God may be welcomed.
5. The suffering of children must be acknowledged and addressed, as Christ's church seeks its transformation so that children may flourish. (p. 244)

In formulating her emancipatory theology of childhood, she challenges parents and congregations to see children in a new way: through the eyes of God. As signs of hope in our churches and societies and as a means of welcoming God in our lives and religious practices, we are challenged to embrace children in radical new ways in our lives and in all the ministries of the church.

In 2005, another important addition to the growing literature on theology of childhood was the publication of *Graced vulnerability: A theology of childhood*, written by David H. Jensen. Jensen (2005:xii) states that his intention is to provide 'an inclusive theology of childhood that provides the basis for an ecclesial ethic of care for all children'. His emphasis is especially on the vulnerability of children. In making his case, Jensen's unique contribution is his perspective that vulnerability is a dimension of the *imago Dei*. Therefore, we have to take care of children through practising vulnerability (Jensen 2005:12). By living out vulnerability with children, our comprehension of 'what it means to be created in God's image and what it means to be church' (Jensen 2005:12) will grow. Jensen (2005) elaborates on his view by stating the following:

The difference of each child lends light on the differently created creatures we are called to be. By paying attention to children's lives, which are threatened on many sides by the violence of war, poverty, the sex trade, and domestic abuse, the church offers its own distinctive practices – peace making, baptism, sanctuary, and prayer – that care for children in a broken world. These postures, moreover,

remind us that the One whom we profess as Savior, became vulnerable for our sake. (p. 12)

With this contribution, Jensen gives a reinterpretation of sin, church practice and especially of our witness amidst the global suffering of children. Hereby, he *challenges* the church to develop and live by an ethic of care towards the vulnerable children of this world.

In the same year, the book *Children and our global future: Theological and social challenges*, written by the independent scholar Kristin Herzog (2005), was published. Herzog (2005) states that her goal with this book is to:

[U]rge ... theologians and interested lay people in churches, schools, and universities to take children seriously in the construction of theology and in our life as people of faith and conscience. (p. 1)

In arguing her case, she wrote eight chapters. She starts with discussing the historical neglect of children by theology and highlights the growing attention that children are receiving in other disciplines. In the second chapter, she looks into the challenges that our tradition poses. Herzog (2005:22) is of the opinion that any form of 'Christian activism will remain shallow if it is not rooted in the biblical witness and empowered by its spiritual energy...'. By studying the Bible, Herzog (2005:39) identifies the following three perspectives on children which are important to take cognisance of when thinking about theologies of childhood: 'children as worthy of blessing and caressing, as models of our relationship with God, and as representatives of Godself.' In the following chapter, she (Herzog 2005:51–70) opens herself to other religious traditions and especially pays attention to how children are depicted in religious art and stories. In Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, Herzog (2005:71–120) reflects on exploitive practices against children throughout the world with regard to the global economy and child poverty as well as civil wars and violence against children. She (Herzog 2005:121–142) turns in Chapter 6 to the task of the

churches, emphasising the importance of welcoming children. In the following chapter, Herzog (2005:143–160) attends to the challenges of welcoming the children of the ‘third world’ by using the Methodist church in Peru as case study. The recognition of the importance of the agency of children in global change is discussed in Chapter 8 (Herzog 2005:161–171). With this work, Herzog challenges the church and theology to take seriously Jesus’ words to welcome the children in our lives, to not just care for children but to listen attentively to children, to allow children to be God’s agents of transformation and justice in our lives and to learn from them. When we start doing this, it will change our lives and theology for the better.

The work *Children of God: Towards a theology of childhood*, edited by Angela Shier-Jones and published in 2007, is a collection of nine essays written by different authors from the United Kingdom. The topics they address are diverse and bring together a rich mosaic of different perspectives on theology and childhood. These topics are approached as a dialogue between theology and 21st-century biological and social sciences with ‘the deliberate intention of opening up theological questions rather than closing them down’ (ed. Shier-Jones 2007:xvii). In opening up these questions, she (ed. Shier-Jones 2007) states that the authors took into consideration the chronological order of human development:

Thus from expectancy we move to birth, from birth to babe in arms, and from thence to that most mysterious stage of being educated and more obviously ‘related to’. Delinquency and adolescence are not synonymous although they do share some characteristics, they are therefore dealt with as a twinned pair before we move to consider the effect of all of this on the child in adulthood. The volume thus concludes with an exploration of the interdependence of biological and spiritual childhood and asks whether or not the children of God can ever grow up, and what they would become if they did. (pp. xii–xiii)

The different contributions succeed in engaging in a theological compelling way with the many challenges that come to the fore in this chronological developmental approach. However, it also makes clear the complexity of the engagement of theology of childhood with biology, sociology and culture, which contributes to our current understanding of childhood. In a certain sense, it stresses how difficult it is for even us as adults to study and gain understanding of and insight into all these complexities.

Published in 2013 under title *The search for a theology of childhood*, Brendan Hyde compiled in one collection different essays, in total 15, written by Jerome W. Berryman between 1978 and 2009. It represents Berryman's thinking over a period of 30 years. Berryman²⁴ became well known for developing the scripture-based Godly Play approach to the religious education of children, based on the principles of the Montessori tradition.

The book is structured around five themes that Hyde identified in Berryman's writings. The first section focuses on Maria Montessori's approach to and method of religious education. The first two chapters investigate the creative use of symbols, images, structure and rules in Montessori's method. This section concludes with a chapter on Sonia Cavalleti's writings on the religious potential of the child which have also had a huge influence on Berryman's views on religious education. The next section includes three essays on the use of language in the religious education of children. It is followed by a section revolving around children's spirituality and religious education. The fourth section consists of essays focussing on the role of play and imagination in the creative process of

24. Cf. <http://www.godlyplayfoundation.org/>

religious education. The last section contains essays on ethical aspects involved in working with children.

Although these essays were written over a time span of 30 years, they are as relevant for religious educators today as when they were written. For people involved with Godly Play, these essays are very helpful. They are, however, also much more. They provide much insight for anyone that is involved with religious education and/or interested in theologies of childhood. The value of the book is enhanced by the very good introduction and the prefaces to each section written by Hyde. Key features of Berryman's thinking and work are underlined, and this information and background are beneficial for the reader.

Another important book in this category is Edmund Newey's (2012) *Children of God: The child as source of theological anthropology*. Newey states that the intention of his book is 'to explore a theological anthropology of the child – or rather a series of such anthropologies' (Newey 2012:loc. 307–308). Originally Newey (2012:loc. 497–498) was interested in investigating how Thomas Traherne and Charles Péguy used images of the child in their work. Later on, he decided to broaden his study and added the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Friedrich Schleiermacher. In each case, Newey (cf. 2012:loc. 221, 284, 297) strives to conduct a close theological reading of the child figure they imagine in their work. His research is guided by two questions: 'who is the child?' and 'where is the child?'

The first question is an intratextual question and necessitates a close reading of each author's texts. With this question, the goal is to clarify 'the particular ways in which they configure the child' (Newey 2012:loc. 340) and 'what imaginative work the author's particular figuring effects' (Newey 2012:loc. 535–536). The second question is intertextual, and it is 'concerned

with the networks of understanding’ (Newey 2012:loc. 340) or ‘the “social imaginaries” that nurture the particular pictures of the child’ (Newey 2012:loc. 540). Newey (2012) states the following:

In investigating the presuppositions that lie behind the different configurations of the child, the focus broadens to illuminate the place of the child in each writer’s wider cultural and theological context. (loc. 542)

Structured around these two questions, Newey discusses the theological anthropology of the child in the works of Traherne, Péguy, Rousseau and Schleiermacher, and in the process, he identifies the continuities and differences between them and how these influenced the broad structure of their theology.²⁵ In the concluding chapter, he (Newey 2012:loc. 618) discusses these findings in the light of contemporary theology.

A last book to mention in this section is the innovative book by Fiona Gardner (2015) with the title *The only mind worth having: Thomas Merton and the child mind*. The title of this work came from Merton’s belief that the child mind is ‘the only mind worth having’ (Gardner 2015:loc. 92). Using her skills as both psychotherapist and theologian, Gardner explores in this book the meaning of this belief of Merton. She attends to it especially in the light of Jesus’ invitation in the Gospels to change and become like a child. In the process, Gardner (2015:loc. 290–291) takes the reader on a journey of ‘becoming’. In the first part, the focus is on understanding, and therefore, she explores in Chapters 2–6 ‘the basic elements involved in the child mind and the different perspectives used in the book’. In the second section, Chapters 7–10, Gardner (2015:loc. 333–335) looks into ‘the process of re-finding the spirit of the child’, discussing practical ways of doing it. In the last section, Chapters 11–15, she discusses the process of becoming. ‘The emphasis shifts away from the person’s understanding the child mind

25. Cf. http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B00AFB177Y?ref_=kin_pc_dp

concept (Part 1) and re-finding it (Part 2), and turns to centring attention on the enchanted world itself' (Gardner 2015:loc. 365–368). The book concludes with an afterword.

With this book, Gardner does not only make an important contribution to our understanding of Merton's theology but also to our understanding of the meaning of Jesus' invitations to change and to become like a child. She confronts us with the necessity of finding the child mind as the only way towards spiritual maturity in adulthood. In an imaginative way she guides us on the path of 'becoming'.

Publications on the agency and voices of children

One of the crucial questions in child theology is how to involve children in doing theology to prevent that child theology ends up being only adults who are theologising about children. All too often, children's agency and voices are ignored in the church and in doing theology. In this regard, two interesting and important theological books were published, stressing the importance of hearing and taking into account children's voices in doing theology.

A first resource focussing on this topic, commissioned to mark the 30th anniversary of the United Nations Year of the Child, is *Through the eyes of a child: New insights in theology from a child's perspective*, edited by Anne Richards and Peter Privett (2009). The book begins with a chapter focussing on our society's changing view of what a child is, followed by an exploration of the nakedness and vulnerability of the child in the 21st century. Thereafter, 12 different theological themes are discussed from the perspectives of children: Creation, spirituality, word, play, sin, forgiveness, grace, salvation, death, judgement, angels, and heaven and hell (eds. Richards & Privett. 2009:v–vi). To look through the eyes of

children in doing theology is a daunting task and usually an experience that takes you right out of your comfort zone. The challenge is to present the views of children without being influenced by your own views as researcher:

This is not an easy intellectual or emotional exercise but takes a particular kind of discipline which is actually unknown in many other kinds of theological discourse. A certain kind of restraint has to be exercised which allows the children to express themselves without re-interpretation, explanation or dismissal of what apparently make no sense. (p. xxi)

The contributions fall into two types: Some of the contributions build on empirical research done amongst children and contain content which has been provided by children themselves. The other contributions rework a theological theme from the perspective of adults, imagining that they look through the eyes of children at this specific theme. Each chapter concludes with questions for reflection or discussion, and each of the five sections concludes with multi-generational activities to stimulate reflection.

All the chapters are excellent additions to child theology. It does not only help us to look afresh at the theological themes discussed, but it also challenges us to allow the presence of children to influence our own theologising. Not all the chapters succeed in looking ‘through the eyes of children’. Some of them reflect a distinctly adult view in their concerns and the presentation of their arguments. It seems that, in order to enter theology through the eyes of a child, we shall have to spend much more time with children and listen very carefully to their voices.

After an international research seminar at the Catholic University at Leuven in Belgium, held in 2007 on *Children’s voices: Children’s perspectives in ethics, theology and religious education*, a book with the

same title was published in 2010 under the editorship of Annemie Dillen and Didier Pollefeyt. They state that, with this book, they tried to enhance the academic discourse on children and theology (eds. Dillen & Pollefeyt 2010):

Thereby we hope to make clear that classical Christian theology may benefit by taking seriously the voices of children and reflections about children. The volume tries to show that nuanced and interdisciplinary reflection can be relevant for Christian and social practices of adults with children and that these practices can influence theology. (p. 4)

Dillen and Pollefeyt (ed. 2010) identify three main questions for the authors to reflect on in their essays. They are the following:

1. Why is it important that we 'hear the voices' of children and what does this mean for how we treat and have relationships with children?
2. What would the 'voices of children' express? How do children experience society and, in particular, religion, and what do they have to say about it?
3. What do the 'voices of children' mean for theology, ethics and religious education? In what way can our theology change when we look at it from the perspective of children? (pp. 4–5)

They provided the authors with four main categories (with 17 sub-questions) which challenged them to explore the nature and status of children; their participation in family, church and society; relationships between children and theology and the implications of the biblical notion of children as 'models of faith' for religious education (eds. Dillen & Pollefeyt 2010:5–7). These essays were published in the following five sections (eds. Dillen & Pollefeyt 2010:vii–ix):

- Children's voices and theological reflection.
- (Re)Thinking Christian sources about children.
- Children in family and society: pedagogical reflections and ethical responsibilities.
- Family life, praying with children, parental responsibilities.

- (Nurturing) Spirituality of children.

This book is a valuable stimulus to the conversation about theology and children. It includes worthy contributions concerning the theoretical insights of contemporary scholars on including children's voices in doing theology. However, the strong point of this publication is also its weakness. With a few exclusions, the voices of the children themselves are not heard. This publication could have gained by including scholars who had done empirical research with children.

Publications in the religion, marriage and family series

Three publications in this series, under the editorship of Don Browning, are worthy of note.

The first one, written by Martin Marty (2007), was published under the title *The mystery of the child*. Right at the beginning, Marty (2007) presents his thesis for the book clearly:

[T]he provision of care for children will proceed on a radically revised and improved basis if instead of seeing the child first as a problem faced with a complex of problems, we see her as mystery surrounded by mystery. (p. 1)

Drawing on poets, philosophers, theologians and scientists, he discusses in great depth his understanding of wonder and mystery. In nine chapters, he explores the meaning of care, control, mystery and wonder as it relates to the child and attempts to apply the principals identified in some specific contexts. Central to Marty's argumentation is his understanding that childhood is not just a specific phase in the development of a person, which you leave behind at a certain stage. Childhood is for him rather an attitude of openness and receptivity throughout life. At the beginning of his last chapter, Marty (2007) states:

Readers of a book titled *The Mystery of the Child* have no reason to expect it to end with reference to aging and aged people. Such a conclusion should not occasion

surprise, however, because I have consistently argued that something about the being of the child keeps unfolding through all the years in healthy humans. (p. 231)

According to Marty (2007:233–237), the aim of life is not entering into a ‘second childhood’ but rather obtaining what he calls ‘childness’. He (Marty:2007) explains ‘childness’ as follow:

Childness is a condition that is not to be monopolized by infants and little children. Childness is a quality that people of any age can embody, so long as they remain in positive relation to others. When applied to senior people, the concept of childness illustrates and illumines ‘the mystery of the child’. (p. 237)

Marty’s challenge to all people of all ages is to wonder continuously about a life that does not move past childhood but embraces the mystery of ‘childness’ in young and old alike.

As part of the abovementioned series, jurist Patrick Brennan (2008) edited the book *The vocation of the child*. Brennan (2008:x) brought together a variety of scholars from different disciplines such as history, education, spirituality, theology, philosophy, ethics and law but also from different theological traditions, namely Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox, to grapple with this theme. Although their conclusions vary widely, they agree amongst themselves that the idea of children’s vocation offers a corrective to a rights-based approach concerning the status of children. In the discussions, it becomes clear that, in light of the vulnerability of children, the vital question is: ‘Can adults help or hinder a child’s vocation to become and to be a moral, spiritual person?’ (Brennan 2008:x). Or framed in another way: ‘Are we adults capable of squandering our children’s vocations? Alternatively, can we help them discover and realize their vocations?’ (Brennan 2008:2) In wrestling with this theme, a variety of subjects are addressed such as sin, innocence, baptism, play, work, children’s education and parent-child relations and responsibilities.

The essays in the book are divided into four sections. In the first section, ‘The vocation, calling, or office of a child’, the scriptural and philosophical evidence for a theology of the vocation of a child is explored. In the following section, ‘Innocence, depravity, and hope for the freedom of the child’, the focus is on Augustine and Aquinas as sources for understanding the vocation of the child. The third section consists of essays discussing ‘The rights, duties, and work of the child’. The last section, ‘Deciding who the child will become’, attends to becoming as a central concept in the understanding of vocation and stresses that education plays an important role in children’s becoming.

With this publication, the new and important dimension of children’s vocation is brought to the discussions on children and theology. It leans more to a theoretical discussion of the theme rather than giving practical answers for implementing the implications of this theoretical basis. It is appropriate because it is only in conversation with the children in their own context that practical answers can be found.

The third book to take cognisance of in this section is *The sins of the fathers: The law and theology of illegitimacy reconsidered* (Witte 2009). Witte, the director of the Centre for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University in Atlanta, is a pre-eminent writer on law and religion in the Western world. From a theological, historical and legal perspective, he explores, analyses and critiques what he calls the ‘paradoxes of illegitimacy’ (Witte 2009:1) in a rigorous way. In the process, he clearly identifies the major developments in the law and theology of illegitimacy. With an introduction and conclusion, he discusses this important theme in five chapters. It covers illegitimacy in early Judaism and Christianity; the classical Roman law on legitimacy and legitimation; sex, marriage and sin in medieval canon law; the

English Common Law and its reforms and the new law of non-marital childhood in the USA and beyond (cf. Witte 2009:vii). In his concluding reflections, Witte (2009:167–184) shares a vision of the reforms he deems necessary.

A central element of Witte's book is his severe critique of the misreading of biblical texts on illegitimacy, which led to discrimination against and the deprivation of children by the law, especially in medieval times. It was not until the beginning of the 20th century that, under the influence of the human-rights movement, this unjust attitude and actions started to give way in both theology and secular law. Although this is true, Witte concedes that the generally existing indifference to children born outside of marriage continues the negative attitude towards illegitimate children. He (Witte 2009) declares:

The ancient angel's description of Ishmael's bane still seems altogether too apt a prediction of the plight of the modern illegitimate child: 'He will be a wild ass of a man, his hand will be against every man and every man's hand against him; and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen' (Gen. 16:11–12). (p. 175)

Therefore, Witte pleads with civil and religious communities to enhance parental responsibility towards their children and to give more support to families and, where parents fail, to care for their children by giving more attention to the possibilities of adoption as a way of taking care of these children. Regardless of their birth status, children need protection and respect for their dignity and rights.

Overall, this book conveys an important message about illegitimacy and challenges the church and theology to pay more attention to the plight of these children.

Publications by the Child Theology Movement (CTM)

At a Cutting Edge conference, organised by Viva Network at De Bron in 2001, a compilation was made of more than 200 hard questions asked by

or about children (White 2010:47–58). Some of these questions were the following:

- Why should we forgive parents who abandoned us?, the children ask. (p. 49)
- Why is there different approaches in handling children in the Old and New Testament? (p. 50)
- How is it that God is the protector, defender, provider and I have been/ am abused, homeless, broken, violated?, signed by a 10-year old street child. (p. 51)
- What is the church’s responsibility to children? (p. 52)
- How do you help girls abused by fathers, brothers, and men understand God as a loving father? (p. 53)
- How can God love the paedophile as much the abused child? (p. 54)
- If God loves children so much, why does He allow them to suffer so much? (p. 55)
- Why wasn’t I born in the US or Canada? (p. 56)
- Why does a child have to die of AIDS at just 9-months old? How do we pray for such a child? (p. 56)

A group of people under the guidance of Keith White started to work on these questions. This led to a consultation in Penang, Malaysia, and the establishment of the Child Theology Movement (CTM) in 2002. The vision of CTM is as follows:

[T]o reform all theological reflection and enquiry ‘with a child in the midst’ and to ensure that theology of this kind informs every aspect of the church’s life and mission, including that which relates to children.²⁶ (n.p.)

The initial consultation was followed up with different consultations all over the world.²⁷ At these consultations, participants developed an

26. <http://www.childtheology.org/about-ctm/>

27. Cf. <http://www.childtheology.org/about-ctm/>

experimental way of doing child theology together (cf. Willmer 2007). Collier (ed. 2006) states the following about this process:

As an experiment it is a learning process, adventure into the unknown to discover whatever is there. It is not an instructive, didactic process *per se*. The essential ingredient in the experiment, what makes it an experiment not an instruction, is to put a child, by imagination, in the centre of a working group, who are in a significant, practical theological argument. (p. 10)

These experiments are usually divided into three main stages (White 2010:159–160). In the first stage, each member of the group has to formulate, according to their own understanding, the key aspects of the theological theme under discussion. The second stage asks of the participants to listen carefully to a child placed in their midst. White (2010) explains this stages as follows:

This part of the experiment does not require actual children in the midst: it can involve acts of imagination, stories, and the sharing of the personal experiences of children and childhood in a particular culture. (p. 159)

In the third phase, the group re-examines their original understanding of the theological theme under discussion.

Using this experimental process, key theological topics such as sin (ed. Collier 2004:17–20), mission (ed. Collier 2007:28–36), creation (Collier 2008:17–21), salvation (ed. Collier 2009a:16–21) and ecclesiology (ed. Collier 2009b:15–24) were explored. Reports of most of these consultations were published by CTM.²⁸ A book with the title *Toddling to the Kingdom* (ed. Collier 2009c), which is a compilation of extracts from the different consultation reports, was also published.

With Marcia Bunge as editor, CTM also started to publish a series, *Key topics on child theology*. The goal of these publications are to explain ‘the idea and the process of Child Theology as it has been developed since 2001

28. Cf. <http://www.childtheology.org/blog/category/consultation-reports/>

in the Child Theology Movement' (Willmer 2007:3). The series already contains the following four publications:

- *An introduction to child theology* (White & Willmer 2006).
- *Experimenting together: One way of doing child theology* (Willmer 2007).
- *Child theology for the churches in Asia: An invitation* (Tan 2007).
- *Child theology in the African context* (Grobbelaar 2012).

These resources are not meant to be prescriptive for doing child theology. They are rather an invitation by the Child Theology Movement to become partners in the exiting journey of exploring an old genre of theology with new enthusiasm and perceptiveness (cf. Berryman 2007:103).

Two of the directors of CTM, Haddon Willmer and Keith White²⁹ published the book *Entry point: Towards child theology with Matthew 18* in 2013. At the outset, they (Willmer & White 2013) declare:

This book is the outcome of a sustained conversation on the text of Matthew 18:1–14. It is however neither a critical commentary nor pure exegesis. It is rather an essay, venturing ideas... (p. 11)

They take the gospel text and build their seven chapters in an unconstrained way around the central concepts in this passage: child, kingdom, temptation, disciple, humility, reception and father (Willmer & White 2013:15–17). In the concluding chapter, Willmer and White (2013:207–215) summarise in eight points what they have learned in their conversation with Matthew 18 and amongst themselves over more than a dozen years. There is much to learn from this book and to take forward in our searching for new insights into the kingdom of God where children are in the midst. It is also an open invitation to join the

29. Cf. directors and personnel – <http://www.childtheology.org/about-ctm/>

authors on this journey. This invitation is best captured in their own words (Willmer & White 2013):

What we have written is not a confessional statement of what the Child Theology Movement stands for, but is written within the vision what CTM is: a fellowship of thinking and active disciples exploring the gospel seed and sign of the child placed in the midst by Jesus ... It is now handed over, not to be judged kindly or adversely but to be used according to the best critical and constructive capabilities of readers. It leaves much to be completed and much to be bettered. (pp. 214–215)

Publications by the Global Alliance for Holistic Child Development

In May 2007, a consultation was held in Chiang Mai, Thailand, involving Bible and theology schools and Christian academic institutions already presenting or interested in academic programmes in holistic child development. At this consultation, the Global Alliance for advancing Holistic Child Development training programmes were established. On their webpage,³⁰ this alliance is described as follows:

[A] voluntary group of seminaries, Bible schools, and other Christian academic institutions working together with researchers, trainers, practitioners, and other Christian leaders to create a global movement of academic programs in holistic child development (HCD). (n.p.)

In various parts of the world, a variety of certificate and diploma programmes, master's degrees and even PhDs in HCD have already been established. This development led to the publication of various resources to enhance this field of study, it includes the following:

- *Child, church and mission* (Brewster 2011)
- *Introducing child theology: Theological foundations for holistic child development* (White 2010)
- *Childhoods in cultural contexts* (White 2011a).

30. <http://www.hcd-alliance.org/>

Although these books were written as handbooks for the students enrolled in the HCD programmes at the Malaysian Baptist Theological Seminary, they are important contributions as introductory texts to the study field of children and theology.

Publications on children, theology and mission

Recent times have seen a growing interest in the interconnectedness between children, theology and mission. This debate was stimulated by two important conferences focussing on this theme. The papers delivered at both conferences were published in different compilations.

With Keith White (2011b) as general editor, the first edited volume consists of the papers delivered at the *Now and next* conference held in Nairobi, Kenya, on 9–12 March 2011. Amongst the organisations organising this conference was CTM, celebrating its 10th birthday; INFEMIT, celebrating its 35th anniversary; the 4/14 Global Summit, which looked at the conference to deepen its theological and missiological roots and the Lausanne Movement, which saw the conference as a follow-up on their specific focus on children at Cape Town 2010 (cf. ed. White 2011b:1). The purpose of this international conference, as stated in the prospectus, was the following (White 2011b):

[T]o do sustained and serious theological and missiological reflection in which children and young people are seen as agents of God’s mission, and lenses through which we find, with the help of the Holy Spirit, new insights into God in Christ. We expect and pray that the conference will open the way for new streams of theological understanding of church and mission. (p. 1)

It is clear that this conference was ‘intentionally and unapologetically theological’ (ed. White 2011b:2). It started with a biblical reflection on ‘[b]iblical understandings of children and childhood: Resources for the church and mission today’, delivered by Marcia Bunge (ed. White 2011b:15–34).

After this, four main themes were addressed, and they followed a 'theologically coherent progression' (ed. White 2011:2). Each theme was addressed by a plenary, followed by three or four responses. According to White (2011b) the four themes were as follows:

Children as signs of the kingdom of God: A challenge to us all.

The church and the child: A challenge to the churches.

Child theology: A challenge to seminaries.

Children in mission: A challenge to Christian movements and organisations. (p. 3)

Containing all these themes, the publication also includes an introduction to the book (ed. White 2011b:1–13), some concluding reflections (ed. White 2011:211–218), and a conference report (ed. White 2011:219–225). It is a good representation of international thought on children and theology at that stage as it included the papers and reflections of 105 theologians, church leaders, Christian educators and mission practitioners from 28 countries across six continents, representing 35 organisations, 48 academic institutions as well as 16 alliances and networks (ed. White 2011:219). With its focus on children, this publication opens up a new field of importance in the globally academic conversation and interaction between children, theology and mission.

The second compilation exists of the papers, responses, devotions and group-discussion notes of the 4/14 Window Missiology Conference held in Seoul, Korea, on 26–28 February 2013. Under the editorship of Brewster and Baxter-Brown (2013), the volume was published with the title *Children and youth as partners in mission*.

In an introduction, the 4/14 Window missiology process is discussed, explaining all the factors leading to this conference and the goals they set

out to achieve (eds. Brewster & Baxter-Brown 2013:i–iv). The book is structured around the following three major sections:

- The purposes of God.
- The prompting of the Spirit.
- The position of Jesus.

In each section, three papers, with responses to some of them, are included. The editors provided a short introduction for each of the nine themes.

The first section starts with a meditation on Psalm 8:2. It is followed by a paper focussing on children and youth as partners in mission. The second paper gives a critical review of the modern mission movement. The last paper addresses the challenge of moving towards a new missiology by renewing our engagement in God's mission.

Section two is introduced by a devotional on the deliverance of the slave girl in Acts 16:16–38. The first paper in this section centres on discerning the work of the Holy Spirit in mission today. It is followed by a discussion of the missiological presuppositions, motives, structures and methods specific to the 4/14 Window movement. This section concludes with attending to the raising of Samuel, giving attention to releasing children to discover God's purpose.

The last section begins with a devotional on Jesus, children, church and mission. The focal point of the first paper is the process of equipping people for a new mission era. The paper explores the topics of space and community, engagement and empowerment. Children and the youth, as agents of transformation and mission, are discussed in the second paper. The third paper addresses the redeemed adult and child and the *Missio Dei* as a speaking back to missiology.

As a follow-up to the *Now and next* publication, *Children and youth as partners in mission* broadens the complicated theme of the relationship

between children, theology and mission. It emphasises the crucial importance that Jesus attached to children and the challenge to the church, theology and mission to follow Jesus in this regard. The contributors help the church, theology and mission by giving some guidance on the way to shaping a new missiology that includes children. This resource is not the last word on children, theology and mission, but it is definitely a stimulus for further exploration and reflection on this highly relevant issue for the 21st century.

The last resource to attend to in this section is the publication in the Regnum Edinburgh Centenary Series, *Theology, mission and child: Global perspectives*. It was published in 2014 with Bill Prevette, Keith White, C.R. Velloso Ewell and D.J. Konz as editors. This book can be described as a ground-breaking contribution to the field of study. It addresses in a fresh way a variety of issues in connection with theology, mission and children.

In the introduction, White (2014:3) states that there are ‘three primary and equally constituent parts to the volume’. The three parts White (2014) mentioned are the following:

A child in context.

A theologically informed understanding of the nature of the gospel.

A missiological dynamic that cannot abandon the commission of God in Christ and is therefore determined to discover what Church and Gospel mean to a real child in a specific situation. (p. 3)

These constituent parts are then worked out in six sections containing a total of 16 chapters. White identify six issues in connection with children which were taken into consideration in the authors’ theological thinking throughout the volume. They are, according to White (2014), the following:

1. Changing perspectives worldwide on children and children's rights.
2. Children as social actors and subjects who are fully human.
3. *Oikos* (household) as a primary locus of children's lives and experience.
4. Child theology.
5. Managerial missiology with the risk of instrumentalising children.
6. The three cultures of childhood: local, religious and global. (p. 4)

Issues that the authors explore include the triangle of theology, mission and child; historical perspectives on theology, mission and child; contemporary theology and practice with reference to children in Christian mission; the relationship between children and HIV/AIDS and the abuse of the child girl; children and social-justice issues; perspectives on mission and hospitality with a child in the midst; institutions and the formation of children; and raising children in religious pluralistic contexts.

This book explores in an imaginative way the triangle of theology, mission and children. It challenges the reader, whether an academic, theologian, missiologist, missionary, pastor or Christian working with children, to receive children in Jesus' name in their lives and ministry, in their theological reflections and missionary practices, in their academic work and in pastoral encounters.

■ Conclusion

The research question formulated at the beginning of this chapter has been answered. Indeed, many initiatives, driven by religious and theological academia from outside of the more traditional scholarly domains that are focussed on children in practical theology, namely religious and Christian education and family, youth and children's ministry, were undertaken to promote the development of resources on religion or theology and children in the 21st century. This discussion of available resources falls woefully

short in exploring all the wonderful contributions made in the abovementioned resources because it was also not possible to address the scope of all the material available. Nonetheless, in spite of the fact that religious studies and theology show a growing interest in children, the words of John Wall (2010b) can still be echoed:

Though the study of theology and children has come a long way in recent years, it still occupies a sequestered realm within larger theological inquiry. While no church leader or theologian today can fail to consider issues of gender, race, ethnicity, or culture, the same is not yet true for age. (p. 1)

It seems that this failure is especially true of the African continent. This book is part of initiatives to rectify this failure. May many African theologians take up the challenge to do theology with children in their midst.

The grammar of combining the vocabulary of theology, children and Africa

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■ Introduction

During my theological training, one of my lecturers made the remark that theology is nothing else than grammar: It is to learn to express yourself better and better about God and God's kingdom. It was only much later that it came to my attention that the philosopher Wittgenstein (Ambrose 2001:32) said in one of his Cambridge lectures that '[t]heology is the grammar of the word "God"'. Although Wittgenstein attributed this definition to Martin Luther, no one has yet located the text in any of

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Luther's works (Brenner 1996:453). Through the years, the many philosophical and theological questions which this statement raised were much debated, especially in the fields of philosophical theology, philosophy of religion and religious studies (cf. Bell 1975; Brenner 1996; Harvey 1989; Min 2008). The intention here is not to discuss all these philosophical questions with its many thorny issues, but it may be helpful to look at the three words 'children', 'theology' and 'Africa', which are used in this publication, from the angle of grammar.

■ Grammar and theology

The concepts grammar and/or language and/or the use of the metaphor of theology as grammar were and still are a very active part of the work of some theologians (cf. Bartlett 2001; Bell 1975, 1988; Bloemendaal 2006; Bouma 2012; Brenner 1996, 1999; Cummings 2003; Holmer 1978; Jennings 1985; Jones 2002; Kallenberg 2001; Kim 2011; Knowles 2012; Long 2015; Merrill 1986; Min 2008; Moore 2009; Robinette 2009; Stout & MacSwain 2004; Torrance 2005; Ward 1999; Zorn 1995). In non-linguistic circles, the concept 'grammar' is usually used with a very general and broad meaning. In essence, it refers to the rules for using language. It is rules accepted by a community or group of people for forming and combining words in their language in a certain way with the purpose to communicate understandably with each other. 'The more we write and the more we talk, the more we conform to certain standards. If we do not, we use language to little avail' (Holmer 1965:241); in short, grammar guides well-formed language understood by the users of that language. Language created according to these grammar rules forms the surface structure of the meaning we want to convey.

Although our language capabilities can grow throughout our lives, the most important building blocks of the grammar of our native language are already internalised during early childhood. Chukovsky (1963:7) expresses the opinion that ‘beginning with the age of two, every child becomes for a short period of time a linguistic genius’. At that stage, children do not even know any grammar rules, and their language capabilities mostly develop through observing and copying other speakers around them, as Chukovsky (1963) says:

Two- and three-year-old children have such a strong sensitivity to their language – to its many inflections and suffixes – that the words they construct inventively do not seem at all distorted and freakish but, on the contrary, extremely apt. (p. 4)

At a later stage, around 5 to 6 years old, this talent seems to begin to fade (Chukovsky 1963:7). It is only during their school years that they start learning the grammar rules formally so that they can read, write and understand the surface structure of the language(s) they are taught. Throughout our lives, we mostly do not even notice how heavily we rely on grammar to convey understanding and meaning in our communication with each other.

The surface structure of our grammar comes almost spontaneously according to the mutually accepted grammar rules we have learned. It is usually easy to understand when we talk about objects we can see, for example a table or a door, a flower or a dog. We can see them, we can touch them, and we can even detect many of them through our other senses. However, the understanding of words are not only conveyed in the words used. Under the surface structure of our words, and especially our combination of them, there is usually also a hidden grammar or

meaning present. This hidden grammar is mostly determined by our own life experiences which influence the meaning we attach to words and the way we combine them, and this can differ from person to person and from one culture to another. This hidden grammar can even change in one person over time. It is mostly more difficult to detect and understand the hidden grammar than understanding the surface structure.

Considering theology as talk about God and God's kingdom, understanding becomes more complicated. It is much more difficult to express ourselves understandably about God and God's kingdom because they are not visible realities. We actually try to speak about what is almost impossible to speak about. Our language just cannot express adequately who God really is. What is even more difficult is to talk about the view that God has from God's side concerning this world, our lives and God's kingdom. This problem of communicating meaning about God and God's kingdom exists on both the surface and the hidden structure of our theological grammar.

The history of the Church shows how difficult it was and still is to create a mutual grammar for understanding God and God's kingdom. In history, there are many examples of theological struggles about how to express many of our doctrinal convictions. In the Early Church, one finds the Trinitarian controversy with the Arians, the Christological questions about how the divinity and humanity were joined in Christ and the controversy about sin between Augustine and Pelagius. Later on, many controversies arose between the Roman Catholic Church and the Reformation, and also amongst different Reformers. Even today, widespread disarray is visible in the language and practices of

Christian faith, not only between different theological traditions but also amongst people from the same theological tradition. Recent times have seen a proliferation of theologies with different grammatical structures such as Black Theology, Liberation Theology, Womanist Theology, Feminist Theology and Mujerista Theology. Part of the origin of these theologies is the search for language and grammar to communicate a better understanding of the mysterious God and this God's kingdom.

The deepest meaning behind the surface grammar of all these theologies already started to develop from people's earliest experiences of God and God's people and the context in which they heard the message of the Bible and were called to communicate and live God's revelation. In our lives, it is often difficult to find the best words and combine them in ways that convey the deep hidden theological meaning behind our surface grammar in an understandable way, not only for the believers amongst whom we live but especially for the world to which we are called to be witnesses. Sometimes the distortion between our surface and hidden grammar is the result of being confronted with contextual realities in which our language is not adequate to communicate God's message in a relevant way to the people around us. On other occasions, the discrepancies are the result of our interaction with bad theological grammar. The tradition may sometimes help us in forming good theological grammar, but it can also hinder us. To communicate the same truth about God and God's kingdom in new times or circumstances implies that we also have to say it anew with a new surface-theological grammar that expresses the hidden grammar of meaning in new and more understandable ways.

This is not an easy task. Theology as grammar about God and God's kingdom always comes at the second hour (Steuernagel 2003:103). First of all, God's revelation has to come to us. Without a personal encounter through a life-giving visitation by God in our lives, no theology is possible. Real theology can only develop in the life-giving presence of God through a daily spiritual discernment process as a walk-with-God-practice (Hendriks 2013:819). Therefore, our theological concepts can only be understood when they 'stand in a particular relationship with our life – specifically with our emotions (or individual passions)' and come clearly to the fore in our daily Christian life (Bell 1975:308). In grammar, it is always the surrounding context that makes it possible to understand a word or certain words. The implication of the expression 'theology as grammar' is that the hidden grammar of our theological concepts and statements can only emerge when the surrounding context of those people who use them appropriate these concepts and statements in their style of life (Bell 1975:315). This should also be true in whichever way we use the words theology and children together. Our style of living has to appropriate them.

What helps us in living out the hidden meaning of our theological grammar is that we do not believe on our own. We believe amongst other believers, and in our shared life we agree on, as far as it is possible, and live out the grammar of our theology. That does not mean that we, individually or as a group, can fully grasp and express God's revelation in our lives. Therefore, it is necessary that we constantly have to listen to God, our tradition, our context and each other, always searching for better language and grammar, expecting to be liberated from our grammar mistakes of the past and the present as well as the bad theological grammar habits that we have developed. In this process, we need to expect our theology and lives

to change for the better. The implication is that, in our journey through ever-changing circumstances in this world, we shall never reach a moment at which we have completed our task of forming and combining words in a certain way to communicate our beliefs about God and God's kingdom in a clearer and more understandable way amongst ourselves and to the world. To listen anew and formulate anew, to always be open to wonderful surprises in God's revelation to us in different contexts is a constant calling which we have to accept and live by. We, therefore, continuously have to remind ourselves concerning our theological grammar, our words and language, as Neville Alexander (in Smit 2008) expresses it:

[It] is much more than a passive reflection of a pre-existent, autonomous reality, that indeed, the language we use ... helps to construct the reality within which we act and to which we react. (p. 349)

Theology as grammar is thus not just talk about God, but it is also constructing the new reality of the kingdom of God in our lives and a new way of living and assessing life that is orientated towards God and God's kingdom. The same is true when we use the words theology and children in combination with each other. We are actually constructing a new reality, a new social order 'organised around children', expressing God's view of children and its influence on the 'small world' of God's kingdom (cf. Gundry-Volf 2001:60).

This is a continuous challenge to all Christians: to develop theological grammar which will stimulate conversations about God and God's kingdom because we increasingly experience that we are developing a mutual understanding, interpretation and emotions about some of the most important theological concepts embedded in our conversations. This is also the challenge that confronts us in bringing the two words, theology and children, together. It is an enormous challenge to develop mutually

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understandable grammar in bringing together and using these two concepts in relationship to each other. This is not an easy task because, at the surface structure, the concepts can be combined in different ways to convey different meanings. What makes it even more difficult is that each user possesses and brings an own hidden grammar structure or pre-understanding of children, theology and even the combination of these two concepts to the conversation.

■ **Developing a grammar for relating children and theology**

It can help us all, and enhance our conversation with each other, if we are willing to identify and reflect on the hidden grammatical structure of meaning behind our use of the words theology and children, on their own and together, and how this structure developed in our own lives. I travelled my own journey with these two concepts as well as with real children and my own way of doing theology, accompanied by other people, who together informed the development of my grammar for relating children to theology. It is actually still a grammar-in-the-making.

The starting point for my own learning of this grammar was not my formal theological studies. It already started way back, at my birth and in the way I was welcomed into this world. It may even be argued that it started with my conception when I was created from the sperm and egg of two people with their own grammar of children and theology embedded in their lives. The grammar of these two people did not influence me only by nature but also through nurture. I firmly believe that a large part of the foundation of my grammar about children and

theology was already laid in my sub-conscious in my early childhood years through the context in which I was nurtured. Since I was a baby, my parents had two or three babies in foster care for shorter or longer periods for many years. Over many vacations, we took care of an orphaned child. Although I grew up as the only biological child of my parents, I was surrounded by children of whom my parents took great care. These experiences influenced my hidden grammar in connection with children in many ways, often without being consciously aware of it.

I was also surrounded by theology in many ways. My parents were dedicated Christians, very much involved in church life. They attended church services regularly and took me with them from a very tender age. For many years, my father served as a deacon and later as an elder. Since I can remember, my mother has been involved with the children's and woman's movements of our church. My father was a Sunday-school teacher for many years. I even had the privilege to have my father as my Sunday-school teacher for two years. I can remember many a time that I found my parents kneeling beside their bed, praying. I could also experience how much they loved people and served them in many ways. My father became my role model for being a Christian. That was the theological context in which I grew up.

In this context, children and theology became a part of the hidden structure of my grammar without any conscious choice on my side. In some mysterious ways, these two words met each other and started to live together. This happened to the extent that, in the second local church where I served as a pastor, I was asked to take responsibility for the children's ministry in the church. When I asked, 'Why me and

not my co-pastor or anyone else in the church?', the answer was that the members of the church could see a natural connection between children and me, and that I cared deeply for children. It surprised me because, up to that point, I did not take any conscious decision to focus on children in my ministry. Much later, in a conversation with my oldest child, a daughter, about what she remembered from her early years in the first congregation I served, she made a comment that I shall always remember. She said that what stood out for her in her first 7 years of her life was the enjoyable moments when I played with her on the carpet in the foyer of our house, how we rolled around, how she was riding horse on my back, how I tossed her up into the air and caught her again, how funny it was, how we laughed together, how we later on played with her dolls. She then added that when her brothers arrived, they became part of our playing moments and that she never felt that her brothers were more important than she.

At that stage of my life, I did not even know that Landreth (2002:16) had said that play is the language of children. What happened in both instances was that the grammatical structure of children and theology that was deeply curved into the hidden meaning my life came to the fore spontaneously. It became part of my life exactly in the way that I explained above that language and grammar and the meaning attached to them are acquired in our lives. When I use the words theology and children in the surface structure of my grammar, this whole history and much more are present underneath it as the hidden structure of my grammar. As I grew up, this hidden structure was also formed by many life experiences and cultural factors that influenced my life, not the

least the theological tradition in which I was trained. It is this whole history that will always influence the way I use these two words and the meaning I attach to them. It is like an iceberg in the sea. The biggest part of an iceberg lies under the water, hidden from what is seen on the surface.

This is precisely the case with my grammar of children and theology: the biggest part of meaning lies under the surface structure, hidden from the eyes of the people around me. What is true of myself is also true of every other person who uses these two words. We can use theology and children on the surface, structured according to the existing grammatical rules to convey a certain surface meaning to other people, but under the surface lies the bigger grammatical structure of our real understanding of these words and the meaning we attach to them. Unless we admit it to ourselves, start to create a space which allows us honestly to communicate with each other about this different hidden grammatical structures and listen very carefully to each other in this process, it will be very difficult to understand each other and create shared meaning and common ground for this new emerging academic subfield in theology.

We need each other in creating guiding rules for this new grammar-in-the-making. The main reason is that my thinking and the expressions I use in my own way of combining theology and children are still very much blurred in many ways, and I need the community of believers to guide me and journey with me through the fog surrounding my own mind. What I express in my own views on children and theology is, therefore, not prescriptive in any way but only descriptive. It is a search for more clarity in my own mind and life with God and children in this world. It is

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also expressed as an invitation to all theologians to join this searching journey.

The challenge we all are invited to is to develop together a grammar for relating children and theology in an understandable way, not just for our conversations amongst ourselves, but also for witnessing to the world and for building a new social order around children as expression of the 'small' world of God's kingdom. If our grammar about children and theology does not change our lives and serve the missional calling of the church, we are spending our time and energy on a lost cause. Theology, per definition, 'has no reason to exist other than critically accompany the *missio Dei*' (Bosch 1991:494). The essence and the goal of combining children and theology with each other is always supposed to be missional, to be an instrument in God's hands to let the 'small world' of God's kingdom come into this world and our own lives more and more.

The journey to construct a meaningful theological grammar of relating children and theology already started and progressed with the different publications about children and theology over the last few years (cf. Chapter 1), the consultations by the Child Theology Movement and other local and global initiatives over the last about 15 years. Taking into account this short period of deliberately focussing on children and theology, we have to admit that we still have to do with a grammar-in-the-making. Therefore, a certain degree of elasticity – and not the rigidity of a 'grammar-police' – should prevail amongst us in our efforts to develop a more understandable grammar structure for using the concepts theology and children together.

■ Children and theology

■ Meeting one another

The two words, children and theology, are old words with their own lives, independent from each other. They do not need each other to exist, live and convey meaning. It is part of the problem in using these two words together. Each one of them has on its own meaning, which is not necessarily clear and limited to one interpretation. Many people talk about a child or children every day. Most of the time, we presume that we know exactly what we are talking about, and we do not even question our own use of these words. The result is that we use them in different ways without really scrutinising them critically. In the process, many things are said that are contradictory. Sometimes our expressed ideas differ, even contradict, the real-life experiences of the children living around us. The same is true of the concept theology. Maybe not all people is using it as often as the concept child or children, but God and living a Godly life is ever present with us. When we use the concept or the idea of 'theology', it can have many layers of meaning, differing from person to person. On the questions 'what is a child?' and 'what is theology?', no simple universal answer can be given. The variety of different answers are influenced by many factors, not the least our own life experiences with these concepts, including our encounters with real children in different contexts, our own religious life and practices, the theological tradition in which we stand and our different understandings of these words caused by difference in culture. This is not the time and place to explore these concepts deeper. It is sufficient to admit that each concept can convey on its own a confusing number of meanings that can hugely influence the grammatical structure of meaning when using them together.

However, because both concepts exist, are alive and are used in the same world, it is almost inconceivable that they will not meet each other at some time in one way or another. It seems, though, that the meeting between them did not happen often in the past. It is actually amazing that theologians did not pay more attention to the meeting of these two words or to actively combining them until very recently.

Actually, many theologians have not merited childhood as a serious topic to attend to (cf. Bunge 2001:3, 2004:43, 2006; Miller-McLemore 2006:635–636). According to Bunge (2008), the biblical sciences have generally neglected the themes of children and childhood in their research. She is of the opinion that they did not give much attention to the many references in the Bible to children and childhood and the different uses of child-related terminology by the biblical authors. She even states that ‘most of literature that has addressed any relationships between biblical texts and children has been written primarily by scholars in the areas of religious education or children’s ministry’ (Bunge 2008:xv).

This view does not imply that, over the centuries, theologians did not attend to children in their theological thinking and writing at all. Occasionally, there were glimpses of attention to children in the work of some theologians (cf. Berryman 2009; Bunge 2001). What is clear, however, is that children were marginalised by many theologians and were not allowed to influence and shape theology consistently. There are many reasons why this marginalisation of children in theology occurred (cf. Bunge 2001:11–12; Miller-McLemore 2003:xxii; Sims 2005:11). The following statement by Sims (2005) can be seen as a correct but very sad reason as to why children were easily omitted from serious theological reflection:

Children generally have not been viewed as active agents in the process of interpreting, constructing, negotiating and defining their relationships, societies, cultures, families and churches. Theologically they have not been viewed as active, formative agents in their relationships with God, others, themselves, society and culture, but rather as passive recipients of formation for such relationships or as young, immature sinners in need of conversion. (p. 11)

This situation has started to change since the beginning of the 21st century. A growing awareness of and interest in connecting children and theology started to develop. Several important books and articles were published, exploring this relationship (cf. ch. 1). In the process, different ways emerged for relating children and theology. The surface structure of this developing grammar was expressed in different ways and conveyed different meanings. The Child Theology Movement created a grammar structure very much influenced by Jesus' action in Matthew 18:1–14 to put a child in the midst of the disciples during an intense theological argument.

The grammar of child and theology in the light of Matthew 18:1–14

We have to ask the question: In what way(s) can Jesus' action in Matthew 18:1–14 help us to develop a grammatical structure of children and theology that will improve understandable communication? In trying to answer this question I will not analyse this pericope in depth. Such an analysis is presented in Chapter 5. Here I only look into aspects that may help in answering the question formulated above.

In Matthew 18:1–14, Jesus is addressing the disciples' understanding of God and God's kingdom. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and the cross and death, to the fulfilment of his mission to this world.

After Jesus had announced his coming suffering and death for the second time on this journey (Mt 17:33–23), the disciples still did not understand that the trademark of God’s kingdom was to lay down your own life and die. They rather started to argue (cf. Mk 9:33–37; Lk 9:46–48) with each other about greatness, about who will be the most important in the kingdom of heaven. It was to address this misunderstanding of God and God’s kingdom that Jesus took a little child to stand by his side (cf. Lk 9:47).

How do you picture what is happening here? It is clear that Jesus did not seek a child or sent a disciple to fetch a child. The implication is that there were children around Jesus and his disciples. The South African film director, Regardt van den Berg, directed a docu-drama based word-for-word on the Gospel according to Matthew, released in 1993. Before starting with the production of the film, Van den Berg stated that he was convinced that he was to present Jesus as a joyful person, the Saviour that experienced the greatest form of joy, the joy of saving the lost. The implication of this decision comes also to the fore in his picture of Matthew 18:1–14.³¹

It does not mean that the way in which Van den Berg filmed this scene represents what really happened. It is rather a pictorial expression of the hidden grammar of meaning that Van den Berg attached to this episode in Jesus’ life. It is a scene full of joy. It is a picture of Jesus and his disciples with a few playing and laughing children around them. When the disciples asked their very serious question concerning greatness, Jesus took a child, playfully, whilst he answered their question. On the children’s faces, the joy to be with Jesus is clearly expressed.

31. <http://regardtvandenbergh.com/matthew.html>

At a conference on child theology held in Ethiopia in November 2013, this scene was shown to the conference attendees. It was immediately clear that many of the people present could not identify themselves with the picture Van den Berg created. According to them, Jesus could not have acted as informal and playful as pictured by Van den Berg. It just did not fit their cultural view of leadership and their view of Jesus as an authoritative male figure. The conduct of the children in the presence of adults, and especially around such an important leader as Jesus, was just not acceptable. They experienced Van den Berg's picture of the children as a disturbance, as misbehaviour on their side. These children just could not represent the child that Jesus had put in the midst of his disciples. Their cultural view of children did not allow them to picture the children and their interaction with Jesus in this way. What came to the fore here is that their hidden grammar of meaning underneath their surface grammar structure of Matthew 18 differed from Van den Berg's hidden grammar of meaning underneath the same surface grammar structure.

What is quite interesting of Van den Berg's picture of this scene is that he managed to keep the focus on Jesus the whole time, but he did it in such a way that all the children around him and his disciples were included. The implications are very clear: Jesus is the focus point, and the specific child he was referring to was only a representative figure of all the children around them. This pictorial interpretation fits with the world view of the Jews, who did not have an individualistic world view as developed in some parts of the developed world but a collective, group-orientated world view (Grobbelaar 2008:220–221). In a long discussion on this topic, the Old Testament scholar Perdue (1997:237) came to the conclusion that 'the strong sense of corporate solidarity and community dominated Israel's and early Judaism's social and religious world'. It is therefore highly unlikely

that there was only one child with Jesus and his disciples. Van den Berg's picture of a group of children around him is consistent with this world view.

Jesus took a child from this group of children as a clue, a sign or language to change the disciples' view of God and God's kingdom and to teach them a new theological grammar about God and God's kingdom. It is a moment of revelation to the disciples, a revelation not about children or any of their many inherent characteristics or virtues (cf. Grobbelaar 2008:322–325) but about who God is and about God's way of doing things. It is a revelation of God's grammar in relation to God's kingdom.

Through using a child, Jesus wanted to change not only the surface structure of their kingdom grammar but also the deepest hidden structure of their grammar about God and God's kingdom. By this action, Jesus confronted the hidden meaning behind their words, which was being formed in their innermost being since the beginning of their own childhood years, with God's own grammar about the kingdom of God. Unless you change, unless your grammar about God and God's kingdom and the role of leadership in this kingdom changes, unless your innermost being and your understanding of the meaning of life change in such a way that it can be seen in your life and heard in your use of words, you cannot enter God's kingdom.

Part of this conversation was also a clash between two different views of children, the view of the disciples and Jesus' own view. The view of the disciples was formed by their surrounding Mediterranean culture (cf. Grobbelaar 2008:291–301). In this world, children were seen as property that belonged to their parents, without any status, undeveloped and incomplete, on the way to becoming an important human being, an adult. The only value of children lay in their future being.

Jesus had exactly the opposite view of children. Whilst the disciples looked at the kingdom of God from the perspective of their present situation where children had no status and where adults were the most important, the people with status, with power, with influence, the ideal of human perfection, Jesus said to them very clearly: No! This is not how it works in God's kingdom. Come and have a look from my perspective, look back at this life from the future, at all children, at your own lives. See that in God's kingdom, there are no adults, no hierarchy, no greatness, no power relationship, no difference in status, no unfinished humans-to-be, no incomplete state of being, no one with undeveloped character or bodily weakness, or emotionally instability or intellectually deficiency. It is a kingdom where the standard of the ideal human being is to be a child of the living God. Let this eschatological perspective on God's kingdom become the deepest theological grammar of your life, the hidden grammar structure of meaning behind all your thoughts and actions. Let it also change the rules of the surface structure of your grammar, the words you use and the combination in which you use it. Remember, you have to follow me to the cross, you have to lay down your life, your longing for power and status, your theological grammar, especially about children and God's kingdom. Yes, you will have to change your own innermost, cultural orientated, view of children. Then and then alone will you become children in my kingdom. Then your calling would be to receive, to welcome the children in this world and in your own lives. When you do it, if you live according to God's grammar about children and theology, according to God's way of doing things, you will be surprised with a wonderful experience: You will also receive me.

Different combinations of children and theology

Looking to live according to God's grammar about children and theology as expressed in Matthew 18:1–14, it is now important to study the surface grammatical structure of combining theology and children. On the surface, it is grammatically possible to combine or structure these two words in the following different ways (cf. Bunge 2007:12):

- child theologies
- theologies of childhood
- theologies for children
- children's theology.

Other terms related to children and theology to these combinations can be added. Terminologies such as children and religious education, children's ministry, children's spirituality and children's spiritual development. To these terms other concepts which, based on age and developmental motivations, use youth instead of children, for example youth ministry. The big question is: What are the differences between all these terms? Are there any overlaps between them? How do we differentiate between them? What is the focus of each one? The scary reality is that all these combinations and all the surrounding concepts we can add can be rather confusing, and it is not so easy to distinguish between them.

We also have to be aware of possible dangers in using theology and children together. We tend to allow children and the social construction of childhood as well as the knowledge about children that is generated by childhood studies and other academic disciplines to eclipse theology. The challenge is that we should always remember that we are doing theology, not on an island severed from other academic disciplines, but in interaction with them, taking into account our theological identity and remaining true to it. The other danger is just the opposite. We can focus

so much on theology that we almost lose the real children of this world. Then theology tends to become sterile adult thought, losing the influence of children's agency on the formation of our theology and exposing ourselves to the possibility of not welcoming Jesus in our theology and lives. We even run the risk of not entering into God's kingdom.

Therefore, we have to receive children in doing theology and be careful of how these two concepts influence one another. One of the important questions in combining these two concepts is: Which one comes first? Where do you start? Wilmer and White (2013:13–15) use the image of people travelling between two cities to illustrate the influence that either child or theology might have as the starting point for the upcoming journey. You can start with theology and then move on to children, or you can start with children and move in the direction of theology. Depending on the starting point, you will reach a different destination.

When people start with theology and then move on to children, they actually want to work with God's view of children. They want to understand children from a theological perspective. The destination of this journey is usually called theology/ies of childhood (cf. Ch. 3). According to Bunge (2006:554), "Theologies of Childhood," ... primarily provide sophisticated understandings of children and childhoods and our obligations to children themselves'. An important part of this study is to explore all the different views on children and childhood present in the Bible and the Christian tradition in such a way that the dignity of children is respected (cf. Bunge 2007:12).

The journey can also be undertaken in the directly opposite direction. Then the traveller starts with children and moves in the direction of theology. The destination is then child theology/ies. In this journey,

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children become the hermeneutical lens through which you explore God and God's way of doing things to come to a better understanding of God and God's kingdom. Child theology therefore re-examines theology as a whole, including all the practices of the church and Christian life (cf. Bunge 2006:554). Children are like lenses as White and Willmer (2006) explain:

[T]hrough which some aspects of God and his revelation can be seen more clearly. Or, if you like, the child[ren] is [are] like a light that throws existing theology into new relief. (p. 6)

Both child theologies and theologies of childhood are legitimate surface grammatical structures. However, they do not exist independently from each other. The journey is not just a straight linear movement from one to the other. Sometimes the traffic gets mixed up. Willmer and White (2013) stated this as follows:

When the direction runs from theology to child, there are always some hints and gestures in the other direction ... travels in the child-to-theology direction ... does not mean it eliminates some traffic on the other carriageway. (p. 14)

'Children-to-theology' and 'theology-to-children' cannot exist in total separation. They do influence each other. Conceding this influence, Willmer and White (2013:14) say: "Child-to-theology" implies and shapes "theology-to-child". Stated in other words, child theologies imply and shape theologies of childhood. With this view on the relationship between these two concepts, it seems that child theology is the shaper and by implication the more important factor in this journey.

Is it really only child theology that shapes theology of childhood? What about the possibility of theology of childhood shaping child theology? When one moves from children to theology, one probably already has a view of children, a theology of childhood. If children become the

lens through which you explore theology, the question is: Who are these children or what lens do you use? Just as there are different kinds and colours of lenses, children are not all the same. There are many differences between them: They grow up in different contexts, they are part of different cultures, some are poor and some are rich and very privileged, some are abused and other not. There are child soldiers and those who have not experienced any violence in their lives. There are child prostitutes and those who have never been sexually exposed. There are children who have experienced trauma in many ways and also those who did not. The children you use as your lens when you look at God and God's kingdom determine what you are going to see, which new theological perspectives and insights you are going to gain.

Your concept of a child or your theology of childhood will influence and shape the child theology you will express. It seems to me that it is exactly what happens in Matthew 18:1–5. By using a child as a sign in his conversation with his disciples, Jesus actually uses their existing theology of childhood, formed by their surrounding Mediterranean culture, to expose them to a new perspective on God and God's kingdom. It is this new view of God and God's kingdom that have to change their existing theology of childhood to the extent that they become kingdom people who are willing to receive children in their midst. It also has to change their theology of leadership and their view of God and God's kingdom. It is difficult to express this in words or a picture, but it seems that we have to develop a more integrated understanding of theologies of childhood and child theologies. It has to be integrated in such a way that each one has a different focus but are actually dependent on each other and on shaping each other.

It is an open question whether the metaphor of the journey illustrates this integrative process effectively. It seems that this metaphorical constructing expresses and works with bi-polarity rather than with integration. When you start with children as the lens through which you look at God and God's kingdom, the lens may already be so blurred that you cannot see the truth. If you start from God's side moving to children it could happen that children can become only an object of study, a conceptual study, and that you lose sight of the real children of this world. Therefore, I choose at this stage to rather use 'theology and children'. For me, the combination of theology and children is always an integrative movement, and at different times, you may approach it from different angles, but it is always a to-and-fro movement. This is one of the challenges in developing a grammar of children and theology: How do we express this integrated process in understandable words according to good grammar rules?

Using 'children and theology' as overall concept may be seen as too general, but it also makes it easier to include under one umbrella concepts such as theologies for children, children's theology, children and religious education, children's ministry, children's spirituality and children's spiritual development. Keeping them all together may help to enhance integrative thinking and grammar development. Because I do not want to create the impression that one is more important than the other, I use both 'children and theology' and 'theology and children' in this chapter as inter-changeable concepts, indicating that there is no priority order but rather an integrative relationship between these two terms.

Maybe it is time to coin a more exact name for this umbrella. John Wall (2010:loc. 197) uses the concept 'childism' for 'ethical thought that has been conducted explicitly in light of childhood'. He (Wall 2010:loc. 49-50) states: 'Childism is the effort to respond to the experiences of children by

transforming understanding and practices for all'. Young-Bruehl (2012) also uses the concept 'childism' in her work, but she defines it in a totally different way. She (Young-Bruehl 2012:4) states that the definition of childism is 'prejudice against children'. Young-Bruehl (2012:4) elaborates on this definition by saying:

My aim is to enable us, Americans and others, to move beyond editorializing over how much the care for 'antisocial' children costs, and to start thinking about the huge range of anti-child social policies and individual behaviours directed against all children daily. (p. 4)

These two definitions illustrate that Wall and Young-Bruehl approach the concept childism from different angles and with different hidden grammatical structures. To make this term usable, we shall have to converse with each other about the exact meaning that we attach to it. Until then, this term can also contribute to much more confusion. Maybe we have to utter the prayer that a professor in philosophy at the University of Stellenbosch once prayed in his class: 'Protect us from all our isms, o Lord, that for once we can honour you'.

■ And what about Africa?

The grammar of theology and children is further complicated when we add to it the word 'Africa'. How do we understand Africa, and what influence does Africa have on the meaning of theology and children? It is not easy to answer these questions. Beryl Markham (1942), who spent a great deal of her life in Africa, once stated that the many books about Africa present almost just as many different views of Africa. If this was true of her time, it is much truer of the 21st century. Africa can be defined in many different ways. Africa and African identity have been defined in terms of geography, culture, ethnicity, skin colour and even suffering (cf. Malherbe 2011:5–6). One of the problems in defining Africa is that there

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is no universal Africa or African or African child. Africa is a perplexing mosaic of diversity. The African continent exists of 54 countries and more than 3000 ethno-linguistic groups. These different groups do not have the same culture or value system, and they do not have the same view of family and children and childhood. In different contexts, children are raised in many different ways. This is illustrated by the following African proverb: 'Every country has its way of dressing a chicken'.³² Zakes Mda (in Villa-Vicencio 2009) is of the opinion that African identity is a recent phenomenon, still in the making:

Until about 100 years ago the inhabitants of the continent did not generally refer to themselves as Africans... They recognised and celebrated various identities that were based on ethnicity, clan, family, gender and class. (p. 116)

This is a complicated issue, and this chapter will not discuss all possible views on Africa but will keep it simple, knowing that it is oversimplified in many ways.

Most Africans live on the African continent, not only a diverse continent, but also a continent which differs in many ways from the rest of the world. We are Africans because of our geographical place on this earth. It was on this continent that the hidden grammatical structure of all African's innermost being was formed. It was here that Africans learned to express the surface structure of their grammar, lives and theology in quite different ways than in other parts of the world. As Africans, we also developed our grammar about child and theology on the African continent. The implication is that we were influenced by many factors that played a role on this continent. We were influenced by the history and the struggles of Africa, by the slave trade, the colonisation of Africa and the power struggles of post-colonisation. We were influenced by unique African

32. <http://afriprov.orgf/dailyproverbs.htm>

cultural practices. We were influenced by the world views that developed in Africa over centuries. We were influenced by the concept *ubuntu*: A person is a person through other people (cf. Grobbelaar 2012:40–44). We were influenced by the rest of the world's views about and their actions towards Africa. We were also influenced by the circumstances and the suffering of children on the African continent. All of these factors influenced our understanding of the words children and theology.

However, we are not only influenced by the realities of the diverse African contexts. We are also called and sent into these different contexts to be witnesses in each context and to develop a grammar of theology and children that is understandable for the people living in that context. The grammar of children and theology will make no sense for Africans if it is not born from God's revelation in and for Africa. The necessity of the contextual relevance of the grammar of children and theology is clearly demonstrated by Jesus' revelation to his disciples in Matthew 18. It was not a global child that Jesus put alongside himself. He wanted to address the problem with which the disciples struggled at that moment in time: their misunderstanding of God's kingdom and the role of leadership within this kingdom. The best way to change their misunderstanding was to call a child to his side. Because children had no status in the world of the disciples (cf. Grobbelaar 2012:19–20), a child was the best language to use to address the disciples' struggle with status and greatness in God's kingdom. It was also the best way to liberate them from the wrong surface and hidden structures of their theological grammar and, actually, to liberate them from themselves and all their selfishness. Unless you change, unless you are reborn as a child, you will not enter the kingdom of God. This rebirth can only come from God. The change did not come immediately, and it was not an easy task for

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Jesus to transform them. He struggled with the culturally infused resistance of the disciples to change their grammar of child and theology. It is evident in the events described in Matthew 19:13–15 and 20:20–28. Through Jesus' patience and perseverance, they changed eventually. In his explanation about what happened on the day of Pentecost, Peter even used the language of the Prophet Joel to state that the Spirit was poured out on all people and that their sons and daughters will be prophets. What a change in Peter's surface and hidden grammatical structure of children and theology!

■ Some questions and challenges

In light of the discussion above, I have identified some challenges and questions regarding the clearer formulation of our developing grammar of children and theology that we need to attend to.

■ Are children really important?

A fundamental question is: Why are children in our time still important for our theology and lives? It is easy to answer this question on a theoretical level. The actual question is whether the agency of children is really part of our grammar of children and theology? Sometimes the real implications of a grammar of theology and children that includes children's active agency are better illustrated in real life stories than in complicated and drawn-out theoretical arguments. Regarding the agency of children, Danna Fewell (2003) tells the following challenging story:

'Mom,' asked the ten-year-old, 'can anyone write a Bible?'

Hmmm ... that's an interesting question. Why do you ask?

Because I have some important things to say about God, and I think I'd like to write a Bible.

Well, I suppose you could write one. The real question would be; would other people want to read it?

Why wouldn't they want to read it? I know a lot about God and the way people ought to treat each other.

Do you think your perspective on these things would be significantly different from that of the Bible we read in church?

Mom, really! Just how many ten-year-olds do you think helped write that? (p. 41)

We need children as God's agents and guides on our journey through this life. We need them to open our eyes and ears to understand more and more about God and God's kingdom, to enrich and even improve our theological grammar. We need them to remind us over and over again that only children enter the kingdom of God. We need them to avoid the danger of becoming too important in our own eyes, of seeking more and more status and power. We need them to take our hands and lead us along the road into God's kingdom. We need them to help us to communicate the gospel to the world in a better way. As Fewell (2003) observed, children often express the essence of the Gospel much better than adults:

'Mom I'll tell you everything I know about God,' said the five-year-old.

'Everything?' asked her mother.

'Yes, everything,' the daughter answered solemnly.

'Will this take long?' asked the mother.

'No.'

'All right,' said the mother. 'Tell me everything you know about God.'

'God wants us to take care of each other,' said the little girl.

'Is that everything?' asked the mother.

'Yes,' said the little girl. 'That's everything. Everything there is to know about God.'

And she skipped off to play. (p. 53)

Children often really know better than adults. We tend to think that we have to teach our children. In developing our grammar of child and

theology, we have to take in consideration that the roles may need to be reversed: We become the pupils and our children the teachers. Danielle D'Souza (2012) illustrates this principle with the following story from her own experience:

My daughter Danielle is an unusual person, at least for her age. Recently she said to me, 'I've been thinking about why some Christians make the sign of the cross.'

I was raised Catholic in India, and I confessed the question hadn't really occurred to me. Danielle explained, 'They touch their heads because God is the creator, the mind who made the universe. Then they touch their hearts because Jesus is the Saviour, the one who removes sin from our hearts. And finally they touch each shoulder, because that's the Spirit in us. We are God's arms in the world, and it is our job to do God's work while we are here.'

That's the kind of daughter I've got. She says stuff that is totally unexpected for a kid her age – stuff that I've never thought of, and sometimes wish I did. While I regard myself as her teacher, or one of her teachers, occasionally she teaches me things I don't know. (loc. 100–107)

Who is 'the child'?

The expression 'the child in the midst' became an important concept in the Child Theology Movement globally, and it is now used in many other contexts. Although we know nothing more of this child of Matthew 18:1–14, this boy or girl in the midst was a real child, a specific child of flesh and blood. The disciples could see this child, they could have touched this child if they wanted to, and they could even have talked to this child. This child had a name. Using this child as his language, Jesus was not talking in abstract theological or philosophical terms about a concept or idea, 'the child'. The disciples were always confronted with the reality amongst them. The reality of the children was actually much more impressed on the disciples' minds and hearts when Jesus encouraged them to welcome each child in his name into their lives.

It has become commonplace to use ‘the child’ in our academic deliberations and even in the titles of our books. The surface grammar of ‘the child’ seems to be correct but only if it is referring to a specific child. Who is this ‘the child’? What is the name of ‘the child’? If we use ‘the child’ as a general concept, we tend to detach ‘it’ from reality. ‘The child’ becomes an abstract concept that lives only in our minds and our theoretical thoughts. One example is ‘the African child’. Who is this ‘the African child’? Actually, the African child does not exist. It is not a real child. ‘The African child’ is rather a social construct. Therefore, I prefer to use ‘a child’ or, even better, ‘children’. It helps me always to keep in mind the reality of the children of Africa.

Another reason for this preference has already been expressed earlier in this chapter when I made the remark that the child in Matthew 18:1–14 was just representing all the other children around Jesus. In using children and theology in this chapter in connection with Africa, I also took into consideration that part of the complex world views of Africans is a collective approach to life rather than an individualistic approach as seen in many parts of the Western world. This approach to life is captured in the word ‘*ubuntu*’, which implies that ‘I am a person through other people’. It is not typically African to isolate a child from other children. Therefore, in African theology, the responsible thing to do is to use the plural: children. In this Chapter, I give expression to the above sentiments by using ‘children’ and theology and not ‘the child’ and theology.

It seems to me that the objectification of ‘the child’ is enhanced by using the concept ‘the child in the midst’. It creates the impression that ‘the child’ stands in the midst of the disciples only as an object lesson for them. In Luke’s version of this event, he used another Greek word which can be translated as that Jesus allowed a child to stand alongside him. ‘Alongside’

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draws the attention to Jesus and the child with him. A specific child, as a representative of all the other children present, became part of the conversation between Jesus and his disciples. 'Alongside Jesus' emphasises the importance of this child for understanding the theological conversation between Jesus and his disciples. However, 'the child' never stands there without Jesus or disconnected from Jesus' action that allowed the child to come alongside him.

The focus is on Jesus and not on the child. We are often talking and writing so much about children, using large numbers of statistics, spending much time on theoretical talk about childhood and children's ministry and child care work, and running around, organising advocacy and actions on behalf of children. There is nothing wrong with it per se, but we are so busy and concentrating so hard on doing things for or on behalf of children that we no longer focus on God, that we cannot see and hear his signs of revelation anymore. Eventually, a time may come when we just do not bother to learn God's language anymore. Not learning God's language may be the root cause for the absence of the connection between children and theology in so many theologians' thinking and writing.

□ The importance of context

In developing our grammar of children, theology and Africa, we have to be contextual theologians. Some theologians have difficulties with this term, mainly because they are of the opinion that all theology is contextual, which is true. All theology is influenced by the context in which you are doing it. My understanding of the concept contextual theology, therefore, is that it is a theology that deliberately engages with a specific context in a sensitive and responsive way (cf. Pears 2009:168).

In the preface to their book *The Bible in a world context: An experiment in contextual hermeneutics*, Walter Dietrich and Ulrich Luz (2002), argue the

need for contextual theology, particularly contextual hermeneutics, in the following way:

When our own ways of understanding no longer work, it is essential to listen to others and learn from them. It seems to us that Western biblical scholarship suffers most from being 'without context'. It is carried out abstractly and therefore leads to abstract results and truths, which are not related to any context. 'Abstract' is not only understood in the usual sense as being opposed to 'concrete'. 'Abstract' also means: unattached to the life and reading of 'ordinary' people, far away from their questions, developed in the ivory tower of the university. 'Abstract' means: detached from the present and from its problems, concerned only with the reconstruction of a past with all its problems. Finally, another way of scholarly, 'abstract' reading that is disconnected from the real concerns of present-day readers is to flee into an imaginary 'text world' – imaginary, because it is entirely created by scholars. 'Abstract' in the widest sense means: without context. All this does not contribute to understanding, which is related to our own context. (loc. 39–45)

It is exactly for this reason that I emphasised above the importance of using the plural 'children' and the contribution that real African children have to make to our development of a grammar for children, theology and Africa. We shall have to find different ways to include the children of Africa in our processes. This had already been done in different ways at many of the consultations of the Child Theology Movement through their experimental way of doing child theology (Willmer 2007). At the first African consultation on child theology held in Cape Town in 2004 (cf. ed. Collier 2004), the attendees, through an act of imagination, put a child soldier and a child prostitute in their midst and then shared stories with each other about real children who had experienced or are living in similar circumstances. Thereafter, they used these 'story' children and their contexts as their hermeneutical lens to discuss the doctrine of sin, identifying how these children and their experiences shed new light on our understanding of sin (ed. Collier 2004:17–20; Willmer 2007:12–22). The crucial question in doing theology in this way is: How do the

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experiences of childhood on the African continent critique our theology? What new insights come to the fore in our theology when using African children as our hermeneutical lens? Are any elements of our theology exposed as distorted or neglected? What do we really see if we look at our theology through the eyes of African children?

A personal friend told me the tragic life story of a girl, whom I call Cecilia. This story was very upsetting for my own theological convictions and was a great impetus for developing my grammar of children and theology and my own way of doing child theology in the African context (cf. Grobbelaar 2012:55–57). I repeat her story here to indicate some of the theological questions her story raises when using it as your hermeneutical lens.

My friend met Cecilia, only 13 years old, during a visit to a rural part of Africa. She stayed in a very small house. As their oldest sister, she was caring for two children, about 5 and 11 years old. She did it very well. Early in the mornings, Cecilia fetched them water. She prepared their food, woke them and helped them with everything to get them to school on time. Every afternoon, Cecilia welcomed them back with a prepared meal.

After lunch, they played or went to the field to do whatever had to be done. Some of the men in the village helped Cecilia with the ploughing, but the sowing, watering, weeding and harvesting were her responsibility. She often felt like giving up. Day after day, however, she forced herself back. She could not afford to lose their small piece of land and, with it, their only source of livelihood.

Their parents died of AIDS only recently. According to the tradition of the area, they were buried right in front of the house. Each day, the children were confronted with the presence of these graves. In a very real sense the

parents were still part of the family's life, as if supervising everything they do from beyond the grave.

Something puzzled my friend from the moment he met Cecilia. She was never alone. At least one but at times three or four of the men from the neighbouring houses were always present. At first, he thought that this might be just a mixture of courtesy and curiosity – making sure the visitor would be welcome or trying to hear what the visit was about. He also wondered whether this might not be their way of protecting Cecilia, a single woman in difficult circumstances.

Gradually another thought arose, one that was later confirmed by volunteers assisting the family. These men were not protecting the children or their 'mother', Cecilia. They were actually protecting themselves. They wanted to make absolutely sure that Cecilia did not share something of her pain with my friend. Because of AIDS, there were relatively few women in that area. These men were helping Cecilia at a great price. They ploughed her fields, but at night, she had to return the favour. And what else did she have to give than her body?

The two younger children were already HIV positive. From what my friend saw, he assumed that it was only a matter of time before Cecilia herself contracted the virus, if she had not already been infected. Cecilia was the head of a family destroyed by HIV. Two heaps of ground close to the front door were constant reminders of the deceased father and mother. The two weak bodies of the children were constant reminders that the plague was still at work. Night after night, Cecilia was forced to court this very same disease.

My friend visited Cecilia a second time. During that conversation, she admitted that one of her worst experiences was that she was socially ostracised at school. Because of the stigmatisation of AIDS, no one

wanted to be seen with her or play with her. During break times at school, she was all alone. She experienced that she was no longer a child amongst other children. In her village, she was an outcast. She no longer experienced *ubuntu*, that she could be a person through other persons, as a reality. Cecilia was no longer connected to her village people and experienced only exploitation by those who were supposed to care for her. Her practical everyday experience was in conflict with her world view of *ubuntu*.

This story addresses several important questions concerning our grammar of child and theology:

- In what ways do Cecilia's experiences of her childhood critique or bring to the fore new insights into our grammar of children and theology?
- Are any elements of our theological grammar exposed as distorted or neglected by this life-story?
- How can our grammar of childhood and theology be redeveloped to address the contradiction that Cecilia, 'the unnoticed child', experienced between the world view of *ubuntu* and the abuse and exclusion by her society?
- Where was the church in all of this? What does the lack of the support from the church say about our being church? What have to change in our churches, in our views, thinking and practices to support and include children who are suffering like Cecilia?
- What does this story say about sin? Can we just say that Cecilia was a sinner in her sexual relationships with the men? Can we say that she just needs to confess her sexual sin and be saved?
- How does this story challenge our views on suffering?
- How are our views on leadership in the church and community challenged by this story? How do we have to change our views?

- What about the role, and misuse, of power in this life story? Why is sexual violence against children just continuing unabated? What are the reasons behind the misuse of power in contemporary Christian churches in Africa and in the political power structures, especially concerning children?
- Cecilia took on her family's diseases and plight for their benefit. She became a servant and served the two children with total commitment. She even allowed men to abuse her, giving away her whole life for the benefit of the children, for food, money and help to provide for all their needs. Jesus says in Matthew 18:5 that he enters into our lives through children. Is she perhaps a type of Christ?
- What is really at stake here? Do we really see what we should see in Cecilia? Could it be that the problem we face is much more than a cultural, social or systemic problem, that it is actually a deep theological problem? Could it be that what we are confronted with is our view of God and also the nature and calling of being church?
- The conduct of the village toward Cecilia is an example of the marginalisation of children in African societies. Many Africans display a harsh and negative attitude towards children. This situation is confirmed in many African proverbs³³ such as the following:
 - Children and baboons drink water. (They do not need important food.)
 - Don't fully listen to what a wife and a child tell you. (They tell you a lot of useless things.)
 - Do not bury a child and an adult together. (A child will disturb an adult person even in the grave.)
 - It is OK to eat whilst a child has an upstairs look at you. (Children will eat after adults.)

33. From a collection of African Proverbs received from Johannes Malherbe.

- A father keeps three fools at his home: child, wife and cattle. (They are not wise.)
- Fire which is lit by a child and a woman will not be extinguished. (They are troublemakers.)
- A forehead and a child do not feel cold. (You do not need to clothe them).

African children are usually not prominent in the ordinary course of life in African society. This position of the child in African societies might, however, be a crucial advantage for doing child theology on the African continent. It means that children are seen in Africa in much the same way that children were seen in the Mediterranean society when the Gospels were written. Jesus could shock his disciples by the very act of giving prominence to the unnoticed children. Jesus could use a child as a sign of humility, not because the child chose humility as a virtue but because it was the social status of children in society. This is not the case in modern, developed societies, which generally do not bring up their children as though the children are or ought to be lowly or without any status in society in any sense. Child theology, in line with Jesus' action in Matthew 18:1–14, can be hugely beneficial by being able to point to a child who is not prominent in the ordinary course of society. It can be significant for developing our grammar of children, theology and Africa when we put African children without any status in Africa into the midst of our reflections about our grammar of children, theology and Africa. By doing so, we give prominence to the usually unnoticed. Such an act should change the grammar of all our theology. In the same way, Cecilia and her life circumstances do not only challenge our grammar of children, theology and Africa but actually the grammar of our theology as a whole.

Danna Fewell (2003) tells quite an interesting story of a conversation between a mother and her daughter that may enlighten this point:

‘I really like these new books I’m reading,’ said the eleven-year-old. ‘Oh?’ said the mom. ‘That’s good! What do you like about them?’ ‘Well, they’re like diaries. The person telling the story is writing it in a diary, so it’s like you’re reading their special secret story, the things they want to remember the most. Besides that, you get the story in bits and pieces and you have to put it together yourself.’

‘If you like stories told like that, there’s a book you’ll want to read when you get older. In that book the story is told by a young woman writing letters to God.’

‘What happens to her?’ asked the girl.

‘At some point she stops writing letters to God and starts writing to her friend instead.’

‘Yeah. I can see why she might do that.’ ‘Oh?’ said the mom.

‘Yeah. It’s not as though God’s ever gonna write back, is he [*sic*]?’

‘No, I suppose not,’ said the mother, smiling and adding, ‘I see you’ve joined the long line of people asking questions about how God relates to us.’

‘Well, sometimes it seems like God is deaf – well, not exactly deaf – but you know how some deaf people have trouble talking and some don’t speak at all? Isn’t there a word for that?’

‘You mean “mute”?’

‘Yeah, mute. Mute. I think God is mute.’ ‘Hmmm. That’s a very interesting idea.’

‘I know, a lot of people think God’s a great big perfect guy in the sky,’ said the girl, making a sweeping dramatic gesture, ‘but I think that if we could imagine even one little thing wrong with God, everything would make a lot more sense.’

‘I think I see your point.’

‘In fact,’ said the girl, mulling this idea over, ‘you know the sign language that deaf people use to talk to each other?’

‘Yes,’ said the mom. ‘Well, I think that’s probably how God talks to us – in signs. Maybe the problem is that we just don’t bother to learn the language.’ (pp. 225–226)

■ Conclusion

Constructing the grammar of theology, children and Africa is a relative new journey, and we shall have to spend much more time in learning this language. Along the way, there will be surprising moments and also confrontational moments, many difficult questions to wrestle with, times of intensive listening to God and the other, and the joyful experiences of the enlightened moments of revelation from God's side. Hopefully, this journey will change our theology for the better. On this way, we shall have to be patient with each other. There is not and there will never be only one correct grammar of children, theology and Africa. As in many other languages, there will be regional grammar or languages with which we can enrich each other and experience the multiple colours of God's revelation. Therefore, we have to respect each other's grammar and welcome each language into our lives.

I am convinced that, in developing and correcting our grammar of children, theology and Africa, we are actually constructing a type of an emancipatory theology. I do not mean it in the sense that we are liberating a specific group of people, in this case children, but in the sense that we are actually liberating ourselves. When our lives are continuously liberated from our own distorted theology through the light that children bring into our lives, we shall become able to welcome, to receive all children and become the voice of the voiceless in our communities.

The most important question in this regard is: Are we as African theologians prepared to commit ourselves to take up the challenges of focussing on research about the grammar of children, theology and Africa? Shall we allow the children of Africa consistently to shape our theology

and lives? Can we as Africans stand up and speak for ourselves in this regard or are we going to be satisfied to work only with what has already been done in other parts of the world, allowing outsiders to do all the work for us? This publication is a few toddling steps towards expressing the voices of some theologians in the most southern part of the African continent on the topic of children and theology. It is done with the hope that more and more African theologians will contribute to this important cause.

Task, sources and significance of theologies of childhood

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■ Introduction³⁴

Every person on the planet is or once was a child, and approximately one third of the human population is currently under the age of 18. In many areas of the world, that figure is higher, and in sub-Saharan Africa, over

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34. This contribution draws upon, extends upon and freshly applies earlier research and publications of the author on related themes which were thoroughly revised.

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half of the population is under 15. Given its high percentage of young people, Africa overall is considered to be the world's 'youngest continent'. All human beings, regardless where they live, enter the world as infants; no one comes into the world alone or as an adult. Each one of us must be nurtured and nourished in order to thrive. Children, like adults, participate in various spheres of our everyday lives: our families, neighbourhoods, nations and religious communities.

Even though children make up a large portion of the human population everywhere, and the largest portion in Africa, they are not consistently given the attention they deserve. All nations, whether rich or poor, often treat children as second-class citizens. In many countries around the world, children lack adequate health care, education or proper nutrition. According to international reports such as UNICEF's annual *State of the world's children*, many African nations score very low on several key indicators of child wellbeing. Yet even those countries ranked most highly in the world for their attention to child protection and excellent schools, such as Norway, Finland, Sweden or Denmark, still see children struggle with drug or alcohol abuse and must consistently look for ways to strengthen their support of children.

Although churches worldwide support children in numerous ways and seek to follow Jesus' own example of welcoming children, churches in all contexts must confess that they sometimes miss the mark. Christian communities throughout the history of the church and around the world have certainly cared for and protected children such as by providing religious education programmes; establishing orphanages, schools, and clinics and offering relief to victims of war or natural disasters and children in poverty. Nevertheless, most churches have at times neglected, marginalised or even abused children. Child abuse takes place in all

denominations worldwide (not just in the Roman Catholic Church), and many churches exhibit a lack of commitment to children in other, subtler ways. For example, religious-education programmes and children's ministries often lack sound materials, well-qualified leaders, parental support or sufficient funding. Furthermore, although the Christian church as a whole possesses rich insights into children, it has not consistently and effectively used its wisdom to become a strong and reliable advocate for children in contemporary public and political debates on child well-being. On the international level, even though rights-based programming 'now dominates the agendas of child-centred governmental and non-governmental institutions' (Stephenson 2003:52), many Christians still side-step or reject engagement with international debates about children's rights. For instance, although the Roman Catholic Church has supported the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC), many Protestant Christians have not, even though several scholars have convincingly shown that a rights-based framework is compatible with Christian beliefs and values (cf. Marshall & Parvis 2004).

Furthermore, despite the needs of children, their presence around the world and in the global Church, and their predominance in sub-Saharan Africa, Christian theologians in South Africa and other countries generally have little to say about children and our obligations to them. Even though attention to children is growing in all areas of the academy, prompting the establishment of interdisciplinary childhood-studies programmes at universities around the world, many theologians still do not treat childhood as a topic meriting serious attention, and they have not sought to articulate robust theological understandings of children themselves. Theological programmes around the world offer few courses, if any, that include attention

to children or the youth beyond religious education or youth and family courses. This happens even though children, like other human beings, should be a matter of concern within all areas of theological education, including systematic or contextual theology. Certainly, many theologians have devoted significant attention to issues related to children such as abortion, human sexuality, contraception, gender relations, marriage and the family. In addition, they have generated insightful multi-religious exchanges and sophisticated interfaith dialogues about these and other global issues that also affect children such as health care, education, economic justice, globalisation, ecology and women's rights. However, even studies on theologies of the family or human rights and even various contemporary forms of contextualised or liberation theologies (for example liberation, feminist, womanist) have largely neglected fundamental questions directly regarding children themselves. These studies rarely explore issues such as the nature and status of children, the duties and responsibilities of both children and parents, or the role of religious communities and the state in protecting children and providing them with the resources they need to thrive. Often, such issues are considered 'beneath' the work of systematic and contextual theologians and suitable only for practitioners or educators.

For this reason and others, discourse within theological education and the broader church has often been dominated by simplistic and ambivalent views of children that diminish their complexity and integrity, fostering narrow understandings of adult-child relationships or commitments to children. Christian communities in the United States, for example, both today and in the past, have tended to speak about children in one-dimensional terms. Some have perceived children mainly as innocent or spiritually wise, thereby often underestimating adult responsibilities for

teaching and guiding children and helping them develop morally and spiritually. Others have tended to view children primarily as sinful and in need of instruction, thereby narrowly restricting their view of adult-child relationships to instruction, discipline and punishment and thus neglecting the lessons that children can teach adults. Mainline and conservative churches alike have often focused solely on the faith formation of children, neglecting the task of child advocacy and protection. These and other examples of simplistic conceptions of children, which can be found in churches and cultures in South Africa and around the world, tend to undermine our commitment to children and have serious consequences for children themselves.

Given the minimal attention to children in the church and theological education and given the wide-spread challenges that children face in the church, in South Africa and in all nations, there is a clear and urgent need for articulating sound and complex theological understandings of children and our obligations to them, or 'theologies of childhood'. The aim of this chapter is to outline the precise task of, possible resources for and the significance of theologies of childhood for South Africa and the wider church.

I hope that, by defining the task of and resources for 'theologies of childhood', the chapter can illustrate the potential power of vibrant and informed theological understandings of children and childhood to challenge common assumptions in the church about children and to generate a renewed commitment to serving them. As theologians from South Africa and around the world develop robust theologies of childhood in their specific contexts, they will also discover ways in which they can contribute meaningfully to interdisciplinary research and programmes in the area of childhood studies. Finally, since every person on earth either is

or once was a child and since people across religious traditions and nations share a common concern for children, theologians who reflect seriously on childhood have the opportunity to generate genuinely fresh approaches to interfaith understanding and to develop practical strategies nationally and internationally for advancing child well-being.

■ The task of theologies of childhood

The task of ‘theologies of childhood’ is to provide sophisticated understandings of children and childhood and our obligations to children themselves. Just as theologians have served the church by offering ‘theologies’ on a number of subjects of common concern such as ‘theologies of just war’, ‘theologies of the church’ or ‘theologies of human sexuality’, theologians can serve the entire church by crafting ‘theologies of childhood’: biblically-informed and sophisticated reflection on children and adults’ obligations to them. Through serious theological reflection in various contextualised theologies such as ‘theologies of the oppressed’, ‘theologies of the poor’ or ‘womanist theologies’, many contemporary theologians have strengthened the commitment to and understanding of groups that have often been voiceless, marginalised or oppressed. In the same way, theologians who seek to carry out the task of ‘theologies of childhood’ focus on one of the most voiceless and vulnerable groups on the planet: children and the youth. Furthermore, special attention to children and childhood is an urgent theological task because, even though children are part of every community, many forms of contextualised theology worldwide offer little serious reflection on children today. Even amongst contemporary feminist and womanist theologies, little attention is given to children as Bonnie Miller-McLemore (2001:446–473) has pointed out.

Another child-related, yet new and distinct, area of theological reflection that builds on ‘theologies of childhood’, is what some are calling ‘child theologies’. The task of ‘child theology’ is to re-examine or rethink fundamental doctrines and practices of the church in the light of attention to children and in solidarity with them. Drawing on analogies to feminist, black, Dalit and liberation theologies, child theologies have as their task not only to strengthen the commitment to and understanding of a group that has often been voiceless, marginalised or oppressed (children) but also to reinterpret Christian theology and practice as a whole, using the ‘lens’ of child or children as a category of analysis. In this way, child theologies help offer new insights into central themes of the Christian faith (such as God, creation, Christology, theological anthropology, sin, salvation, faith, the Word, worship, sacraments, missiology and eschatology), thereby in some cases tweaking and in other cases causing seismic shifts in our understanding of many theological doctrines, practices and even methodologies. Apparently the first to use the term ‘child theology’ and the first to challenge the world-wide church with the larger task of rethinking theology and practice through the lens of ‘the child’ were Keith White, Haddon Willmer and John Collier, the organisers of the Child Theology Movement.³⁵ They have contributed various publications to this new research domain (ed. Collier 2009; White & Willmer 2006, 2013; Wilmer 2007), and now others are contributing to this task (cf. Grobbelaar 2012; Tan 2007).

By focusing particularly on the status and nature of children and adults’ obligations to them, the particular task of ‘theologies of childhood’ is related to but distinct from child theologies and a range of other significant tasks for theologians, ethicists and practitioners regarding children. For example, religious educators and practical theologians have written much on ‘children’s spirituality’, ‘religious education’ or ‘child advocacy’. Some theologians,

35. Cf. www.childtheology.org

inspired by a movement sparked by philosophers on ‘children as philosophers’ (Matthews 1980, 1994; Pritchard 1985), have also started to explore ‘children’s own theologies’, that is, children’s own theological reflections on faith and their relationships to God, themselves and the neighbour.

All of these areas of theology related to children and childhood are important, yet the work of constructing sophisticated and informed theologies of childhood is an indispensable first step for helping Christian theologians and ethicists to put children in the centre of serious theological and ethical inquiry and for encouraging action on their behalf. Although they must recognise the important work of religious education and spiritual formation for children, Christian theologians who wish to construct theologies of childhood should be careful not to confuse their task with ‘religious education’, ‘children’s spirituality’, ‘theologies for children’ or even ‘children’s own theologies’. Their aim is not to describe the content of a ‘child’s own theology’ or how children think about or experience God. Their task is also not to prescribe a form of ‘theology for children’ or to focus mainly on child development, religious education or raising children in the faith. Although their theologies will inform and be informed by such work, their primary task is to provide sound theological understandings of children and the obligations to them. In this way, their audience goes beyond children, parents, teachers, youth and family ministers, relief workers or those caring directly for children. It reaches the whole church.

■ Resources for theologies of childhood

Just as feminist, black, liberation and other forms of contemporary theology are diverse, theologies of childhood, too, are bound to be plural and to take varied approaches in South Africa and the worldwide church. Of course, like all forms of contemporary theology, these theologies will

need to critically retrieve insights from common sources of theological reflection such as the Bible, Christian thought and practice and the experiences of individuals and communities. Furthermore, they will also need to incorporate the insights from the best childhood scholarship being pursued outside theology in the natural sciences, social sciences and humanities. In addition to building on these and other common sources of theological reflection, a theologian's theology of childhood will also be informed by his or her distinctive religious tradition, particular faith community and specific cultural and political context.

Informed by my study of the Bible and Christian tradition (ed. Bunge 2001; eds. Bunge, Fretheim & Gaventa 2008) and shaped by my experiences in the Lutheran Church, my own work in the area of theologies of childhood tends to incorporate six central and almost paradoxical perspectives of children and obligations to them (Bunge 2003a:11–19, 2003b:72–87, 2006a:53–68, 2006b:549–578). These perspectives include: 1) Children are gifts of God and sources of joy, and adults are to delight in and be grateful for them. 2) Children are developing beings, and adults are to help teach and guide them. 3) Children are orphans, neighbours and strangers, and adults are to seek justice for children and treat them with compassion. 4) Children are fully human and made in the image of God, and adults are to treat them with dignity and respect. 5) Children are moral agents who sometimes 'miss the mark' (or sin) and who have growing moral capacities and responsibilities, and adults need to help nurture these capacities, be examples of forgiveness and apologise for their own wrong-doing toward children and others. 6) Children are models of faith, and adults are to listen to and learn from them. All six perspectives are biblically based.

Even though these six perspectives are not exhaustive, they remind us of the complexity and dignity of children and help combat simplistic and

distorted views of children in Christian communities of faith and in the wider culture. Children are not one-dimensional creatures who are either innocent or sinful, victims or agents. Rather, these six multi-dimensional and paradoxical perspectives acknowledge children's full humanity as well as their need for guidance, their strengths and contributions as well as their vulnerabilities and needs and their spiritual wisdom as well as their growing moral capacities. Furthermore, this complex view of children also honours the complexity of child-adult relationships and adult obligations towards children, emphasising that adults are not only to protect, provide and teach children but also to enjoy, respect and learn from them. These six perspectives (held together) help to maintain a 'multi-focal' and vibrant view of children and to develop meaningful and textured relationships with them.

These six perspectives and others are also echoed in some of the excellent Christian theologies of childhood that have been written by theologians around the world. In North America, for example, Bonnie Miller-McLemore (2003:xxiii) emphasises that children must be 'fully respected as persons, valued as gifts, and viewed as agents'. Building primarily on the gospels and the work of Frederick Schleiermacher, Dawn DeVries (2001:161–162) criticises an instrumental view of childhood, stressing that children have intrinsic worth and both rights and responsibilities that correspond to that worth.

As these and other theologians undertake the task of theologies of childhood in all parts of the world, they have the opportunity to build upon an abundance and variety of sources. The following provides some examples of the four primary resources on which theologians have built and can continue to build strong, robust and informed theologies of childhood: The Bible, 'the tradition' (insights from major theologians and the history of Christian doctrine and

practice), ‘other disciplines’ (insights from various disciplines outside theology such as philosophy, the natural and social sciences, literature or history) and ‘experience’ of both individuals and communities. These four sources help to strengthen theological reflection on children and childhood, and child-focused research in all of these areas is expanding rapidly.

■ The Bible

Biblical scholars are exploring a range of perspectives on children and child-adult relationships in the Bible, and the Society of Biblical Literature now hosts programme units that focus specifically on children and both familial and social obligations towards children. Many new books and research projects have been devoted to child-related subjects in the Bible (Aasgaard 2006; eds. Bunge *et al.* 2008; Carroll 2001:121–134; Gundry-Volf 2001:29–60; Fewell 2003 & Müller 1992). Scholars are finding that children are depicted in a host of ways in the Bible: not only as victims or in need of instruction and discipline, but also as gifts of God, signs of God’s blessing, and social agents themselves. The studies also show that children have played more complex and diverse roles in families, communities, and religious life than has often been assumed. Although at times powerless and marginal, they also influence many aspects of community life. Furthermore, they are called to honour and obey their parents yet sometimes also to deceive them or leave them behind. They are depicted as victims of injustice yet also agents of God. In addition, childhood is used metaphorically in a variety of positive and negative ways in the Bible.

Many of these biblical studies also highlight the striking and even radical ways that Jesus spoke about and treated children. At a time when children occupied a low position in society and abandonment was not a crime, the gospels portray Jesus as blessing children, welcoming them, embracing

them, touching them, healing them, laying his hands on them, and praying for them. He also rebukes those who turn them away and even lifts children up as models of faith and paradigms of the reign of God. ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is too such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs’ (Mt 19:14). Furthermore, he equates welcoming a child in his name to welcoming himself and the one who sent him (Lk 9:48). (For other salient passages, see for example, Mt 11:25, 21:14–16, 18:1–5, 19:13–15; Mk 9:33–37, 10:13–16; Lk 9:46–48, 18:15–17).

■ ‘Tradition’

Theologies of childhood can also build on a host of resources that are helping to disclose perspectives on children in the ‘tradition’: in the history, doctrines and practices of the church and in the work of past theologians who continue to influence communities of faith today (cf. eds. Browning & Bunge 2011). Since conceptions of children change over time and are limited and since all religious traditions have viewed and treated children in numerous ways over time, those who seek to develop contemporary theologies of childhood should carefully mine their particular faith traditions and critically appropriate multiple perspectives from their traditions that reflect the dignity and complexity of children. Religious traditions are rarely monolithic, and they contain a wealth of diverse and sometimes paradoxical perspectives on children. We see such diversity in the history of Christianity, and it is evident in many other religious traditions. In the Confucian tradition, for instance, although two of its early and major masters, Mencius (ca. 372–389 BCE) and Xunzi (ca. 810–230 BCE), agreed on the importance of education and ritual practices for children, they expressed different views of human nature, which had implications for their attitudes toward children (Zhou 2011).

By critically drawing upon multiple perspectives on children within their own traditions and by holding these various perspectives in tension and in conversation with one another, theologians can strengthen and deepen their understanding of children and childhood today. Although Christian theologies of childhood are bound to vary, they all benefit by incorporating several resources from the tradition and developing conceptions of children that acknowledge their full humanity as well as their need for guidance, their spiritual wisdom as well as growing moral capacities and their strengths and gifts as well as their vulnerabilities and needs. By paying attention to divergences and tensions within their own particular traditions regarding children, theologians can better analyse and assess contemporary assumptions and presuppositions about children. They can also avoid narrow or distorted perspectives in their traditions that have fostered destructive attitudes and behaviour toward children.

By taking notice of varied perspectives on children, theologians will also uncover neglected elements of their tradition and new areas of research. Contributors to my own volume, *The child in Christian thought* (ed. Bunge 2001), certainly experienced this kind of discovery by re-examining influential theologians and movements with attention to what they had to say about children and to what wisdom from these sources might be appropriated for today. The volume includes essays on figures that have highly influenced various Christians worldwide, such as Augustine, Chrysostom, Aquinas, Calvin, and Luther as well as lesser known but powerful theologians and movements in the church. Even though the contributors all knew their subjects well, they were surprised to discover the amount of attention these figures and movements devoted to children and obligations to them, and the number of positive ideas they expressed. The 19th-century theologian, Friedrich Schleiermacher (d. 1834), who is well-known for his ideas about gender

relationships and theological method, for example, also had much to say about children and child-parent relationships. He wrote many sermons about the family, children and the treatment of children, and he encouraged theologians to write catechisms and other material for children's faith formation. By re-examining his work and that of other influential theologians with attention to their conceptions of and commitments to children, scholars uncovered both many new insights into these theologians and a number of resources for theologies of childhood today. If theologians in Africa and around the world can take up this same task today in their own social and cultural contexts and with reference to the church leaders, theologians, doctrines and practices that have most influenced their own particular faith communities, they will also be able to strengthen theologies of childhood for their context.

■ Other disciplines

Theologians can also build on the creative and insightful work being done in disciplines across the academy concerning childhood and children. Once primarily the subject of educators and child psychologists, childhood is a now growing area of intellectual inquiry in all subjects, and interdisciplinary child-studies or childhood-studies programmes can be found at colleges and universities worldwide. Such programmes incorporate research by scholars from many areas of the natural and social sciences, humanities and law. Thus, theologians can build strong theologies of childhood today by taking into account a host of resources outside the fields of theology such as studies on children and childhood in psychology, sociology, law, history or literature. Scholars in many of these fields are exploring a range of insightful questions about children's development, social status, agency, rights and responsibilities. They are also interested in the role that religion and spirituality play in the lives of children – in the past and today.

Since childhood studies is such a fast-growing subject in many academic fields, it is impossible to summarise the many possible resources for theologies of childhood, yet the potential of these resources can be highlighted by citing just a few examples from the social sciences and history. Recent studies by psychologists and sociologists have much to say not only about children's development and agency but also about the positive role of religion, religious communities and spirituality in the lives of children. For example, several studies by social scientists are showing that a robust faith life and participation in a faith community are amongst the significant assets that help young people avoid risky behaviour, cope with adversity and thrive. A strong faith life can also play a positive role in moral development by providing young people with foundational values and virtues that help guide and ground their behaviour and ethical decisions. Faith communities also help parents in meeting their children's basic needs by providing social and instrumental support and by facilitating parents' sense of efficacy and inclusion thus diminishing the risk of abuse or neglect. Furthermore, psychologists and sociologists are exploring the spiritual lives of children (cf. Cavalletti 1983; Coles 1990; Heller 1986; Rizutto 1979). The Search Institute³⁶, the National Study of Youth and Religion³⁷ and other initiatives are examining the spiritual development and experiences of children and adolescents (cf. Roehlkepartain *et al.* 2006; Smith & Denton 2005; eds. Yust *et al.* 2006). Various not-for-profit institutes and projects are holding conferences, for example *The International Association for Children's Spirituality*, which has sponsored an annual international conference since July 2000 and also launched *The International Journal of Children's Spirituality* in 1996.³⁸ Social scientists are also raising

36. www.Search-Institute.org

37. www.youthandreligion.nd.edu

38. www.childrenspirituality.org

provocative methodological questions about how to study or even define children's spirituality (cf. Hay & Nye 1998).

Research in the area of the history of childhood is also growing rapidly and offering many resources for theologies of childhood today. Beginning with the influential 1960 study by Philippe Ariès about European history, for example, historians have been examining how conceptions of children and their material worlds change over time and in various cultural contexts (cf. Calvert 1992; Cunningham 1995, 1998; Fass & Mason 2000; Pollock 1983; Schultz 1995) and now histories are being written about childhood in all parts of the world. In addition, several dissertations and books have been written on views of childhood in the history of various religious traditions (cf. Gil'adi 1992; Kinney 2003; Marcus 1998; Ziolkowski 2001). These studies have already added important chapters to the history of Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Confucianism as well as to the history of childhood in general. Historians and historical theologians who study specifically the history of childhood within Christianity are finding that, although there are appalling instances of children abuse and neglect throughout the history of Christianity and in contemporary Christian communities, the history of Christianity also contains many initiatives that promoted the well-being and protection of children and an astonishing and complex range of religious attitudes and behaviour toward children (cf. Bakke 2005; Horn & Martens 2009; ed. Wood 1994). Significant foundations for historical studies on children were laid in research that provided detailed analyses of many aspects of family life in the past such as childbirth, motherhood, marriage and divorce. Many of these studies on the histories of childhood within Christianity and other religions are providing a corrective to oversimplified assumptions about religious roots of child abuse or religious views of children. Much of this new historical work is also providing important

resources for scholars in all faith traditions who seek to construct vibrant religious understandings of children and childhood. These studies confirm that the history of childhood in the world's religions is much more complex than previous literature has suggested and merits further investigation.

Like all contemporary histories of childhood, these and other studies are showing that scholars cannot mark a date for the 'discovery' of childhood or chart simple historical accounts from 'regressive' to 'progressive' approaches to children. Scholars also recognise that they must distinguish the history of childhood from the history of children, realising that it is much easier to study adult conceptions of children than to find out how adults actually treated children or to uncover the ideas and experiences of children themselves. Scholars acknowledge that even memories of childhood written by adults raise a number of provocative questions: Do these memories accurately represent that adult's childhood experience? How much are adult memories of childhood shaped by assumptions of what that childhood should have been or by questions posed by historians?³⁹ These and other questions reveal the complexities of writing histories of childhood, even as these histories are uncovering a range of valuable sources within diverse cultures and religious traditions for reflecting on children and childhood today. Furthermore, a number of new studies are taking creative approaches to finding out more about the actual experiences and day-to-day life of children in the past by building on many diverse sources, such as archaeological finds, burial sites, images, letters, diaries, epitaphs, graffiti or medical records.⁴⁰

39. For insightful discussions of these and other kinds of questions that can guide research in the history of childhood, see eds. Hiner & Hawes, (1985:xx-xxii) as well as Hiner (1978:15-16).

40. See, for example, the work of the 'Tiny voices from the past: Perspectives on childhood in early Europe', directed by Reidar Aasgaard at the University of Oslo (www.hf.uio.no/ifikk/english/research/projects/childhood/).

■ 'Experience'

Another significant source of theologies of childhood, like all forms of theology, is the experience of individuals and communities. 'Experiences' in the case of children can mean learning about the many issues facing children, families and communities past and present through a variety of sources such as social scientific reports and the media but also through testimonies, stories, interviews and novels. Attending to experience in the case of children also means striving to listen to children's own perspectives. Almost all those who are seeking to develop theologies of childhood strive in some way to incorporate more fully children's own experiences and perspectives and adult memories of childhood whilst, at the same time, recognising the challenges and risks of doing so. In other words, they seek to honour children's perspectives and childhood memories as powerful and essential sources for theological reflection whilst acknowledging the complexities of carrying out this task.

It is difficult to find and to hear the 'child's voice' not only in history or even in adult memories of childhood but also in conversations with children themselves. Children are vulnerable and often want to please parents and other adults. In addition, adult preconceptions about children's experiences are bound to influence how adults 'hear' children. Even the particular questions posed to children about their experiences and ideas shape their responses. Trying to include them directly as participants in particular theological discussions with adults could cross inappropriate emotional or intellectual boundaries and raises questions about how 'appropriate boundaries' are even defined and defended.

Although no approach can solve these and other difficulties of incorporating the voices of children as sources for theological reflection, scholars are finding some creative ways to incorporate children's voices and reaping some rewards. For example, some have cautiously used stories, letters or diaries

written by children. Others have interviewed adults about their childhood experiences, or they have built upon social or psychological studies of children that include interviews with children themselves such as those by Jonathan Kozol (1995, 2000) or Robert Coles (1990). Scholars have also aimed to learn more about the experience of children in the past and today by studying material culture or medical and legal records. Although imperfect, such attempts are important because they help draw attention to children as creative moral agents with questions, concerns, experiences and ideas of their own. Attempting to incorporate the 'child's voice' also helps check adult preconceptions about children and sparks new questions for investigation.

Sources for theologies of childhood in South Africa

Even though these four primary sources can enrich theological reflection, generally, and theologies of childhood, specially, theologians will build on these four and on many other sources in various ways, depending on their particular questions and context. In the case of South Africa, theologians will interpret these four sources with questions and concerns particular to the South African context, and they will also discover many other possible sources for theological reflection. For example, they will examine the most important theologians of their faith community for insights into childhood. Lutheran and Reformed South African theologians might also critically retrieve insights from Luther and Calvin since both continue to influence Protestantism worldwide today, and both wrote much about children and families. South Africans might also explore views of children expressed in African proverbs of various groups, South African poetry and novels. Since child poverty and exploitation are rampant in many parts of Africa, South African theologians would enrich their work by mining wisdom from social-scientific studies of child poverty, sexually exploited African girls or male and female circumcision. South African theologians could also strengthen

their work in the area of theology of children by re-examining the history of apartheid with a closer eye to conceptions of and treatment of children during this period.

■ Conclusion

As research on children and childhood continues to emerge in all disciplines, Christian theologians in South African and other parts of the world have a host of resources on which to build biblically informed and rigorous theologies of childhood that will serve the church and all areas of theology. By strengthening theologies of childhood, Christian theologians and leaders of faith-based organisations will also be much better equipped and prepared to participate in initiatives that foster interfaith understanding as well as promote child well-being and protection. Since every person on the planet once was or now is a child, the theme of children and childhood is an inviting entry point for fostering ecumenical and interfaith understanding and cooperation. A range of interfaith initiatives are growing around the world, and they take a variety of approaches. Some of the most successful of these focus on addressing ethical issues of common concern (such as peace, environmental or economic justice or adequate health care). People of goodwill from all faiths can learn from one another by discussing religious views of and obligations to children and by working together to address the urgent needs of children in their communities or around the world. At their best, such exchanges help faith communities to re-examine their own traditions more effectively for wisdom regarding children, to re-evaluate their own attitudes and behaviour toward children and to work creatively for social change.

As informed theologies of childhood continue to develop and to expand both within the worldwide church and across religious traditions, they will

help religious leaders to respond more meaningfully to international debates about child well-being, child protection and children's rights. At a time of global change, informed discussions about religious understandings of children will also enrich debates about related international concerns such as increasing economic globalisation, escalating environmental problems and changes in gender roles and the family. Since religion plays such a vital and complex role in children's experience and in social and political life and since one-third of the world's people are children, robust religious understandings of children will add distinctive and much-needed perspectives to these and other academic, religious and political debates.

As more attention is given to children and childhood in all areas of theology and religious studies and as childhood studies continue to grow in many other academic disciplines, religious scholars, theologians and ethicists of all faiths can build on this research and on the wisdom from their particular traditions to offer a broad array of sophisticated religious and theological conceptions of children. By doing so, they will strengthen their contributions to the academy and the public square. They will also build up their own religious community's commitment to serving children. Serious religious reflection on children, which includes attention to their vulnerabilities and needs as well as their strengths and gifts, will be appealing and useful to a wide range of audiences and publics that are concerned about children and childhood – from scholars, professionals and policy makers to civic leaders, international relief agents and child advocates. In this way, the intellectual task of exploring the themes of children and childhood in relationship to the world's great religions has the potential not only to strengthen interdisciplinary research on children but also to increase genuine respect and concrete support for children in local communities and around the world.

Childhood in the book Proverbs and in Shona proverbs

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Introduction

In April 2014, a story of a 16-month old toddler, supposedly abandoned by the mother on the N1 National Route highway due to indescribable economic hardship or some other domestic dispute made headlines in South Africa (Molosankwe 2014:n.p.). Apparently, a trucker narrowly avoided running over the walkabout toddler along the busy highway at about 19:00, and investigations later led to the arrest of the 19-year old mother. This account, branded as inconceivable for an African mother, can only be fathomable if, in the mother's estimation, her toddler was better off

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with well-wishers than with her. Whatever the justification, this story does not sit well within an African frame of reference where words like adoption technically do not exist in many indigenous languages. The absence of indigenous words for adoption across the majority of languages on the continent underscores automatic kin adoption which is widely practiced when a child become parentless. For this reason, as Roby and Shaw (2006:200) observe, adoptions by non-kin have simply not been practiced in Africa. Interestingly, UNICEF's (Cantwell 2014:34) position on adoption in African states is that, for children who cannot be raised by their own families, an appropriate alternative family environment must be sought in preference to institutional care, which should be used only as a last resort. Forster (2002) adds that, in traditional African culture, there were no orphans as parentless children were cared for within the kin system. The African world view, as reflected in the Shona proverbial statement *Mai kunatsa muroyi, ziso riri pamwana* [A mother pleases a witch whilst her eye is on the child], presumes the utmost vigilance in the protection of children (Hamutyinei & Plangger 1996:233–234). The obligatory protection of children embedded in the African world view is stated clearly by Mangena and Ndlovu (2014). It is noticeable from the reactions to the above story that the African endearment of children stands in direct opposition to the calamitous actions of the young mother in the example.

This chapter attempts to decipher the African conception(s) of childhood within Shona proverbial lore with particular reference to the book of Proverbs. The book of Proverbs, which consists of wisdom poems (mostly in Chapters 1–9) and proverbial sentences (ch. 10–31) in its compositional structure, utilises wisdom for its pedagogical agenda. According to Dyrness (1977:189), biblical wisdom has to do with 'the intensely practical art of being skilful and successful in life'. His view

parallels Matereke and Mapara (2009:199) who aptly imbue the general conception of proverbs as the residue of wisdom that is prescriptive of a higher precision of people's world view and conception of reality. Walton, Matthews and Chavalas (2000:248) elucidate the process concerning the creation of wisdom as constituting 'skills in living that combined the powers of observation, the capacities of human intellect and the appreciation of knowledge and experience to daily life'. This perspective can be added a divine orientation implied in Proverbs 1:7 (cf. Pr 9:10; 31:30) in which the motif concerning fear of the Lord motif is primary. The beneficiaries of the instructions contained in this account are primarily identified as the simple or young (Pr 1:4) who are exhorted in Proverbs 1:8 (cf. Pr 6:20) to heed parental instruction. The home setting implied at the onset of the account is sustained throughout (Pr 1:8; 3:12; 4:1, 3; 6:20; cf. 10:1; 13:1; 15:5, 20; 17:21, 25; 19:13, 26; 20:20; 23:22; 27:10; 28:7, 24; 29:3; 30:17) and intimated as a treasured tradition in Proverbs 4:1-4. In Proverbs 4:3, the speaker refers to his early upbringing as 'tender', implying the weakness of an undeveloped character (Brown, Driver & Briggs 1977:940) therefore rationalising the need for deliberate parental instruction without which he would remain unprepared for life. There is a predominance of a vocabulary related to parental obedience that locates this material within a family setting. Frequently, the son, who is the intended recipient, is required to obey through imperatives such as 'listen' (1:8; 4:1, 10), 'do not forsake' (1:8; 6:20), 'accept' (2:1; 4:10), 'keep' (3:1; 6:20; 7:1), 'pay attention' (4:1, 20; 5:1) and 'bind' (1:9; 7:3). Moss (1997:426) regards this material as (informal) parental teaching. He suggests that 'wisdom is presented as the equivalent of parental teaching and that this understanding of wisdom lends topical unity to the first section of the book of Proverbs'.

The treasured home-based instruction presupposed in the book of Proverbs is reflected in the upbringing of children within Shona culture.

Gelfand (1979) describes the educational programme of the Shona as follows:

From the age of six the Shona child is continually instructed directly and indirectly through listening to wise sayings, such as proverbs, being presented with riddles (*zvira hwe*) to answer, puzzles to solve, songs to sing and especially games to play. Most of these activities take place all through the year and anywhere children happen to be ... However, a good deal of this informal instruction takes place after the evening meal at the *dare* (men's meeting place), where the grandfather relates stories to the boys or tells them proverbs and what taboos they should know, or asks them riddles. In the same way the grandmother talks to her granddaughters around the fireplace in the hut. (p. 85)

The use of proverbs and other wisdom devices in the educational programme particularises not only the prominence of proverbial wisdom as pedagogical means but also its inherent knowledge value. Masaka and Makahamadze (2013:136) correctly espouse that proverbs are not only the preserver of religious, ethical codes but also the enforcer of desirable human conduct. In both biblical and African settings, the quality of one's offspring was a matter of cardinal importance, not only in determining personal decorum but also in predicting a lasting legacy through a well-groomed child. Therefore, Shona proverbs, representing one of the ethnic groups of Zimbabwe with whom I am familiar, will be used as a case study of the general view on children and their upbringing in dialogue with the book of Proverbs. I commence the study with some remarks on how proverbs function, followed by an analysis of selected proverbs on the upbringing of children. I end with some key observations.

■ Preliminary remarks on proverbiality

Whilst culture shapes people's behaviour, beliefs and attitudes, as Malinga-Musamba and Ntshwarang (2014:233) correctly observe,

proverbs, regarded as the intellectual property of the elders or ancestors to whom all conscientious Africans subscribe, are the reservoir of non-negotiable truth. Accepting this view, it is also good to take cognisance of Wa Ngugi's (2009:50) opinion in which he cautions us not to identify the essence of African culture by means of just a few proverbial statements.

Proverbs usually presume to be the intellectual property of the experienced who are obligated to instruct the uninitiated. Avoseh (2013) affirms this view by stating the following:

[T]he first and most important 'theoretical framework' in indigenous African education are ancestors whose 'theories' are passed on to all generations through the power of the spoken word situated in layers of orality. (p. 237)

It is important to underscore Masaka and Makahamadze's (2013:133) view that the Shona ancestral viewpoint was greatly distorted and misrepresented by missionary and anthropological studies where veneration was mistaken for worship. They state:

The Shona do not worship [*ancestors*] but simply venerate them because they are an important stage in the process of communicating with *Mwari* [*God*]. The Shona clearly captures this actuality by way of ingenious proverbs that shows that [*ancestors*] are not ends in themselves but means to some greater ends that is *Mwari*. (p. 133)

Traditional songs and games, as Nyota and Mapara (2008:189–202) opine, are one of the ways of learning what a given culture can offer. The same applies to storytelling as Jirata and Simonsen (2014:135–49) demonstrate in their study on Oromo-speaking children in Ethiopia. However, proverbs epitomise the power of the spoken word from which truth is established. This would be true about biblical proverbs in that the sage 'gave counsel, with the insight derived from keen observation of life, from years of

experience, and from wide acquaintance with the fund of ancient wisdom' (Anderson 1993:572). The book of Proverbs is therefore a collection of collections of years of wisdom in what Gerstenberger (2001:25) has argued to be a family-based faith – a theology of the elementary needs of life, particularly pronounced after the collapse of state faith. He asserts that shared life ensured the 'productive and protective activities of wife and husband, children and elderly in the family association directed together to the one goal, making possible the survival of the group' (Gersternberger 2001:25). Proverbs, amongst others, became a very important medium through which the intended intellectual property was passed on from one generation to the next.

Interestingly, although proverbs are easily recognisable, paremiologists will admit that they are not easy to define. However, they are a preserve of observable phenomena that command unquestionable authority as intimated above. Hamutyinei and Plangger (1996:xiii) suggest that 'one of the most revealing clues to the mind of a people is found in its proverbial lore'. With specific reference to the Shona people, of whom they have put together the most comprehensive collection of proverbs containing almost 2000 proverbs categorised under various helpful themes, they add that 'the Shona of Zimbabwe, like most of the Southern Bantu, are exceedingly rich in proverbs. Proverbs also appear to be the most cherished and interesting part of their oral literature' (Hamutyinei & Plangger 1996:xiii). To some extent, and especially amongst the senior members of society, proverbs have remained part of everyday speech. They communicate commonly sanctioned truth distinctly and succinctly. It is a truism that '[a] Proverb is worth a thousand words' (Mieder 1993:x), hence their uses in oral speech, political rhetoric, newspaper headlines, book titles, advertising slogans and cartoon captions. Mieder (1993) concludes:

If used to manipulate people economically or politically proverbs might even become dangerous weapons as expressions of stereotypical invectives or unfounded

generalisations. But, for the most part, it can be said that if used consciously and perhaps somewhat sparingly, proverbs remain to the present day a most effective verbal tool. (p. x)

For this reason, proverbs on children should be quite revealing about the inherent conception of childhood and related rubrics within a given geo-context. I already alluded to the issue of proverbial authority to which I must add that, when people use proverbs, it is in a conscious attempt to appeal to a commonly adhered authority, on the one hand, and a value system that gives both meaning and identity, on the other hand. This mutuality between folk invariably becomes the basis for the correct understanding of a given proverb and its application. In this regard, Avoseh (2013:243) comments that the holistic nature of the African world view has its advantages, but it also makes certain things difficult to explain to an outsider to the traditional African mindset. His comment is important to bear in mind, especially in view of the fact that proverbial truth is obligatory to adherents of the given culture. To an outsider, it is perhaps statements to be analysed and weighed, an option that does not necessarily exist for the insider.

According to Monye (1990:10) language, which is basically what proverbs are, helps people to 'express their thoughts, beliefs feelings, actions etc. When people use proverbs they also project some of the values which give them identity'. For that reason, the 'truthfulness' of a proverb in its original setting is neither doubted nor debated. Kwesi Yankah (1994:127) affirms that proverbs are not universal truths but rather limited pieces of folk wisdom which are valid only in specific situations. However, for the folk in that given context, proverbs that are based on, as Kudadjie (1996:2) says, 'observations made about the nature and behaviour of human beings, animals, birds, plants and natural as well as supernatural objects and beings' invariably become a form of identification. Therefore,

the question of the apparent contradictions between proverbs that some have raised is only a valid inquiry for 'outsiders'. By the same token, ideals that are subscribed to in one context may not necessarily be embraced elsewhere.

An additional word on proverbs pertains to their function. More than providing mere commentary on observed phenomena, proverbs, by appealing to ancient wisdom, contribute significantly to a given discourse. In this regard, proverbs are viewed as 'speech acts', representing a commonly understood manner of speaking that conveys a well-formulated strategy for handling a given social situation. As Grobler (1994:95) reveals in his study of the Northern Sotho use of proverbs, the addresser assumes expertise by quoting a proverb which is in his discourse a 'prescription' for handling a situation. Similarly, Monye (1990:3) says that the proverb users' assert themselves as people who understand the given social problem and their capability to solve it, hence the precursory catchphrase 'our elders say'. In this fashion, there is always a connection between a proverb and its referent in a social context. In some cases, the connection might be to alter the referent as deviating from the norm. So doing, the function of the proverb intends to restore the commonly held viewpoint. To this end, Başgöz (1990) comments as follows:

Folk definition is necessitated when the traditional harmony between the proverb lore and general culture turns to disharmony. In such a situation, the proverb, its message and function or its association with the magico-religious social life requires a new and different interpretation. The folk definition of proverb by various means is an attempt to re-establish an old harmony by a redefinition or reinterpretation of proverbs ... to increase the power and social prestige of proverbs ... (p. 17)

An outsider, therefore, faces the unprecedented challenge of ethnographic distance that, in turn, imposes unwarranted misgivings on the widely

known and talked about proverbial truth amongst the folk. Whilst proverbs are subscribed to by everyone within the social context, that subscription may not be true for an outsider. The logic of proverbs, as much as the definition, is culturally based. Otakepor (1987), quoting an Igbo proverb, concludes:

As words of wisdom proverbs are mechanisms employed in speech acts. They are used to 'salt' speech just as common salt is used to make soup taste better, 'just as you need hot pepper to eat rotten meat'. (p. 263)

By design, proverbs invite reflection, hence their prominence in sacred and secular literature. Regarding the book of Proverbs, if one accepts that the compilation of the material was post-exilic as most scholars opine, it is plausible that the book intended to preserve what would otherwise be lost within a political stalemate as reflected in Psalm 137. Without the temple and the related priestly and cultic practices, Israelites had to rely on a new form of preserving their faith. Gerstenberger (2001) argues in this regard:

The store of paternal and maternal customs, not only collected in the family but also handed down in the wider cultural context, was the hallowed basis of all internal relationships. It was presumably available in wisdom sayings (proverbs), exemplary narratives, songs and commandments (norms of behaviour), which were inculcated from youth upwards. Their vulnerable age alone made the basic rules of family relationships divine norms and talks. (p. 27)

The exilic scenario would have exacerbated the need for such instruction as the very survival of Israelite faith was threatened to the core. I deduce from this that one can extrapolate from proverbial wisdom the ideals that are latent within a given people's perspectives on life. In thinking about our subject on Shona conceptions of childhood, I therefore read Shona proverbs to decipher the perceived norms and values through which I view current realities. This view can be confirmed from another angle. In the preface to the book *Growing up in the Shona society*, Michael Gelfand

(1992:iv) reveals that a child's reasoning capacity is developed through learning proverbs, riddles, playing games, listening to stories and taking part in the songs sung by people. The deliberate choice of proverbs as a medium of communication in home-based nurturing in the Shona culture and the book of Proverbs seems to be intended to maximise the effect on the part of the intended hearer. In these proverbs are embedded the perceived norms and values that can give us some insight into the prevailing conceptions of childhood amongst the users of the proverbs.

We now turn our attention to some selected proverbs for this purpose.

■ Conceptions of childhood in selected Shona proverbs

Firstly, perhaps our natural starting point should be some perspective on the unborn. Culturally, pregnancy begins the process of child formation not only physiologically but also in terms of qualities. The renowned researcher of Shona culture, Michael Gelfand (1992), reveals the following belief:

[The] mind, character and physical appearance of the foetus can be influenced by the mother, who should only look at people with particularly good characters or some admirable quality so that it can be transferred to her unborn baby. (p. 1)

In similar vein, the expectant mother must avoid unpleasant or obscene contaminants, which perhaps explains the proverb *Masha*⁴¹ *mukadzi* (Muwati, Gambashaya & Gwekerere 2011:5) to prescribe the fact that a family cannot survive without a mother. Speaking of motherhood, whilst a man's status depends on being married and having children as well as the quantity of his possessions, a woman's status revolves around the quality

41. The Shona concept '*musha*' usually translated 'home' in this usage implies a platform for consolidating relationships and inculcating *unhu/ubuntu*.

of her offspring. Bourdillon (1998:53) remarks that women's influence in the home actually is unprecedented in view of patriarchal dominance. Muwati *et al.* (2011) argue that a fresh view on the status of women in Shona culture is necessary:

First is the fact that the woman is the axis around which African life, survival and perpetuation revolve. She is the centerpiece of creation. The second realization is that while the woman is the center of creation, she operates together with the male principle as embodied in the stem *-na* (with). Already, this brings us to issues of balance in African life in which the woman is a key participant in the search for survival. This is unlike the definition, role and status of women in Eurocentric thought in which women are marginal and have had to fight to be acknowledged as human. The Shona stand-point on women is also clear in several African creation myths where male and female principles are compatible. (p. 2)

It is for this reason that pregnancy is a delicate experience that preoccupies the mother as expressed in the proverb *Mwana ndeari mudumbu, ari kunze anotambwa naye* [The child, of the mother, is the one in the womb but once born everyone plays with it]. This proverb, serves to underscore the motherly preoccupation with the development of her unborn child, which usually change after the birth of the child because of the growing involvement of the community with the new born child (cf. Hamutyinei & Plangger 1987:2 29). The Shona word for a girl, *musikana*, is a 'compound which posits the woman as the one who creates together with, that is, *musika-* (creator) and *-na* (with)' (Muwati *et al.* 2011:2). Applying the same rule, the Shona word for boy is *mukomana* made up of *mukoma* [brother] and *na* [with], implying the complimentary role of the genders. It must be pointed out that the rich gender harmony intimated in these concepts is a far cry from current reality where male dominance is certainly pronounced and feminine subservience has given rise to various feminist movements. Gender harmony ideally places a child's world in a conducive environment to thrive both domestically and communally.

Serpell, Mumba and Chasa-Kaball (2011) suggest that the following stands to reason:

[In] rural African societies, children were traditionally raised to believe that they were brought up by the community, that they were part of the community, and that in due course they would play an important role in the development of the community. (p. 80)

Through gender harmony and the community at large and via corporate responsibility, the home in which a child is born instils in children expressions of *unhu*,⁴² a reference to virtues, as Mandova (2013:357) indicates, ‘that celebrate mutual social responsibility, mutual assistance, trust, sharing unselfishness, self-reliance, caring, and respect for others, amongst other ethical values’. Focusing exclusively on a child becomes impossible because their world is a world of interdependent determinism.

Secondly, moving away from conception to birth, the proverb *Chikuru mwana, kurwadza kwenhumbu hakuyeukwi* [The importance of the child makes the mother forget her pains during child-birth] reflects the celebratory atmosphere associated with the new addition to the family (cf. Gelfand 1992:2). Gifts are brought to the child almost as a token to see the child. The proud father would express his appreciation to his wife and midwife though it must be added that there is a distinction in gratitude between a boy and girl child. The status of the girl child is represented in the proverb *Kubereka mwanasikana kuchengeta mangava* [To bear a daughter is to store up troubles]. It is perhaps the misunderstanding of a proverb like this which has given rise to the emancipation of women and a strong

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42. *Unhu* is the Shona equivalent of the Nguni concept *ubuntu*, which prescribes patterns of behaviour acceptable to the people and subscribed to by all. *Unhu* practically forms one’s identity because the derivative *munhu* [a person] can only be assigned to one who has satisfactorily met the obligatory parameters of acceptable conduct.

focus on the girl child, which has taken centre stage in many humanitarian efforts to date.⁴³ Although girls were generally seen as troublesome, one has to keep in mind that, within the Shona context, the father would quote this proverb when he is worried that his daughter might have misfortune in the marriage, which would cause him to return the lobola that he might have spent already. Typical of proverbs that seem to be contradictory, the proverb *Mwanasikana ndimapfumise* [A daughter enriches her family] is quoted at the birth of a girl to console her parents who may have wished for a boy. At the same time, the death of an infant is devastating, regardless of gender.

In their paper, Folta and Derek (1988:433) attempt to reveal the devastating impact of an infant's death on Shona mothers and families. In their study, they document that 'societies with high infant and child mortality rates do not recognize infants and children as people and therefore have no burial rites'. This is rather surprising in view of the above proverb that clearly celebrates the birth of a child. Folta and Derek (1988:434) continue by asserting that the 'implicit assumption is that in these cultures, the loss of infants and children is not mourned', perhaps as a coping mechanism but not because they regard infants as *persona non grata*.

The central position that a child occupies in the community is perhaps best illustrated by the proverb *Chatorwa nomucheche chatorwa nashe* [What

.....
43. Croll's (2006) study reveals that this is not a challenge limited to African contexts only as her field research based on East, South and Southeast Asia indicate that many interventions to redress girls' rights have mostly not translated into effective, sustained or transformative national programmes or local projects in support of girls. Kangira (2009) analyses a publication that attempts to portray the girl-child in a positive light in a patriarchal society to see how this presentation could assist in empowering the girl-child. In contrast to the above conceptions, Winer and Phillips (2012) reveal that caregivers who treat boys differently from girls, under the assumption that boys are problematic, rate boys lower than girls in these contexts.

has been taken by a child has been taken by a chief/king]. In simple terms, a child enjoys the immunity of a chief, implying communality in endorsing childhood innocence and vulnerability. Needless to say, children enjoy the best of society's protection because of their position of dependency and hence their inferred supremacy. In this vein, one also finds the proverb *Mwana mudiki chirangaranga* [A child is like the top of the spinal column]. It indicates that a 'baby has no bias and is loved by everybody [and] is freely given to anyone to hold and to look after and people are most careful in handling the child.' This proverb is quoted freely in clarifying the position of a child in a community. (Hamutyinei & Plangger 1987:236). This is perhaps the source of the notion 'it takes a whole village to raise a child'. I do, however, have to qualify that the village in question has to be functional in all respects to uphold such a principle.

Thirdly, arguably the most celebrated conception of childhood is that of bringing up a child. As already indicated, this is where parental bragging rights are mostly claimed. A number of proverbs indicate the joys and challenges of this aspect of parenting more than any other. The parenting challenges are laid bare in the proverb *Abereka atochena moyo* [One who has borne children ought to be patient] or its variant *Wabereka sekera munyasi medengu* [Once you have borne a child, laugh whilst under a big basket], which advises parental patience in view of all sorts of misdemeanours to be addressed or warns them not to take pleasure in other children's shortcomings. This is why *kuudza mwana hupedzisirira* [To tell a child (you) need to explain (yourself) thoroughly] is frequently cited in many parenting contexts. The benefits of careful instruction are equally recognised in the proverb *Mwana chingwarire haapunyutse mbeva* [A careful child does not let a mouse escape].

In his comments on the upbringing of children within the Shona context, Gelfand (1973) states:

The rich beauty of the Shona ethical code stands in sharp contrast to the material individualism of the West. The Shona possesses much that is worth retaining and the prospects are that they will save a good deal of it for succeeding generations. They will have to devise means of blending this with what the West has brought them. The concept of brotherhood, the love of a good family life with close support for its members and good neighbourliness, are the pillars of Shona culture. Africa has something to offer the world in human behaviour and this the Shona can offer to the world by their fine example. (p. 5)

I assume that the observations above relate to the world at the time of Gelfand's research. It would be this celebrated world with which we find common ground as we reflect on the book of Proverbs – shared life (*ubuntu*), which Gerstenberger (2001:27), cited earlier, describes as a theology of the elementary needs of life. We note the biblical celebration of healthy children (Gn 4:1; Rt 4:14; Jr 20:15) as in the Shona culture. The naming of a child echoes the joy as the name itself is a statement not a label (cf. Gn 17:5, 15; 29:31–30:24; 32:28; 1 Sm 1:20; Ex 2:20; Rt 4:17). The importance of a name is underscored in Proverbs 22:1 (cf. 10:7; Ec 7:1), demanding living up to a desirable character and preserving the family name. It is for this reason that one finds that the precedence of parents over children projected throughout the book of Proverbs (15:20; 17:25; 20:20; 23:25; 28:24; 30:17) is a significant pre-existing order with divine sanction as Gerstenberger (2001:30) argues. As will be pointed out in the reflections that ensue, the regrettable reality is that the ideal world epitomised by *ubuntu* is seemingly eroding quite quickly. The world described in the proverbs cited could be a thing of the past, especially in view of the story with which we commenced this chapter. There are lessons we can extract

from these observations to inform our perspectives and, in particular, to assist with restoring our view on childhood on this continent. I now turn my attention to this.

■ Important reflections

Firstly, the diminishing use and knowledge of proverbs in the life and experience of the younger generation is worrisome. In this chapter, I argued that proverbs command a particular authority within a given culture, as Muwati *et al.* (2011) claim:

Given this mass of African cultural evidence, it stands to reason, therefore, that the Shona and the Ndebele conception of human rights is not detached from responsible participation and contribution. Children, who are the flowers of the nation, derive immune benefits from such an upbringing. (p. 5)

However, with the loss, if not the complete erosion, of the use of proverbs, one wonders what options we have in redeeming the situation. How will this impact the situation of children who are on the margins of society (Swart & Yates 2012:1), and how shall we get them to participate as citizens on all matters of life, capacitated with voices and own opinions?

Secondly, the growing numbers of child abuse and negligence such as trafficking, street children, child prostitution and abandonment reflect a world view foreign to Africa. In view of the traditional position of children as being embraced and protected by society, the contemporary abuse of children is shocking. For example, a hijacking incident, described as heartless, saw a 4-year-old boy dragged behind a car as the robbers became impatient with the mother who was trying to unbuckle him from the car seat. The vehicle was found abandoned just a few kilometres from where it was stolen with the boy's body still hanging from the vehicle.⁴⁴ Such

44. Cf. <http://www.sabreakingnews.co.za/2014/07/21/four-year-old-boy-dragged-to-death-in-brutal-hijacking/>

heartlessness is foreign to the traditional African world view. Somehow, these perpetrators of gross human violations must find a way to suppress their humanity in order to engage in such heinous activities. It seems that the world view of 'unhu/ubuntu' is no longer a reality in our time and age. As such, the newly developing theologies of childhood and child theologies demand re-examination with a view to curbing these societal anomalies.

Thirdly, the emergence of child-headed homes means that communality, that is, the taking on and protecting of children as embedded within African culture, is on the decline. This is not necessarily a deliberate degeneration of ideals but an overwhelming lack of resources in view of the enormity of the challenge of parentless children.⁴⁵ Whilst it is admirable to say that it takes a whole village to raise a child, in view of child neglect – regardless of circumstances – one wonders whether such a village of conscientious adults in actuality still exists. Understandably, the unprecedented AIDS scourge has not only had an impact on the lives of children, but it has also caught caring adults under-resourced for taking care of parentless children. This is surely taking its psychological toll. As suggested by Roby and Shaw (2006:199), perhaps a new model for orphan care, of strengthening the capacity of families and mobilising and accentuating community-based responses, becomes imperative.

Fourthly, the institutionalisation of variously needy children is a relatively new development as far as the African view of children is concerned. Children, who were treated like the flowers of society, enjoyed a spontaneous response from society in times of need. Adoption and

45. Kuo, Cluver and Casale (2014:318) place the number of orphaned children in sub-Saharan Africa at over 14 million whilst Morantz *et al.* (2013:338) cite UNICEF for an estimated 56 million children in need. If these numbers are correct, one can appreciate the psychological and physiological demands on adult caregivers who are suddenly thrown into the deep end where they not only have to take care of their own children but bear the burden of the extra children to look after.

orphanages did not exist in times past as society simply had inherent ways to take care of its vulnerable members, especially children. Interestingly, as already indicated, most African languages do not have a word for adoption. To contend with both street children and homeless families today demands a new approach in protecting the vulnerable, particularly children. Practically, there will never be enough institutions to cater for the many vulnerable homeless or parentless children.

Fifthly, the anarchy that we are experiencing in shifting from the highly celebrated ideals of childhood to more foreign perspectives to some extent signals the collapse of the African world view. It seems that rootlessness is the reason for the mayhem where different influences are creating some measure of disequilibrium. Proverbs were one of the ways in which wisdom was passed on to create equilibrium. In their paper on the use of proverbs as teaching tools in urban schools, Grant and Asimeng-Boahem (2006:17) cite the Asante saying: 'A wise child is talked to in Proverbs'. Rattray (1933:457), in his ground-breaking research, points out that the upbringing of the African child had as ultimate aim the production of a man or woman of virtue. This upbringing allowed the child to learn from experience, but it applied admonition when necessary. Children were expected to learn from their elders by emulating their example and not necessarily by the conscious and deliberate instruction on the part of the latter.

■ Conclusion

The significant influence of proverbial wisdom cannot be underestimated within African and comparative biblical contexts. Perhaps for similar reasons, it was by divine designation that an entire book of Proverbs had to be included in the canonical records. Current cases of child abuse and

the ontological concept of *ubuntu* are at polar opposites. Proverbial statements in which *ubuntu* is collectivised reflect a world in which the quality of one's offspring attracts societal recognition of one's own amiable qualities. This relates to the statement, *like father like son*, which can depict negative traits that a son has supposedly inherited from his dad. By the same token, positive characteristics in a son can have been inherited from the father. Communalism embedded within African culture also entails collective responsibility in child rearing. It is not possible to look at children in isolation without considering the key influences in their lives, as the proverbs we have considered intimate. I echo Duckert's (1997) sentiments when she writes:

The future of the church depends upon what children can do now. Our purpose as children educators, nurturers, and models is to engage them in the church's work with the neighbour and to learn with them how to be neighbours ourselves. (p. 78)

It is this communalism that taught a child to regard an adult male as a father and, equally so, an older woman as a mother and everyone else close to one's age as siblings. Incidentally, these injunctions coincide with Pauline instructions in 1 Timothy 5:1 where extended relationships are encouraged. Similarly, it is not surprising that in many African languages there is no direct word for cousin but simply brother or sister. Perhaps redeploying proverbial lore in our education offers a reasonable intervention to things that are falling apart.

Jesus and the children in the Gospel of Matthew

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■ Introduction

In the 21st century, the globalisation process and the development of the network society lead to the growing social exclusion of children (Castells 2000). It brought much suffering for the children of this world, particularly the children of Africa (cf. Taylor 2014). Many children are vulnerable; neglected; abused; raped; abandoned; displaced; hungry; even dying of malnourishment; exploited as labourers, sex slaves and child soldiers; dying before they turn five; without clean drinking water and access to safe, hygienic toilets; and lacking good and effective education (cf. UNICEF 2014). Castells (2000:163, 2001a:18, 2001b:148) is of the opinion that,

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although children were mistreated through the ages, they suffer much more in our time because of the growing influence of poverty-generating factors and the excluding activities of the global networked economy and society. Castells (2000) states:

With children in poverty, and with entire countries, regions, and neighborhoods excluded from relevant circuits of wealth, power, and information, the crumbling family structures break the last barrier of defence for children. In some countries ... misery overwhelms families, in rural areas as in shanty towns, so that children are sold for survival, are sent to streets to help out, or end up running away from the hell of their homes ... (p. 163)

This supply of children is met on the demand side with the globalised and networking criminal section of the new economic system. Castells (2000:164) adds that the 'massive uprooting of populations by war, famine, epidemics, and banditry' is also a source that leads to growth in both the supply and demand of children. This over-exploitation of children has become part and parcel of the existing global system. The loss of children's human dignity in this world is systemic.

However, this situation does not only rob many children of their human dignity, but as Wall (2010:loc. 44–45) states, 'neglecting children diminishes the humanity of us all'. To restore the humanity of us all, theology is called upon to rethink our biblical perspectives on children, society and church and even our reading, interpretation and application of the Old and New Testament as well as our formulated systematic theology, especially in this child-unfriendly African context of the 21st century. The important question is: Do the reading of the Bible makes any difference to the difficult situation of many children in the world and especially in the Africa of the 21st century?

This question is clearly 'a vocational driven question' (Fewell 2003:22), a question of the utmost importance for individuals perceiving their calling as seeking justice for children. However, it is also much more than just an

individualistically driven question associated with a definite calling. Fewell (2003) claims the following:

[*It is*] also a question that probes the ethical validity of (some part of) Western religious tradition, the ethical value of the academic enterprise, and the ethical possibilities of communities committed to reading the Bible with care and to responding with compassion. (p. 22)

It is a foundational ethical question on the way to restoring the humanity of us all, challenging believers in both the academic establishment and the church community to read the Bible with the children and their context of the 21st century as their hermeneutical lens. Fewell (2003) puts it as follows:

[*It is a*] way of reading that allows the subject of ‘children’ to reconfigure what is at stake in the biblical text. I am proposing an exploration of the text as a space to encounter and to contemplate the experiences and needs of children and of the adults who try to care for them. (p. 24)

Just as ‘feminist biblical interpretation generally places women at the centre of theological inquiry, and to varying degrees, makes their experience the criterion and norm for theological reflection, critique, reconciliation, and praxis’ (Nordling 2005:228), theology and the church are challenged in this moment to do the same regarding children.

■ Children in the Bible

In the Bible, there are many references to children and related subjects (cf. Zuck 1996:13–15). There are many biblical stories that refer to or include children. In the history of Israel, God often introduces a new phase in God’s redemptive involvement with Israel by starting anew with a child, for example Moses (Ex 1–3), Samuel (1 Sm 1–3), David (1 Sm 16), Joas (2 Ki 11) and Jesus (Mt 1; Lk 1–2). Various texts discuss the relationships

between parents and children. Taking into account these different texts in their totality, Zuck (1996:15) arrives at the following conclusion: ‘Truly the Bible is a book about children’. Herzog (2005:17) even states that children ‘are at the heart of the biblical message’.

In spite of this wide-ranging witness of the Bible about children, it seems that, until recently, many theologians did not devote much serious thinking to children and childhood as a topic of great importance (cf. Bunge 2001:3, 2004:43, 2006:551). Referring specifically to the biblical sciences, Bunge, Fretheim and Gaventa (eds. 2008:xv) express the opinion that, until recently, bible scholars in general have not paid much focussed attention to the many texts in the Bible referring to children and childhood and to other child-related terminology. ‘Furthermore, they have not explored how attention to children might shed light on other significant aspects of biblical texts’ (eds. Bunge *et al.* 2008:xv).

However, this situation is starting to change. A growing number of biblical scholars are giving more attention to biblical texts referring, both directly and indirectly, to children and childhood (cf. eds. Bunge *et al.* 2008; Koepf-Taylor 2013; Murphy 2013; Parker 2013; eds. Tongarasei & Kügler 2014). In the development of the Child Theology Movement, Jesus’s action in Matthew 18:2–5 to put a child in the midst of his disciples during a theological argumentation (cf. Willmer 2009:28) about who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, played a key role and still influences the operationalising of child theology as a domain of scientific study. In discussing what child theology is, White and Willmer (2006:5; cf. Willmer & White 2013) say that the way in which they do child theology ‘is a kind of extended reflection on and response to what Matthew records in Chapter 18:1–14 of his gospel.’

Matthew 18:1–14 also received attention in some circles focussing on children’s ministry (cf. Doherty 1986; Prest 1992; De Beer 2008). These interpretations are mostly very brief and they usually do not give much attention to either or both of two important principles in interpreting scripture. The first one is to understand the social cultural context or world behind the text, and the second one is to read the text with sensitivity to the text itself, to the logical and chronological structure of the text. In the light of this situation, I decided to revisit Jesus’ teaching about and interaction with children in the Gospel of Matthew in this chapter.

My decision was also influenced by the view of Adrian Thatcher (2010:137) that ‘[i]t is necessary to prioritize the teaching of Jesus over against the rest of scripture...’. It also seems as if the church’s tradition through the ages was more influenced by other texts, for example, the Household codes, than Jesus’ provocative teaching about and interaction with children (cf. Gundry-Volf 2001:59).

■ Children in the Mediterranean world of the first century

When you read the texts about children in the Gospel according to Matthew, you have to take into account the socio-cultural context of the 1st-century Mediterranean world in which the New Testament originated (cf. Carter 1994:98–108; Grobbelaar 2008:287–298; Lincoln 1990:398–402). It was a world where the Hellenistic and Judaic social and cultural contexts met each other. Actually, ‘throughout history ... Jewish culture always existed alongside other cultures. ... absorbing and transforming ideas they learned from their neighbors ...’ (Baumgarten

2011:16). In such a context, childhood was complex, and it is not possible to create a monolithic view of childhood in the 1st-century Mediterranean world. For understanding the background of Matthew's picture of Jesus and children, some generalisations are necessary (cf. Murphy 2013:loc. 1516–1517) and indeed possible. Despite the differences between the cultures in the 1st-century Mediterranean world, Botha (1999:316) is of the opinion that, in daily practices, the Jewish family did not differ much in structure, ideals and dynamics from the families of the other Mediterranean cultures. Balla (2003:109) also comes to the same conclusion that, in spite of some differences, 'much of the views concerning the child-parent relationship was shared by Jews and non-Jews in the centuries around the time of the New Testament'.

In the Mediterranean world of the 1st century, children were not important. People often disregarded and even abused them. In this regard, Strange (2000) states:

When Matthew recounted the miraculous feeding of the five thousand, he drew his story to a close with the comment: 'Some five thousand men shared in this meal, not counting the woman and children' (Mt. 14:21). 'Not counting the children' was a good summary of a widespread attitude. (p. 38)

This world was also an androcentric world: They always regarded men as superior to women. The family structure was essentially patriarchal. All authority in the family resided in the father as patriarch. He had absolute legal authority over his wife, children, slaves and property, and he was the only one who could take decisions about any conflict or disputes in his family (Boecker 1980:29). He was responsible for taking decisions about slaves, marriage and divorce, the discipline of children, household tasks and matters related to inheritance (cf. Perdue 1997:174; Wright 1992:764).

According to different laws, the status of children was ‘that of property belonging to the father’ (Wright 1990:222). In this regard, Phillips (2002) declares:

How the head of the household dealt with members of his household who were not free adult males was in general his private affair, and in contrast to wrongs inflicted on members of other households, was unlikely to cause any public disorder in the community. Consequently, his domestic actions were of no concern for the courts. (p. 112)

In a certain sense, children were ‘owned’ and in a sense not ‘people’, and therefore, fathers could do with them as they saw fit. This kind of authority included the power to decide about the life or death of a child. A father could wait until after the birth of a child to decide whether he would accept or reject the child. If the father decided not to accept the child as his, he could dispose of such a child on the ash heaps outside the town or city gates (Malina, Joubert & Van der Watt 1995:7). It is possible that, although very primitive, disposing of children was practice as a means of controlling the population growth (cf. Van Aarde 2004:134). Although the same type of laws did not apply to the father’s authority in the Judaic world, the father was still the unchallenged head of the family to whom the children had to be absolutely obedient (Malina *et al.* 1995:7). According to Murphy (2013:loc. 1579–1580) ‘[i]nfanticide, the deliberate killing of infants and young children, or its attempt is attested in Jewish sources’. He (Murphy 2013:loc. 1630–1632; cf. Boswell 1988:138–152; Cooper 1996:35–44) adds that the Jewish descriptions were not as explicit as those in the Greco-Roman sources, but the practice of infanticide was definitely present amongst the Jews even before they were exposed to Hellenism and in spite of the fact that it was legally prohibited. Murphy (2013:loc. 2195–2210) also stresses that it is necessary to distinguish between abandonment and infanticide.

Many cases of abandonment did not become infanticide (Murphy 2013:loc. 1630–1632).

Up to 90% of the population were peasants. Most people struggled financially, and during the 1st century, more than 70% of the population lived below the breadline (Malina *et al.* 1995:12). In such a situation, children were a valuable source of labour and income. Child labour was a generally accepted norm. From as early as the age of five, boys had to gather the harvest, and girls had to begin baking bread (Botha 2000:67). When sowing and gathering the harvest, everyone had to work, and there was no time for formal education.

Education was a process of moulding. ‘Children had to be ruled, disciplined; they had to be “made” like a rough piece of wood that is turned into a smooth and finished object by energy and force’ (Botha 2000:68). The father played the primary role in the education of children. Especially in the Jewish world, he was responsible for instructing his children in the law of God (Balla 2003:82). Corporal punishment was often part of the teaching process (Balla 2003:83–84). Children, in a sense, had to be tamed and, therefore, were kept in a constant state of fear.

It was also a world with poor hygienic conditions. ‘Various types of sickness stemming from malnutrition and poverty made childhood in the ancient world very precarious’ (Chouinard 1997:341). The death toll was generally very high amongst children. ‘Infant mortality rates sometimes reached 30%. Another 30% of live births were dead by age 6, and 60% were gone by age sixteen’ (Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003:336). The years of being a child was very short. Most of the girls were married by the age of 13, and most boys were married by the age of 15 or 16 (Botha 2000:75–76).

Life was generally very harsh on children. Children were property that belonged to the parents, in the words of Malina and Rohrbaugh (2003):

[A] minor, a child was on a par with a slave, and only after reaching maturity was he/she a free person who could inherit the family estate. The orphan was the stereotype of the weakest and most vulnerable members of society. The term 'child/children' could also be used as a serious insult (cf. Mt 11:16–17; Lk 7:32). (p. 336)

They viewed childhood as an incomplete state of being that was a mere prelude for adulthood. Children's value laid primarily in 'their future contributions as adults' (Carroll 2001:122) or as Maas (2000:457) states it, 'in the promise of maturity (as heir, producer of wealth, defender of the nation, or bearer of more children) rather than in the concrete reality of the present'. Wilkins (2004) express the same view, saying:

[C]hildren were valued primarily for the benefit that they brought to the family by enhancing the workforce, adding to the defensive power, and guaranteeing the future glory of the house. But they had no rights or significance apart from their future value to the family and were powerless in society. (p. 612)

The goal of parenthood was to control the behaviour of the child and to mould the child to become an honourable adult.

Carter (1994) identifies four similarities in how children were viewed and treated in Jewish and in Greco-Roman homes. He formulated these four similarities as follow:

To be a child is to be dependent on one's parents.

As a lifelong duty, a child submits to and obeys its parents within the hierarchical household. Children are to care for and serve their elderly parents.

Children are marginal beings who are seen as a threat to the civic order. The child must be taught its place so as to maintain that structure. The essential problem with being a child is that one is not an adult citizen.

A child is in transition to its valued future role as an adult citizen. The child exists for the future in that it is the duty of citizens to give birth to future citizens and ensure the survival of the state. Proper training is necessary for children to learn their future roles. Training functions to guard the state from the potentially destructive influence that untrained adults would exert on the social order. (pp. 100–101)

■ Jesus' attitude and actions towards children

In a survey (Murphy 2013:loc. 371–471) of the Synoptic Gospels, Murphy (2013:loc. 470–471) shows that, 'collectively, children play a critical role in each author's depiction of Jesus and his eschatological gathering, from insignificant appearances to pivotal roles'. In many of these occurrences, Jesus' attitude and actions towards children were different from many people in the surrounding Mediterranean world (cf. Grobbelaar 2008:300–3001). Weber (1979:12) is of the opinion that '[i]n his acts and words, something deeply Jewish and, at the same time, radically new appeared'. In his view of children, Jesus did not ignore his Jewish roots and the positive views and descriptions about children in the Hebrew Scriptures. Compared to the 1st-century Mediterranean world, which surrounded the Jewish people and influenced their daily lives and where children did not count at all, 'children did count for something in the ministry of Jesus' (Strange 2000:38). Jesus builds on the scriptural idea and the Jewish tradition of seeing children as gift or blessing, and therefore, Jesus did not treat children according to the position of children under the Jewish religious law of his time as reflected in the constantly recurring rabbinic triad of 'deaf and dumb, weak-minded, under age' (Jeremias 1971:227 and references to literature). The Old and New Testament

do provide evidence of parents who really loved and valued their children and also about positive attitudes towards children amongst God's people, for example, seeing them as a gift from God. However, these attitudes and concomitant actions were not always and under all circumstances practiced amongst the people of Israel, and sometimes 'children faced terrible threats in the ancient Jewish world' (Murphy 2013:loc. 1577–1578). In his study of Jewish literature, Murphy (2013:loc. 1629–1630) comes to the conclusion that 'there is also a dark side to child history within Jewish sources'. Some of the examples he discusses is infanticide, child sacrifice as some passages in the Old Testament suggest, the 42 boys in the Elisha-story who were massacred, killing and/or consuming one's children, abandonment and the lot of children during war, slave children, selling children into debt-servitude and fathers selling their daughters as concubines (cf. Murphy 2013:loc. 1577–1632, 1708–1724).

At best, it seems as if mixed attitudes towards children were present in both the Jewish culture and the 1st-century Mediterranean world (cf. Miller-McLemore 2010:18). Murphy's (2013:loc. 1821–1822) assertion is: [*I*]n some ways, Jews or Jewish tradition valued (and devalued) children differently than surrounding cultures, but similarly in several ways'.

It is against the dark side in the history of Jewish children and the marginalisation of children in the 1st-century Mediterranean world that we have to read Jesus' actions towards and teaching about children in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus' attitudes and actions towards children were not in the first place motivated by an intense and extraordinary love for them but by the special place in his heart for all 'the downtrodden and despised of the world', of which children were a part, just like the poor, tax

collectors, women and any other marginalised figures (Osborne 2010:loc. 13336–13337).

Cotter (2003:85) opines: ‘One of the most important literary leitmotifs of the Old Testament is the concern that is demanded for the alien, the orphan, and the widow’ (cf. Grobbelaar 2008:210–212). Fretheim (2008) also stresses this leitmotif when he declares:

This text about Ishmael in Genesis is a lens through which to read the many references to orphans and other underprivileged children in the Old Testament, for he is the first such biblical individual. Stories like those of Ishmael may reflect the development of Israel’s special concern about orphans and other such children. The theme of ‘widows and orphans’ becomes a prominent biblical lens for thinking about God’s relationship with children ... (pp. 13–14)

In attending to vulnerable children, by treating ‘the least prominent as the most important’ (France 1994:928), Jesus’ was actually demonstrating God’s attitude towards the downtrodden. Jesus was like God, of whom Hannah in her prayer at the temple confessed: ‘He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor’ (1 Sm 2:8). Jesus’ compassion for the marginalised children is the same compassion that God showed in the Old Testament to the widows, orphans and aliens. Therefore, Matthew wrote the story of Jesus in such a way that God is pictured ‘to be one who sides with the outcast and endangered woman and child’ (Schaberg 1989 [1995]:74).

In early-Christian written sources, there are various independent testimonies that Jesus’ positive attitude towards children is historical true and reliable (Van Aarde 2004:127). It is also emphasised in the way in which Matthew structures his story about Jesus’ public ministry within the ‘context of Jesus’ relationship with children’ (Van Aarde 2004:139). According to Van Aarde (2004:139), it starts with Jesus’ baptism (Mt 3:15)

and ends with Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem (Mt 21:1–17). Based on his study about this specific aspect of the Gospel of Matthew, Van Aarde's (2004) findings are as follows:

In a midrash fashion, these two incidents were understood by Matthew as fulfilment of Scripture (Is 1:13–17 and Jer 7:1–8 respectively). By doing so, Matthew's emphasis on God as Father is an indication that the Jesus movement was the commencement of a new 'fictive' family (Mt 19:29), a family of God (Mt 23:9). By making the child and not the father the model for entry into the reign of God, Jesus 'reversed the hierarchical assumptions that governed all of life' (Countryman 1989:188; Riches 1980:132–133). The Matthean Jesus' attitude towards the status of women and his affection towards children represents the deliberate breaking down of boundaries (Schaberg 1989 [1995]:77). The new way was for all to assume the position of children (cf. Mt 23:11–12). (p. 140)

The traditional view that Jesus had a deep affection for children is challenged by Miller-McLemore (2010) and Murphy (2013). They are of the opinion that the Synoptic Gospels' picture of Jesus and children are more complicated and problematic than assumed in the traditional view that children are fully part of the kingdom of God. It seems that the call to follow Jesus has a 'darker side' for children (Miller-McLemore 2010:21). They are of the opinion that the well-being of children is endangered by Jesus' sayings that relativise family ties and project images of familial disruption and alienation of children from their parents. In this regard, Murphy (2013) declares:

[I]f we take seriously the demands and needs of children, there seems a great disconnect between the Synoptic claims of child inclusion and the itinerant nature of Jesus' eschatological gathering of followers. Can we envision any of the children brought to Jesus leaving their fathers and mothers and assuming a life of discipleship? What problems might arise if they do? Our assessment of childhood in the Jewish and Hellenistic-Roman worlds showed that young children were wholly dependent on adults for shelter, food, protection, affection, education or training, and socialization, all of which seems to have taken place in some form of structured environment, i.e. a household, apprenticeship, etc. even if a slave. (loc. 4944–4949).

Furthermore, according to Sim (1994), the calling of the adult disciples also disrupted their own families. Sim (1994) declares:

Like Jesus himself, the disciples were expected to renounce everything – family and possessions, and the comfort and security which these bring – in order to devote themselves utterly to Jesus and his mission. ... Whatever became of the wives and children of the disciples? What hardships did they endure in the absence of their husbands and fathers? (p. 373).

Murphy (2013: loc. 4958–4961) is of the opinion that to follow Jesus implicates that the disciples had to accept a lifestyle that lead to estrangement from their biological family. In his research, Sim (1994; cf. Miller-McLemore 2010:19–21) came to the conclusion that most of the disciples were married with several children between infancy and 11 years of age, and when their fathers joined Jesus' group of disciples, it disrupted their family life and alienated the children from their fathers.

Both of the above arguments show that the potential for disrupting the life of families and children was present in Jesus' call on people to follow him. However, we also have to take into account that the Gospels do not witness to any instance where Jesus directly called children to leave their parents and home and to join the disciple group around Jesus. There is also no clear indication that children did indeed join Jesus' group of disciples and travelled with them all over the country. If there were children travelling with them or children who came to Jesus as in Matthew 19, they were probably street children (cf. Van Aarde 2004:129, 137).

Matthew tells the story of Jesus' healings in such a way that the summaries 'leave no doubt about the sort of people who flocked to him; it was the *ochlos*, the "crowd," the humble people' (Theissen 1983:249). They are, as Saldarini (2001) states, to be characterised as follows:

[T]he expendable class, about 5–10%, for whom society had no place or need. They had been forced off the land because of population pressures or they did not fit into society. They tended to be landless and itinerant with no normal family life and a high death rate. Illegal activities on the fringe of society were their best prospect of a livelihood. (p. 44)

Amongst these people, street children were present (Van Aarde 2004:137). For them, it could possibly be much better to travel with Jesus than to stay in their own.

That the call to follow Jesus could have been disruptive for the disciples' households is possible. However, '[w]e have little definitive knowledge of the marital status and children of the disciples' (Miller-McLemore 2010:21). Sim's view that most of the disciples were married and had children is purely speculation (cf. Miller-McLemore 2010:21).

Against the background of the discussion above, I now attend to some of the texts about Jesus and children in the Gospel of Matthew. Without stating Jesus' love for children in hyperbolic terms (cf. Miller-McLemore 2010:2, 3, 8, 11, 25, 30), it still seems that there was something new present in Jesus' involvement with children, especially as a male figure. Because of his Jewish roots, as mentioned above, his actions towards and his teaching about and through children may have been the culmination point of God's interest in and love for the marginalised children.

Jesus heals children

In Matthew, there are three accounts where Jesus healed children:

- The daughter of Jaïrus (Mt 9:18–26).
- The daughter of the Canaanite woman (Mt 15:21–28).
- The healing of a boy with a demon (Mt 17:14–20).

These cases indicate that Jesus paid ‘close attention to the plight of children ...’ (Jensen 2005:23) and that their vulnerability touched his heart. He even changed his programme and set aside time to visit and heal children. In a world where men usually had little contact with children and especially did not reach out to girls, Jesus acted quite differently in these miracles. He showed that he not only cared for and served adults but also children. He did not make any gender distinction in his healing ministry for children. The statement by Gundry-Volf (2001) regarding the Gospel according to Mark is also applicable to the Gospel according to Matthew:

It can be argued that Jesus’ healing of children and exorcism of evil spirits from them in Mark’s narrative are concretisations of his teaching that the reign of God belongs to children. (p. 38)

Jesus used children in his ministry

Jesus also used children in his service. Matthew 21:12–17 has a description of one such an example. All the Gospels have the account of the cleansing of the temple and the healing of the blind and the crippled. However, only Matthew adds that the children worshipped Jesus by shouting the refrain, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David!’ In their worship, the children showed incredible insight. They recognised the identity of Jesus as the Son of David. Despite this, the chief priest and the teachers of the law did not join them in their singing and worship. They were rather indignant.

These events are very ironic. Gundry-Volf (2001) underlines it when she states:

The chief priests and scribes, who, of all people, are in a position as religiously trained Jewish adults to see the significance of Jesus’ deeds, recognise him as the Messiah, and

lead the people in acclaiming him, do not do so; rather, the children, who are ignorant and untrained in religious matters and the least likely to play this role, in fact, take it up. (p. 47)

In a sense, this is why Jesus thanked his Father in Matthew 11:25: 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants'. In contrast to the intelligent and learned religious authorities, children, who are not necessarily intelligent and learned, confess who Jesus is because God revealed it to them. This interaction brought to the fore a very important perspective about God's work: God can and wants to use children in the coming of God's kingdom in this world. God uses children as agents to reveal Godself to the world, even in the presence of God's enemies!

■ The kingdom of God is for children

In Matthew 18:1–14, we find one of Jesus' most extraordinary discussions with his disciples. In reading and understanding this conversation between Jesus and his disciples, it is important to take into account the following two important aspects of any written material:

- The socio-cultural context in which it was written, in this case, the 1st-century Mediterranean world in which the disciples and children found themselves, as discussed above.
- The text itself, in this case, the logical and chronological structure of Matthew as a whole.

It is amidst their specific socio-cultural context that Matthew, through packaging his message in a certain way, communicates the Jesus story to his readers. Therefore, you have to interpret Matthew 18:1–14 by taking both these aspects into account (cf. Grobbelaar 2008:304–311)

□ The genre of Matthew

Matthew wrote his Gospel in Greek. It is just logical that the existing Hellenistic literary culture influenced him in his writing. According to Burrige (2004), the Gospels are biographical documents. In a generic sense, they are related to the ancient Greco-Roman biographies. Taking into account the general structure of the ancient Greco-Roman biography, it is possible to divide Matthew broadly in the following three sections:

- prologue: Chapters 1–2
- narrative: Chapters 3–25
- epilogue: Chapters 26–28.

According to this structure, Matthew 18:1–14 fits into the narrative part (Mt 3–25). This narrative part focuses on the words and deeds of Jesus. Through this part, Matthew want to achieve a specific goal. He wants to communicate to his readers the status of Jesus as protagonist of the Gospel and to prove that he is worthy of the honour given to him (Nel 2002:59).

□ The structure of Matthew 3:1–25:46

Hagner's (1999:37) comment on the structure of Matthew in general is also relevant for this part of the Gospel: 'Because of the complexity of the Gospel, its varied and broken patterns, and its overlapping structures, no single analysis has proven satisfactory'. Yet, in this 'mayhem', there are two important structural markers. Although they overlap with one another, they influence the structure and our understanding of Matthew 3:1–25:46 in such a way that we have to take cognisance of them. They are, firstly, the repetition of the phrase 'from

that time on, Jesus began to', and, secondly, the five discourses recorded in Matthew.

Firstly, the repetitive phrase 'from that time on, Jesus began to' is repeated in Matthew 4:17 and in 16:21. According to Kingsbury (1986a), it signals the following:

[T]he beginning of a new phase in the life and ministry of Jesus. In addition, each of the verses in which the formula is embedded stands apart to a degree from its context and sounds the theme that Matthew subsequently develops throughout a larger portion of his gospel. (pp. 29–30).

The intention is not to use this phrase to divide the entire Gospel of Matthew in a thematically structure as Kingsbury (1986a:30) did. However, it is important to take into account that the ministry of Jesus can be divided into two important phases on the basis of the repetition of this transitional phrase (Combrink 1985:78). The first phase, Matthew 4:17–16:20, focuses on Jesus' authoritative ministry and the various reactions to it. In Matthew 16:21, Jesus announces his future suffering and death for the first time. It is an important turning point in the progression of the story. According to Combrink (1991:4), up to this point, the disciples understood Jesus in terms of his ministry of teaching, preaching and miracles. From this moment onwards, they had to understand Jesus in terms of his suffering, self-surrender and death. They also had to understand their journey with Jesus to Jerusalem in terms of his coming suffering and death. It is important to interpret Matthew 18:1–14 within this second phase of Jesus' ministry: on his way to Jerusalem and the cross (Matthew 16:21–25:46).

Secondly, Matthew ordered Jesus' teachings in five discourses. What is interesting about these discourses is that each one of them ends with almost the same formula, 'when Jesus had finished saying these things',

(cf. Mt 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1) (Combrink 2002). What stands out is the way in which Matthew integrates these discourses with the narrative parts of the life of Jesus. The result is that the continuous alternating of the narrative and the discourse divides the ministry of Jesus into five blocks. Matthew 18:1–14 is part of the fourth discourse recorded in Matthew 18:1–35.

□ **Matthew 18:1 – 14 within the structure of the second phase of Jesus’ ministry**

In the second phase of his ministry (Mt 16:21–25:46), Jesus announces his coming suffering and death three times (Mt 16:21; 17:22–23; 20:17–19). With each announcement, Matthew follows the same repetitive pattern. (cf. Grobbelaar 2008:313–315). Firstly, he describes the announcement by Jesus. After the announcement follows the disciples’ total lack of understanding of Jesus’ words. Each time, Jesus reacts with an image. Each image has more or less the same message: unless you change. With these images, Jesus calls his disciples to a radical life conversion or transformation. The radicalism of these images lies in the fact that each one clashes with the core values of the 1st-century Mediterranean world. It challenges the disciples to start living a new culture with new core values in the midst of the surrounding Mediterranean culture and even their own Jewish heritage.

The first announcement is in Matthew 16:21. The misunderstanding comes to the fore in Peter’s reaction. He reprimands Jesus (Mt 16:22)! It is a clear sign that two different value systems are at work here. Kingsbury (1986b) describes these two different value systems as follows:

[T]hat grounded in ‘thinking the things of God’, and that grounded in ‘thinking the things of men’ (16:23). Since Jesus thinks the things of God, he is ‘self-giving’ and

construes his passion in terms of rendering to others self-sacrificial service (20:28). Since Peter and the disciples think the things of men, they are 'self-concerned', bent on saving their lives and avoid suffering and death (16:25). (p. 15)

After Jesus' reprimand to Peter follows a discourse with the disciples (Mt 16:24–28). In this discourse, Jesus calls them to a radical life change through the image of taking up your cross (Mt 16):

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. (vv. 24–25)

In Matthew 17:22–23, we find the second announcement. This time, the disciples become very grieved. Again, their self-directed value system comes to the fore. Their reaction to Jesus' pronouncement of his coming death is to ask Jesus about the most important ones in the kingdom of heaven (Mt 18:1). This is followed by Jesus' discourse with the disciples in Matthew 18:2–35. As part of this discourse, Jesus calls the disciples again to a radical life change through the metaphor of becoming like children (Mt 18):

He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.' (vv. 2–5)

It is quite ironic that, after the announcement of Jesus' death, the disciples are concerned about who is actually the most important amongst them (Hagner 1995:517). The fact that this important question did not just have a theoretical bearing amongst the disciples becomes clear from the painful events that followed Jesus' third announcement of his suffering (Hagner 1995:517).

With the third announcement in Matthew 20:17–19, Matthew records the understanding of Jesus' followers in two ways. Firstly, he

mentions the reaction of the mother of the sons of Zebedee. It is followed by the reaction of the disciples towards her behaviour. The woman's reaction is to come to Jesus with her two sons. Just like the disciples in Matthew 18:1, she asks Jesus: 'Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom' (Mt 20:21). The disciples become very angry with the two brothers. Their mother's question creates the impression that they themselves want to be more important than the other disciples. These reactions are followed by the discourse in Matthew 20 where Jesus calls his disciples to a radical life change – to be not like the authorities but rather to become servants:

But Jesus called them to him and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.' (vv. 25–28)

Kingsbury (1986b:113) indicates that Matthew's story of the disciples in this second phase of Jesus is dominated by the motif that the willingness to serve others is an essential aspect of being a disciple. Matthew 18:1–14 forms part of Jesus' attempt to build into his disciples' lives this essential aspect of discipleship. To follow Jesus and to serve other people require a great transformation in each disciple's life. It seems that this transforming process described in the three pericopes, namely to take up your cross and to lose your life, to become like a child and to become like a servant or a slave, is similar to one another and has the same meaning and intention. Jesus calls the disciples who want to follow him to lay down their old selfish lives and to become new persons with a new value system, the value system of the kingdom of God.

■ Comparison with the passages in the other two Synoptic Gospels

Mark's (9:33–37) and Luke's (9:46–48) accounts of these events differ from Matthew's account in one important way (cf. Grobbelaar 2008:315–317). In Matthew, the discussion starts with a question asked by the disciples. According to Mark and Luke, there is a direct provocation for the disciples' discussion with Jesus: They were arguing with each other. They argued about which one of them was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. In Matthew, however, there is no indication of any rivalry between the disciples. Why does Matthew not mention this argument? The reason is that he generally pictured the disciples in a more positive way than Mark (Barr 2002:323). In Mark and Luke, Jesus takes the initiative in the discussion. He directly confronts the disciples about their arguing with each other. The discussion in Mark and Luke can, therefore, be classified as an argumentative and controversial discourse. In Matthew, the disciples actually take the initiative in the discussion, and their question 'takes on a more academic tone' (Evans 2012:329). In this way, Matthew erases the negative distance between Jesus and the disciples as seen in Mark and Luke. Their question opens the way for Jesus to teach them what really constitutes greatness in his kingdom (Evans 2012:329). The character of the discourse takes on the form of teaching or education. This corresponds with Matthew's picture of Jesus as the great Teacher.

However, this question by the disciples is not as innocent or theoretical as Matthew tries to describe it. Taking into account Mark and Luke and the content of Matthew 20:20–28, it is the result of internal conflict amongst the disciples. Each one of them really wants to be more important, wants more honour, status and authority than the

other. Du Plessis (1989:32) contributes this to the fact that this bunch of ordinary people is already daydreaming about the glory that they will find in the new dispensation that Jesus will bring about. If one considers the fact that the people that Jesus called as disciples did not come from the elite but from those without any status in society, it is understandable that they were tempted to turn Jesus' gift of discipleship into status (Hauerwas 2006:261). However, the kingdom of Jesus does not invite or structure any status.

The conflict about status amongst the disciples can be explained, on the one hand, in terms of the formation of social groups and the phases through which small groups develop and, on the other hand, in terms of the central truth of their culture, namely honour and shame. Like all other groups, Jesus' disciples also experienced the different phases of group formation: forming, argumentation, norming, performing and adjourning (Malina 2001:149). Jesus' vision is, however, that his disciples are not to be just another Jewish group with the same ethos and values as other groups in their community. To be part of the Jesus group, the disciples are required to break with their cultural surrounding, especially their religious traditions. In the formation of the group of disciples, they have to be re-socialised into their new Christian ethos and identity. The constant danger was that their primary socialisation in their Jewish culture would cause the derailment of their secondary socialisation in the values of the Jesus group. As Wilkins (2004) states:

They are still developing an understanding of what it means to be Jesus' particular type of disciple, which is different from other forms of disciples within Judaism and the wider Greco-Roman world. (pp. 611–612)

In this process of re-socialisation, the values of honour and shame also have to be re-socialised. The disciples have to discover, amongst other

things, that there is a big difference between what counts as honourable in their surrounding culture and what is honourable in God's eyes (DeSilva 2000:75). Regarding this difference, the new behaviour means the following (Malina 2001):

[Q]ualifying as honorable in and for the in-group is service (for example, Mk 9:35; 10:35), attachment to the other in-group members (= love; as in Mark 12:31–33), taking the last place (Mark 10:31), and the like. (p. 132)

The formation of these new values, ethos, identity and behaviour would have caused 'storming' amongst the disciples. The argument between the disciples about which one of them was the greatest was part of this 'storming' phase in the group of disciples. It clearly shows how stubborn their primary cultural socialisation was and how difficult it was to change it (Malina 2001:150). Jesus' reaction to the disciple's argumentation is part of this 'storming' phase. It is his attempt to re-socialise his disciples in the values of their new identity as well as in the type of community he is calling them to be. Jesus 'confronts, head-on, the manner in which the majority culture thinks of greatness in terms of power over others and precedence before others' (DeSilva 2000:74). In Mark 10:44, Jesus teaches his disciples that they should rather reveal an ethos of servanthood than to rule over others: 'and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all'. This paradox is reinforced when Jesus takes a child to stand amongst them in answer to their request about greatness (Bailey 1995:60).

■ Exegesis of Matthew 18:1 – 14

■ The structure of Matthew 18

Matthew 18 is the fourth block of the five discourses in Matthew. Here, Jesus is the great teacher who teaches his disciples about their new ethos and identity. There is a remarkable concentration on paucity and service

in Matthew 18 and for this new community not to define itself in terms of authority (Johnson 1999:207).

According to Davies and Allison (1988:62), the interesting triads in Matthew also comes to the fore in Matthew 18. Consequently, Matthew 18 can be divided into six paragraphs (cf. Garland 1993:188–189; Senior 1998:204–205). The first three paragraphs (Mt 18:1–14) are about children or the little ones, and the last three (Mt 18:15–35) focus on the reconciliation of church members. They divide the whole chapter as follows:

- 18:1–5: Who is the greatest?
- 18:6–9: On offences
- 18:10–14: The lost sheep
- 18:15–20: The sins of a brother
- 18:21–22: Forgiving seventy times seven
- 18:23–35: The parable of the unmerciful servant.

Davies and Allison (1988:65) conclude: ‘Given the tripartite groupings in the other discourses so far examined, this result seems too striking to be dismissed as undesigned’. Although some scholars (cf. Gundry 1994:358; Luz 2001:422) propose other possibilities, I decided, in concurrence with Davies and Allison (1988) and Garland (1993) and Senior (1998), to work with Matthew 18:1–14 as a unit. It, furthermore, makes sense to work with this unit when you read the Bible from the viewpoint of child theology. This choice is validated by the statement made by Keener (1997:284): ‘The unifying theme in this section is the importance of honouring children and others who lack worldly status in the kingdom’. In keeping with Davies and Allison’s structure above, Matthew 18:1–14 is divided into three smaller sections: verses 1–5, 6–9 and 10–14 (cf. Carter 2000:362–366; Davies 1993:127–129; Schnackenburg 2002:171–175; Van Zyl 1982:42).

Regarding the above structure, one question needs to be addressed: To which part does Matthew 18:5 belong? Is it part of Matthew 18:1–4, as in the above structure of Davies and Allison, or is it rather part of Matthew 18:6–9 (cf. Gnilka 1988:120–134; Gundry 1994:358; Hagner 1995:520–521; Harrington 1991:264–265)? Because of the use of the words ‘one such child’ in Matthew 18:5, it can be seen as the conclusion of Matthew 18:1–4. However, Matthew 18:5 is also moving away from the use of the child as a metaphor for passage into and real greatness in the kingdom of heaven. The emphasis in Matthew 18:5 is rather on the welcoming of children and the disciples’ service towards them. As such, it serves as an introduction to Matthew 18:6–14, which further expands on the proposed handling of children by Jesus’ disciples. Taking into consideration both these viewpoints, it seems that verse five fulfils a linking or transitional function, and it is handled as such in the interpretation that is given here of Matthew 18:1–14.

Interpretation of Matthew 18:1–5

The question of the disciples, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’, should be understood within the context of the 1st-century Mediterranean world with its core values of honour and shame. Because of these core values, the ancient world drew a very clear distinction between important and unimportant people. The religious leaders, like the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law, often demanded the most prominent positions in the community. The disciples grew up in this culture, and therefore, it was actually quite natural for them to wonder about which one of them was the greatest in this new group around Jesus. ‘They assumed God’s kingdom would be like any other kingdom on earth – one in which rank, status, power, and authority were the

marks of greatness' (Weber 2000:286). They actually want to know the following (Chamblin 2010):

If *all* the citizens of this kingdom are children of God ..., are all equally great, or are there criteria whereby some may be judged – in Messiah's eyes – to be superior to others. (n.p.)

The disciples, however, made a serious mistake, a mistake which Jesus tried to correct by his teaching that follows in Matthew 18:2–14.

■ Entrance into and real greatness in the kingdom of heaven

While the disciples listen attentively with the hope in each one's heart that Jesus will mention his name as the greatest amongst them, Jesus' answer bypasses all of them completely (cf. Wiersbe 2008:160). Instead of mentioning one of their names, Jesus calls a little child into their midst. According to Chamblin (2010:n.p.; Mt 18:2) '[t]he chosen term is not *pais*, but its diminutive *paidion*. While these two are not sharply distinguished, it is proper to think of a young or little child'. France (1994:927) stress it that '[o]ver against all conventional ideas of status and importance Jesus offered the model of the *little child*.' To gain access to the kingdom they, the disciples and all adults, should become like a little child. According to the very nature of metaphors, Jesus makes a very radical pronouncement that turns the values of honour and shame in the 1st-century Mediterranean world on its head. He confronts the disciples with another possibility, the reality of the kingdom, which views honour and shame and status in a different way from what they are used to. With this metaphor, Jesus actually invites the disciples to begin to think in a new way about themselves, their lives and the world, about the way in which they can live and associate with other people and about the way in which they view the kingdom of heaven.

In the 1st-century Mediterranean world, children were not important and had the least status in the community (cf. the discussion above). Seeking to become more important, Jesus' pronouncement that the disciples have to 'return to the status of a child, would have been deeply disturbing' to them (Maas 2000:456). According to Joubert (2002:241), it is very bad news for the disciples, and it could even have made them angry. The disciples' expectations are herewith thrown into disarray, and they are shown that a radical shift is needed in their expectations and behaviour, in their ethics and their cultural values. Such a status reversal is not natural. According to France (1994:928), '[I]t involves a radical *change* [*lit. 'turn round', conversion*]'. This call to conversion is not addressed to the crowds and is not a call to become disciples. He is speaking to people who are already following him as disciples. Chamblin (2010) phrases it as follows:

These verbs – *turn* and *become* – express how radical is the reorientation Jesus requires of them. Indeed, unless they are thus transformed, they will surely be exposed as false disciples, and will be denied entry into the kingdom of heaven. (n.p.; cf. Mt 18:2–5)

How should we interpret this metaphor? From the earliest stages, the church fathers interpreted it as that Jesus was referring to one or another inherent characteristic or quality of children: innocence, wonder, simplicity, humility, purity, joy (cf. Bakke 2005:56–86; Estep 2008:65–66; Gould 1994; Konz 2014:27–28). Estep (2008) voices the following option:

While it must be acknowledged that Jesus himself never directly affirms the innocence of children, their innocence, according to the earliest understandings, is what Jesus intended to convey in his child metaphor. (p. 65)

Exegetically it is very difficult to maintain such a view. If the metaphor is referring to the subjective qualities of children, Konz (2014), identifies the following problem:

[It] assumes these qualities to be true of children to begin with, thus involving a projection of such qualities *onto* the child which Jesus placed in the disciples' midst (while usually ignoring more negative 'childish' behaviours – jealousy, temper tantrums, and plain naughtiness – which as any parent could attest could equally be proposed as common qualities of children). (p. 26)

Since Augustine, other interpretations have been suggested. He (Augustine) understood the metaphor as referring to the small stature of children and thus to their physical weakness and powerlessness (Bakke 2005:93–94). In modern times, many people, including some academics, still interpret this metaphor as referring to inherent characteristics of children that adults should also show (Zuck 1996:206). Bauer (1975:77–83) states that one should not look for an explanation of 'like a child' in child psychology by searching for a particular childlike characteristic or attribute. In his discussion of the history of the interpretation of this metaphor, Bailey (1995:58–59) clearly shows how the interpretation of 'like a child' has changed over the years from an interpretation that takes its premise from the inherent character traits of children to the current explanation that emphasises the social status of children in the 1st-century Mediterranean world. Blomberg (1992) states it clearly when he declares:

This humility cannot be a subjective attitude (children rarely *act* humbly) but an objective state (children do depend almost entirely on the adult world for their protection and provision. (p. 273)

Therefore, Davies and Allison (1991; cf. Herzog 2005:41) declare:

To become a child has nothing to do with innocence or simplicity or sinlessness. Rather, as verse 4 proves, the Matthean Jesus is calling for humility...The point, of course, is not that children are self-consciously humble, but that they are, as part of society at large, without much status or position. (p. 757)

Hagner (1995:518) agrees with this statement by saying: 'The child's humility is its lack of status, not its actions or feelings of humbleness'.

According to Saunders (2010:179), '[w]e are not invited here to sentimentalize childlikeness. Jesus associates the child with humility, which refers not to personal modesty but to social location among the humiliated ones'. The change to which the disciples were called was not to obtain a certain attitude or disposition of children but to take up the place of children in the social order. Jesus used a child as an example for the adult disciples because children were lowly and unimportant in the eyes of the community, were marginalised and pushed aside and were therefore defenceless, vulnerable and powerless in their relationships with adults. Wilkins (2004) puts it as follows:

The humility of a child consists of the inability to advance his or her own cause apart from the help and resources of a parent.

Jesus celebrates the humility that comes from the child's weakness, defencelessness, and vulnerability. The child can really do nothing for himself or herself and will die if left alone. It is this kind of humility that Jesus uses as a visual aid to contrast the world's form of greatness to the greatness of the kingdom of heaven. (p. 612)

The disciples, however, want to be great, to have more status, more honour and more authority, to rise above others. They want to have more value and importance in the eyes of the world. It is right here where Jesus brings a radical change in the standards of the disciples and all of humanity on how to gain honour and status. Where more honour and status usually mean moving up the social ladder, Jesus says that, from the perspective of the kingdom of God, more honour, status and authority is actually a downward movement to a lower position. The disciples have to live as if they have the same lowly position or status as children in the order of social ranking in their society. It asks of them to undergo a status transformation (Joubert 2002:241). Rather than to rule over one another, they have to serve one another and the world around them. According to Jesus, the one who wants to be a leader, who wants to be 'great', has to humble himself, 'accepts a position of low status' and

‘considers himself insignificant’ (Newman & Stine 1988:n.p.; Mt 18:4). In a sense, what Jesus is asking here is a role reversal. The disciples have to step into the shoes of children. For adults to become like children is naturally impossible. It is only possible through an act(s) of imagination. Disciples, rather than striving to be at the top of the social ladder, dreaming how it can affect your lives, imagine yourselves at the bottom of the ladder, like children.

This meant that the disciples also have to think differently about authority. In this regard, Mouton (2005:7) rightly states: ‘In showing compassion to children...Jesus subverts the established values of power in the moral world of first century Palestine’. Usually more honour or status also brings more authority. In the kingdom of God, this is reversed. ‘[T]hose who are infected with the world’s appetite for lording it over others are here informed that this lust must be completely surrendered’ (Hare 1993:210). To have status in God’s eyes, the disciples have to learn to live without authority. The implication is that their desire to exercise control in a domineering way (Louw & Nida 1988:475), to exert authority by issuing orders and telling others what to do (Danker 2000:150) must die. The disciples are to live out their leadership in a way that do not ‘mimic the powerful but the powerless’ (Davies 1993:127). Those who are prepared to do this receives from Jesus the power or authority to act on his behalf. This authority should be applied from within a close connection with the Lord (Foerster 1964:570). In following Jesus, authority should be used to give expression to God’s will. It is, therefore, not a ruling authority but an authority that serves. This is the answer to the disciples’ question about greatness: ‘[T]he “great” are those who make themselves servants and slaves...’ (Osborne 2010:loc. 12545).

Mouton (2005) says it in the following way:

In Jesus of Nazareth God is particularly and dramatically present at the margins of human existence. Not to say that God is not at the centre of life, but in Jesus the centre profoundly *shifts* to marginal people and places. (p. 7)

Du Plessis (1989:5) is of the opinion that Jesus considered children to be important because children, within the authority and status structure of the community, were despised and undervalued figures on the margins of society. They were marginalised, just as the leper, sick, poor, tax-collector and prostitute.

In Jesus, God moves children to the centre of life whilst the world has moved them to the margins of society. It is precisely this change that has to take place in the lives of the disciples. For them, to find God, they have to move from the worldly centre of honour, status and authority to the worldly outskirts, to the marginalised, where God is. In order to take part in the kingdom of God, they have to become like the unimportant children. This means that the disciples have to start dreaming in a different direction: not towards the centre of worldly interest but towards the outskirts of worldly disdain. They have to begin to live like children as if they do not have any worldly authority, honour or status. They have to live from God's free grace alone. In this regard, Moltmann (2000:600) states: 'We can only enter into the kingdom of God if we receive it like a child with empty hands'. This asks for a total and radical change in the disciples' lives and values because 'in the child relative weakness and disadvantage cannot be overcome, but must be embraced and respected' (Pais 1991:18).

In a certain sense, the disciples have to start their lives all over, in the way that Jesus shows them. In Jesus, 'God took on all the powerlessness, weakness, and neediness of human childhood for our salvation' (Pais 1991:15). Jensen (2005) declares:

[T]he birth narratives ... express something unique about the way in which a vulnerable God reveals Godself in overlooked spaces and people. The Christian story of incarnation begins not with glorious triumph, but in humility, homelessness, and in the pregnancy of an unwed teenage mother... The baby Jesus comes into the world not to ignore the stigma of the vulnerable, but to en flesh it. (pp. 21–22)

Therefore, Jesus' birth into this world and his childhood is from the beginning a story of marginalisation and suffering. The Son of God is born not in magnificence 'but as a destitute child' (Jensen 2005:21). When King Herod, shortly after Jesus' birth, starts to kill all the boys under the age of 2 years in Bethlehem, Jesus becomes a fugitive who, in a certain sense, is an illegal immigrant who has to live outside of his country of birth. When he and his parents return, they settle in the small, insignificant town of Nazareth in the region of Galilee. Jesus grows up in the poor countryside town that John referred to in John 1:46 as 'Can anything good come from Nazareth?'

In following this Jesus, the disciples also have to become like children. This means that they have to start living their lives with a new ethos, with a new value system characterised by a lack of status and a willingness to be associated with those on the margins of the society. Van Zyl (1982:45) indicates that the change required here is precisely the same as the change described in the gospel according to John in the pericope that deals with rebirth. In a sense, 'become like a child' obtains soteriological value: It brings salvation and new life in the kingdom of God. This is exactly what the children in our midst should constantly remind us of. Pais (1991:13) expresses it very clearly: 'The child is the key to the salvation of all of us'.

Service by the kingdom 'child'

In Matthew 18:5, the text moves away from using the child as a metaphor for becoming and being a disciple of Jesus to focusing on how the disciples

should treat the real child still standing amongst them. Instead of being a model for the disciples, the child now becomes an object of action, of service for the disciples. In this process, Jesus turns the disciples' behaviour towards the unimportant children into the litmus test of their acceptance of the new value system of his kingdom as spelled out in verses 2–4. He calls on the disciples to welcome or receive the children on his behalf. According to Weber (2000:287), '[w]elcomes implies every aspect of caring for other persons – accepting them, loving them, providing for them ...', just as a mother would do for her child(ren). To tell men to do this is a radical pronouncement that was contrary to the accepted handling of children in the surrounding Mediterranean culture. Combrink (2002) explains it as follows:

Normally women looked after and took care of children. It was one of the reasons why women then, were considered to be inferior – because their lives centred on children. Now the disciples also had to fulfil this role! (p. 39)

It is part of the change of status that the disciples have to undergo: They have to be willing to play even the culturally 'inferior' role of women towards children. In a sense, the 'manly' disciples had to become 'motherly' towards children. It is asking of the disciples to take up their cross and to die, to lay down their cultural baggage that prevents them from becoming the people that God wants them to be, to become new human beings that serve children, to become slaves, even in their relationship with children.

Some New Testamentici are of the opinion that the child in verse 5 is no longer the actual child referred to in verse 2. The child now symbolises the 'little ones' mentioned in verses 6, 10 and 14 (France 1985:271; Weber 1979:47). Who are these little ones? Various commentators raise different opinions. For Patte (1987:249), they are 'a relative large group which includes both disciples and others who view themselves as needing help

from Jesus'. Hagner (1995:521–522) links up with Matthew 10:40–42 by making a case for the little ones to refer to the disciples and for the action of receiving to be delivered by the 'disciples in pursuit of their calling, and hence especially in missionary work'. France (1985:271) simply says that the little ones are 'insignificant believers'. Weber (1979) is also of the opinion that Matthew refers to little ones as a smaller group of believers.

Here, 'the little ones' are not the believers in general, but a special category of Christians namely, particularly vulnerable believers, those who tend to become 'lost sheep' (cf. Matt. 18:10–14) ... Using a vulnerable, seemingly unimportant and often despised child as a symbol for the weak and poor members of the Church is singularly appropriate. (p. 48)

However, Weber (1979:59) rightly warns that the metaphorical meaning of children can be over-emphasised at the cost of the surprising manner in which Jesus identifies himself with an actual child. He concludes that, although the child in verse 5 probably has a metaphorical meaning referring to a larger group of believers, it does not change the fact that Jesus originally spoke about an actual child and had just taken one into his arms.

In order to understand verse 5, Weber's viewpoint is accepted. Besides, although it is clear that the term little ones cannot be applied to children everywhere in the Bible, it is still possible to include children in the concept 'little ones' in verses 6, 10 and 14 precisely because they are 'insignificant' (France 1985:271), 'vulnerable' (Weber 1979:48) and powerless. In his discussion of this aspect, Murphy (2013:loc. 4538–4539) states: '[I]t is entirely within the realm of possibility to view the "little ones" (μικροί), particularly in Mark and Matthew, as referring to children'.

Therefore, the terms child or children are used in the further discussion of this passage. This choice is also motivated by Strange's (2000:56) comment that readers must be careful not to see Jesus' interest in children

as purely a metaphorical interest to emphasise aspects of the adult disciples' lives. Jesus was truly interested in real children.

Matthew 18:5, therefore, makes the point that the disciples' behaviour and actions towards children, how they would welcome and accept them, show the nature of their relationship with God. It proves whether they are truly prepared to live without any status and authority, to live in a way that fits the kingdom of God.

According to verse 5, the disciples are called to welcome children in a specific way: in the name of Jesus. This means much more than just to greet them and to say 'welcome' to them. It means to show hospitality towards them (Hagner 1995:522; Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003:92; Weber 1979:50). According to Strange (2000:54), 'welcome' here 'probably means to serve people and to see to their needs ...'. The disciples have to serve the children by showing them hospitality and addressing their needs. They have to serve them in the name of Jesus, that is, on behalf of Jesus, as his representatives. They have to act towards children as Jesus would by serving them unselfishly and caring for them with love.

A surprising addition to this action of welcoming is when Jesus goes even further and adds that whoever welcomes a child in his name, actually welcomes him. With this pronouncement, Jesus identifies himself with children and states that children are God's representatives in this world. Strange (2000) is of the opinion that Jesus' statement should be understood in the light of 'the Jewish law of agency'. He explained it as follows:

A later rabbinical saying held that: 'A man's agent is like himself... Such authorized representatives or proxies were to be received and treated like the person whom they represented. This seems to have been a long-established and widely-recognised aspect of Jewish society. It had developed from the ancient Semitic customs surrounding messengers, who had to be given plenipotentiary powers to act on their masters'

behalf, because of the difficulties of communicating over long distances. An example would be Abraham's servant, dealing on his master's behalf with the betrothal of Isaac (Gen. 24). Respect shown to such agents was shown to the one whom they represented. In saying 'Whoever receives a child like this in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the One who sent me', Jesus was drawing on the imagery of this custom or law of agency. (p. 54)

The presence of God becomes visible through the children and 'whoever takes in a child, takes in Christ' (Moltmann 2000:599). The implication is that every child that crosses the disciples' path is actually Jesus crossing their path. Actually, it implies much more. Bailey (1995:60) shows that, in this pronouncement by Jesus, the child becomes the representative of Jesus, and Jesus in turn is the representative of God the Father who sent him. Moltmann (2000:599–600) says: 'In children, God is waiting for us to take in God. In helpless children, God is waiting for our compassion'. The disciples have to behave towards children as they would towards Jesus. '[T]hey should treat the child with respect and care, as if they were receiving Christ himself' (Strange 2000:55). This is precisely what Mary and Joseph did. By welcoming the unexpected child into their lives, they actually welcomed God. Yes, 'Mary bore the Messiah, but she first and foremost proved to be hospitable to a child whose existence she could not have anticipated' (Hauerwas 2006:261). Although it humiliated her in many ways, she received him right into her womb. On his part, Joseph received the 'fatherless' Jesus as his son. By doing this, they did not only receive Jesus in their lives, but they actually welcomed God, the real parent, and his actions right into their lives.

In his identification with children, one finds Jesus' deepest motivation for the transformation that he is calling for in his disciples: Whoever forsakes the honour and status of this world and gives up his or her life in service to the people on the margins of society will find her or himself in the

presence of the living God. Such a person lives, works and steps where God lives and works and steps. Such a person is already in the kingdom of heaven.

To a certain extent, the pronouncement of Jesus that whoever welcomes a child in his name welcomes him, matches the parable of the final judgement in Matthew 25:31–46. In this passage, Jesus says to those who fed the hungry, housed the stranger, looked after the sick or visited those in prison: ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me’ (Mt 25:40). According to Matthew 25:45, the opposite is also valid: ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me’. From this, the conclusion can be drawn that whoever does not welcome a child in Jesus’ name also does not welcome Jesus. Gundry-Volf (2001:44) supports this view with the following radical statement: ‘[F]ailing to welcome children implies rejection of Jesus and God’. Would it be correct to add to this pronouncement of Gundry-Volf that the saying in Matthew 25:46 is also valid for those who fail to welcome children – and that they will receive eternal punishment? Indeed, whoever does not welcome a child in Jesus’ name indicates by this act that they cannot yet enter into the kingdom of heaven because they have not yet become like a child, have not yet take up their cross to follow Jesus into the kingdom of God. It seems that it is precisely the implication of the warning in Matthew 18:6.

■ Matthew 18:6–9

Opposed to the surprising pronouncement of Matthew 18:5 stands the pronouncement of Matthew 18:6:

If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.

Here the contrast is clear between those who welcome children in Jesus' name (Mt 18:5) and those who put a stumbling block before them (Mt 18:6). 'Welcome' and 'to let stumble' or 'to cause defection' are two contradictory deeds. To cause defection or stumbling must be understood in a very serious light. How do you cause a child to stumble? Different answers are given to this question. For Hagner, it means to cause a child to fall into sin or even to cause the child to lose faith in Jesus. 'It is thus to hinder in some fundamental sense and not simply in the giving of mere personal offence ...' (Hagner 1995:522). Patte (1987) states that it is possible to welcome children only when one becomes like a child, and:

[c]onversely, as long as one does not turn and become like a child, one cannot but scandalize the little ones and the children, that is, cause them to turn away from God. (p. 249)

Evans (2012) seems to express the same view as Patte. He is of the opinion that the question should be answered in light of Matthew 18:1–5, which says:

[F]ailing to treat the little one as important and as significant as the powerful and influential may indeed be the cause of stumbling that Jesus has in mind. The danger consists of those who, self absorbed, fail to have consideration for the weaker and more vulnerable. (p. 330)

To become and behave as children without any status and power mean that the disciples always have to keep in mind that they are never to abuse the defencelessness and vulnerability of children. Rather, they should seek justice for children in all spheres of life.

These verses contain a very strong rebuke for anyone who causes one of the children to stumble. 'Jesus did not mince his words here' (De Beer 2008:51). In no uncertain terms, Jesus states that it is better for those who cause children to stumble to die quickly rather than

contributing to the destruction of children's lives. For such a person, a large millstone is to be hung around the neck, and the person will then be thrown into the depths of the sea. The 'large millstone' was the revolving top millstone that was pulled by a donkey (Hagner 1995:522). With such a millstone around your neck, you could only sink and drown. Through this hyperbolic statement (Evans 2012:330), Jesus is probably making sure that the disciples realise how important the children really are to him and how serious a 'crime' it is to let one of them fall into sin. Based on these verses, one can conclude: 'If God's kingdom comes into this world by way of the poor and the children, so does the judgement of God' (Moltmann 2000:599).

Matthew 18:10–14

In Matthew 18:10, Jesus provides further motivation why the children should be important to his disciples: 'Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven'. According to Woodley (2011:loc. 2308), '[t]he word Jesus uses for "despise" in verse 10 means to treat with disdain, implying a wounding act of contempt'. He (Woodley 2011:loc. 2308) is of the opinion that 'Jesus' warning covers anything from torture to abuse to emotional cruelty'.

According to Combrink (2007:160), this expression about the angels was well-known as terminology used in the courts of Eastern kings. It stresses that the angels had personal access to the king and was in service before his throne. That this privilege, which was only granted to the most important angels, could now also be used by the angels of these despised children is an indication of how important the children are to God. The point that this image probably wants to make is that God is always available

for the children, is interested in their well-being and pain and cares for them. If the children are so important to God, they also need to be very important to Jesus' disciples.

That children are important to God and should, therefore, not be despised by the disciples is further underlined in Matthew 18:12–14. With the parable of the lost sheep, God's concern for children is expressed in a hyperbolic way by focussing on the one over and against the 99 (cf. Weber 2000:289). How does the shepherd react when one of the sheep went astray? He leaves the 99 behind in the field, not even in the safety of the sheep pen, to first go and look for the lost sheep, and 'he searched through dangerous "mountain" terrain; and...he continually searched until the sheep was found' (Weber 2000:289). What should be kept in mind here is that shepherds in those times had a very bad reputation. They were 'a despised occupational group ... generally ranked with ass drivers, tanners, sailors, butchers, camel drivers, and other despised occupations' (Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003:93). If a person with such a reputation acts with so much care and love towards one single sheep, how much more should the disciples act with the same passion towards one child who went astray! Patte (1987:251) is of the opinion that to become like a child actually means to be prepared to accept responsibility for the care of the lost sheep (child) in such a way that you are willing to leave behind the rest of the flock, that is, those you already have. Mathematically it makes no sense. For God, however, children are so important that God does not want one of them to get lost. God desires the salvation of each one. Each should be received into God's kingdom (cf. Osborne 2010:loc. 12747–12754). This is also stretched in the story of the mothers who brought their children to Jesus in Matthew 19:13–15.

■ Mothers bring their children to Jesus: Matthew 19:13–15

■ Introduction

In Matthew 19:13–15, children are brought to Jesus. From this event, it seems as if the disciples do not yet understand what Jesus was trying to teach them in Matthew 18:1–14. Although Jesus told them in Matthew 18:5 to welcome children in his name, when the people bring their children to Jesus, they stop them! Schnackenburg (2002:186) suggests that what happens here should not be understood ‘as an idyllic episode, but as instruction for the community on how they are to behave towards children’.

■ Matthew 19:13–15 and the structure of Matthew

This pericope is part of the fifth block of narrative and discourse that Matthew uses to tell the story of Jesus. Matthew 19:3–20:34 describes Jesus’ actions and instruction during their journey to Jerusalem. Nel (2002:241) indicates that this section concentrates on practical-ethical questions like divorce (19:3–9), celibacy (19:10–12), children (19:13–15), money (19:16–20:16) and mutual service to each other (20:20–28). With reference to the ethical questions discussed here, Davies and Allison (1997:1–2; cf. Carter 1994) are of the opinion that ‘19.1–20.28 can ... be interpreted as a long *Haustafel* consisting of sayings of Jesus, a *Haustafel* in which traditional values are turned upside down ...’.

■ Interpretation of Matthew 19:13–15

The question that comes to mind when you read Matthew 19:13–15 is: Who are these children? Why do the people want to bring the children to

Jesus? Although it is not mentioned who brought the children, Botha (2000; cf. Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003:98) states with reference to the corresponding section in Mark 10:13–16:

[T]he picture is one of peasant women, many of whose babies would be dead within their first year, fearfully holding them out for Jesus to touch, to protect them or clear them of the evil eye (this was a serious malignancy from which parents had to protect their children in the Mediterranean world). (p. 59)

It is possible that these children were already sick, maybe even dying (Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003:336). The women probably bring their children to Jesus out of desperation. They would have heard of Jesus' healing miracles and would have hoped that he would heal them. There is, however, another possibility. As mentioned above, Van Aarde (2004:127) is of the opinion that street children came to Jesus. They were amongst the expendable class that followed Jesus. Nevertheless, whether they are sick children or street children, the disciples are not impressed with their coming to Jesus. They probably thought that Jesus had more important things on which to focus his attention than to bless sick or street children. They even scold the people because they (the people) wanted to disturb Jesus with the children. Osborne (2010:loc. 13303–13304) states that it is most likely that the disciples were 'upset at having their trip to Jerusalem interrupted for a trivial reason. Jesus is no simple teacher to be spending time blessing children'.

Jesus' reaction is to reprimand his disciples. As Matthew often does, he deletes the emotional language that Mark uses in telling the same story (Hagner 1995:552). Actually, Mark uses a very strong word for Jesus' reaction by saying that Jesus was indignant towards his disciples. Smit (1983:97) indicates that this is the only time that this specific word is used in connection with Jesus. It means to blame someone, to be disturbed and

to rebuke. The question that arises is: Why did Jesus' react in this way? Against what did Jesus react so strongly?

In response to this question, many answers are offered. The general explanation is that the children were not important for the disciples, that they even despised the children (Smit 1983:97). The disciples still think that Jesus is only looking for adult followers. Although Jesus has already taught them in Matthew 18:1–14 how important children are in God's kingdom, their typical Jewish attitude towards the children, their cultural view and values, again comes to the fore (Nielsen 1973:141). Children are unimportant, especially in religious matters, and therefore they can be overlooked and their needs can be ignored. The disciples still act in agreement with the culture of their time. They struggle to break the cultural habits to which they have become used but which were against the heart of the gospel. 'The priorities of the disciples were warped, and they had not assimilated what Jesus taught in 18:3–5 about the centrality of little children in the kingdom community' (Osborne 2010:loc. 13312–13314). Chouinard (1997:342) is probably correct when he states: 'By rejecting the children the disciples were essentially rejecting a mindset and quality of life fundamental to the kingdom of heaven'. That is why Jesus reacts so fiercely.

The context in which these events took place in Matthew and the other two Synoptic Gospels confirms that the disciples are in conflict with the heart of the gospel. In Matthew, this pericope forms a subdivision of the description of the disciples' misunderstanding of Jesus' announcement that he would suffer and die and their battle about which of them is the most important as far as merit or status is concerned. In Mark, this is also the broad context of the corresponding pericope. In Luke, this pericope is preceded by the parable comparing the Pharisee and the tax collector. In

this parable, rather than the Pharisee who trusts in his own righteousness, the sinner undeservingly receives mercy. In all three Synoptic Gospels, this pericope is followed by the story of the rich young man who wants to know what he had to do to receive eternal life but who is not prepared to come to Jesus like a child.

Oposing the disciples' attitude that the kingdom is for adults, Jesus confirms here, as in Matthew 18:1–14, that the kingdom of heaven is precisely for people like these undeserving children without any status. In this regard, Gundry-Volf (2001:38) says: 'A more emphatic statement of children's reception into the reign of God by Jesus could hardly be made'.

What is most interesting in this story is the fact that none of these children did anything from their side to receive Jesus' blessing. They were brought, they were completely passive in what happened here (Harrington 1991):

[T]he child receives the kingdom for what it is – a gift. A child has no social claim on the kingdom, nor can the child claim it on the basis of achievement. (p. 274)

That the disciples have not yet grasped this partiality of Jesus 'towards beneath', and that they try to keep the children from Jesus, is the reason for Jesus' disconcertedness. By laying hands on the children and, according to Mark, blessing them, Jesus showed very clearly that he gives them the salvation that he has brought about. In this way, he visibly demonstrates to the disciples what it means to welcome children (Mt 18:5). Crossan (1994:64) is of the opinion that Jesus' actions here should be interpreted in the light of the power that the Roman father had over his child to decide, only after the birth of his children, whether he wanted to accept his children or not. The series of deeds, that is, placing arms around the

children, laying hands on them, blessing them, must be understood as (Crossan 1994):

[T]he official bodily actions of a father designating a newly born infant for life rather than death, for accepting it [*sic*] into his family rather than casting it out with the garbage. (p. 64)

Jesus therefore did not only come to save adults but also to save the marginalised children and to adopt them into his family. Jensen (2005:10) is of the opinion that Jesus' touching and blessing of the children serves as an extended metaphor for his own ministry: 'The Savior of the world touches those whom most would rather ignore, blessing and healing them for renewed life'.

It is clear from Jesus' actions that one does not have to be mature or an adult, self-reliant and independent to be considered for God's salvation. God's salvation is meant for children. Adults have to learn to become children without any status before God. As in Matthew 18:3, children again became a model for the disciples (Harrington 1991:274). Harrington (1991:276) says that the fact that Jesus was asked to bless the children is not strange. Rather, what is strange 'was Jesus' willingness to take children seriously as persons and to propose them as models for human behaviour, especially in receiving the kingdom of God'. Hagner (1995) makes the following claim:

[T]he nature of the kingdom is such that even little children find their place in it. Little children indeed intrinsically have an affinity for the kingdom. They too in their way are members of the community of faith. Even more remarkable, little children can serve as a paradigm for the conduct of disciples. Jesus is not too busy even on the way to the cross to bless the little ones who can, by example, teach the 'little ones' who are the adult members of the community of disciples. (p. 553)

In learning this new behaviour, the disciples had to behave like Jesus towards the children and welcome them in the way that Jesus had

already taught them in Matthew 18:5. Hare (1993) draws the following conclusion:

It seems possible that Jesus' saying was understood by Matthew and his church as authorizing the practice of including children and young people in the corporate life of the church. This is suggested also by his inclusion of children with men and women in the great feeding scenes (14:21; 15:28). Regarded from a sociological point of view, this may have been one of the reasons why Christianity spread so rapidly in the Roman world. There were popular religions for men (Mithraism) and for women (the religion of the Bona Dea). Christianity offered a family religion in which both sexes and all ages could participate together. (p. 224)

■ Some theological perspectives

To follow Jesus is not a romantic or idyllic concept. The Gospel of Matthew illustrates this fact in the three metaphors used by Jesus to teach his disciples about the consequences of following him and of becoming part of the new group of people that he is establishing. All three metaphors in essence express the same message: To follow Jesus implies a radical transformation of your life. You have to take up your cross and die. You have to change from an adult to a child without any status or influence in life. You have to become a slave, excepting the obligation to serve others. You have to lay down your life, which is entrenched with the values and customs of your surrounding culture, and adapt a new way of being, of thinking and living. You have to adopt the kingdom-of-God lifestyle that is driven by a new set of values and expressed in new ways of doing things and in establishing new customs, creating a new kingdom culture. As Osborne (2010:loc. 13331–13332) expresses it: ‘Following Jesus means a “marginalized way of life” by abandoning “power and security” and embracing “vulnerability”’. It is only through this radical life-change, a rebirth, that you can enter the kingdom of heaven.

In this sense, there is nothing special in the child used by Jesus in Matthew 18:1–4. The child is only one of the metaphors Jesus uses to express the revolutionising message of the new kingdom that he is establishing. Therefore, we have to be very careful not to romanticise or even idolise the child. The focus should always be on the action of Jesus and what he wanted to say through this action about God and God's kingdom. The child is only the vehicle, the language to convey a theological view. As we listen to the voice of God, expressing through children (and bearing your cross and becoming slaves) God's expected changes in our lives, it will unsettle our theology and our God language. It will also unsettle our conceptions of children and God's kingdom, our tendencies towards status, power and success, and even our thinking and understanding of God. In this process, we shall always be forced to turn around to restart right from the beginning, with freshness and new dynamics, filled with new possibilities – like a new-born child, sucking its first breath of life (cf. Konz 2014:44–46).

Starting anew like a child also implies that we have to look anew at the children around us. Throughout Matthew, children are pictured in a positive way. It can best be summarised in Davies and Allison's (1997) words:

In 14.13–21 and 15.29–39 Jesus miraculously feeds a crowd, among which are children. In 15.21–8 he heals a child. In 18.3 he tells his followers to be like children. And in 21.15 children, recognizing that Jesus is the Son of David, shout 'Hosanna'. Thus throughout the Gospel the reader feels sympathy for children. They are objects of Jesus' mercy. They are to be imitated. And they can receive miraculous insight. (p. 35)

With this picture of Jesus' view of children in Matthew, the view of children and childhood in the 1st-century Mediterranean world is re-interpreted. Through Jesus' interaction with children, he shows that he came to restore the children, unworthy in the eyes of the world, in line

with the truth that they were created in the image of God. He welcomes them and enters into a relationship with them regardless of their age. Through his behaviour, Jesus indicates that children, although they are still developing, are worthy people right from birth and therefore do not become people only in adulthood. In this way, he also demonstrates that the marginalised children of the 1st-century Mediterranean world are also included in God's love for people on the margins of the society.

Because children are important for Jesus, he expects of his adult followers to see and treat children with human dignity. From birth, children should not be seen as incomplete adults but as able-bodied people. In their childhood, children should already be treated with the same respect and worth as adults. As people who are so easily marginalised in society, we have to reach out to children with the same love that God has for all the marginalised people in this world. What Pope John Paul II says (in Woodley 2011) about the Catholic church is actually applicable to everyone following Jesus and to our relationship with the vulnerable children in our communities:

The protection and defence of the human person – every person and the whole person, especially those who are vulnerable and most helpless: this is the task which the Catholic Church, in the name of Jesus Christ, cannot and will not forsake. (loc. 2319–2320)

Woodley (2011) draws the following conclusion:

In other words, as those who belong to Jesus, as those who share our Father's heart of mercy and goodness, we should be vigilant to reflect his tender and protective care for vulnerable people. (loc. 2320–2322)

In Matthew, Jesus' followers are invited to welcome children in Jesus' name. Therefore, they have to be careful not to let the children fall into sin. They also have to be committed to actively search for the children and bring them back into the kingdom. The disciples have to live out these

attitudes and actions of love towards all children but especially to the marginalised and vulnerable children.

Adults can live out this love towards children when they are dedicated to the well-being of all children. This dedication should have many implications for ministry that includes children.

■ Some ministerial perspectives

Children are extremely vulnerable, and because of the sin of all humanity, they are regularly the victims of various disasters, abuse and neglect. Often they find themselves in circumstances that are unjust and that do damage to them and in a world that is indifferent to their needs. Especially in the 21st century, they are suffering from social exclusion in the new globalised information-driven network society. Jensen (2005:xiii) says: 'Children's voices often drown in the cacophony of commercialization and violence that characterize the (post)modern world'. Matthew 18:5 and 19:13–15 challenge all faith communities to become, and always be, a welcoming space for all children.

However, children need much more. They need faith communities that are also committed to be fearless voices for the suffering children around us, calling and guiding people to make this world a hospitable place for all children. Christ-like love is supposed to notice especially the suffering and marginalised children of this world and to reach out to them and offer them the protection, care and healing that Jesus brought. In their children's ministry, communities of faith should supplement their strong focus on the formation of the faith of individual children on a personal level with a stronger local involvement in the needs and interests of children in the public sphere, especially the many children

at risk in communities in Africa. Therefore, the church and theology are called to more actions of advocacy on behalf of and with children. Local and worldwide information about children and the extent of their suffering and exploitation should receive extensive public attention and should be followed up with action. Attention should particularly be given to the re-development of 'an ethic of care for the vulnerable children in our midst' (Jensen 2005:xiii). Local churches have to become hospitable spaces where these children at risk are welcomed and served with the love of Jesus.

The relationship and interaction between children and adults should be characterised by unconditional love and servanthood and not by any form of exploitation through power. Authority has not been given to adults in order to rule over children but rather to create room in which the characteristic of servanthood can be attained and grow. Therefore, adults must be prepared to welcome children in Jesus' name, that is, to receive them with hospitality and provide them with a chance to live a quality life. Adults who do not want to welcome children into their lives and move them aside and out of their world, and even cause them to sin, are in danger of moving Jesus out of their lives and of being rejected from the kingdom of God.

God is inherently a missionary God and does not want any single child to be lost. This is the reason why Jesus died. Jesus' command to the church to take the good news to the world includes all children. Therefore, in its children's ministry, the church should more clearly expose God's missionary heart for children. Any missionary strategy and action should include children. More importantly, children's ministry should be focussed towards missions and become a missional children's ministry. In the process, communities of faith, especially the more affluent parts of the world and the more affluent

congregations in any context, should make an effort to practically re-associate themselves with the poor and vulnerable children of African society.

It seems that Matthew interprets Jesus' actions and pronouncements about children to call on all communities of faith to include children as able-bodied members in all meetings of the community of faith. Children do not have to be adults to qualify to have a relationship with God, to worship God and to serve God within the community of faith. Entrance to God's kingdom is not provided by biological age but by the willingness to become like a child in your relationship with God. To include children in the main services and other church gatherings is naturally not easy and actually a challenge. The community of faith should, however, not shirk from this important challenge. Van Aarde (1991:685) warns that, from a New Testament perspective, it seems that, in many communities of faith, children are still handled as people on the margins. This is true more than 25 years after he wrote it and does not honour the gospel of Jesus. It should earnestly be addressed by the community of faith. The community of faith should never exclude children but should rather include children into the totality of the life and ministry of the faith community and integrate them as able-bodied members.

Children are not only a harvest field but also labourers to bring in the harvest. Through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, they carry the fruit of the Spirit, receive the gifts of the Spirit, and God also uses them as sources of revelation, as servants of his grace and even as his voice and agents to change adults. Often, children are more open to receive God's revelation than adults, including the church leadership. The fellowship of believers should therefore fully include children into all the different ministries of the faith community.

The interaction of adults and children in the totality of the life of the fellowship of believers is important for both groups – in order for them to grow in faith. Children need adult examples of a committed Christian life because it is important that they see and experience how to live a Godly life. Children learn by following the example of adults as their role models. Adults, however, also need children as models of faith, sources of revelation and representatives of Jesus in their lives (Bunge 2004:49). Gundry-Volf says that adults should not only mould children but should also follow them (Gundry-Volf 2001:60). This asks that adults, in following Jesus, become ‘like children’ without status and power and authority and that the ethos of self-sufficiency and living for yourself be replaced with an ethos of self-sacrifice. Weber (1979:51) says: ‘If we want to learn how to receive the Kingdom and how to become God’s representatives, we must learn it from the child in our midst’.

To ‘become like a child’, adults need the visible presence of children in their midst as a constant reminder that they should become like children and that they should learn from children. It calls all of us to contribute to changing all churches into hospitable spaces for children.

■ A new social order

The challenge that the abovementioned theological perspectives poses to believers, the church and theology with regards to the ministry with children can probably be described best in the following words by Gundry-Volf (2001):

In light of the traditional reception of the New Testament teaching, the most significant challenge before us is to recapture in our own particular contexts the radicalness of Jesus’ teaching on children. Children are not only subordinate but

sharers with adults in the life of faith; they are not only to be formed but to be imitated; they are not only ignorant but capable of receiving spiritual insight; they are not 'just' children but representatives of Christ. What makes that challenge so difficult is that it would entail changing not only how adults relate to children but how we conceive our social world. Jesus did not just teach how to make an adult world kinder and more just for children; he taught the arrival of a social world in part defined by and organized around children. He cast judgment on the adult world because it is not the child's world. He made being a disciple dependent on inhabiting this 'small world.' He invited the children to come to him *not* so that he might initiate them into the adult realm but so that they might receive what is *properly theirs* – the reign of God. (p. 60)

The challenge that the church in Africa faces in the context of the 21st century is to work on creating, for the benefit and good of all African children, especially the many children at risk, a new social order, the kingdom of God, where children will experience hospitality and complete acceptance as worthy people. When this happens, adults will enter, as children, the kingdom of God!

Calvin's theology of childhood

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Introduction

Little has been written on John Calvin's understanding of childhood. This is surprising since Calvin's writings and reform activities in Geneva reflect a great concern for children and child-rearing (Pitkin 2001:162). Two recent contributions that directly address the topic are that of Barbara Pitkin in a chapter from the book entitled *The child in Christian thought* (2001) and Herman Selderhuis' chapter in the essay collection entitled *Calvin today: Reformed Theology and the future of the church* (2011). A few books have been written on Calvin's theological anthropology, yet surprisingly, they do not refer at all to Calvin's understanding of children and childhood (cf. Engel 1988; Torrance 1957; Van Vliet 2009). This is

surprising since one would have thought that Calvin's understanding of childhood would be an important theme in any study of his anthropology. Fortunately, there is an abundance of literature on Calvin's notion of education, catechism and child baptism. These works contribute to a better understanding of Calvin's concept of childhood although Calvin's theology of childhood cannot be understood in abstraction from his theological anthropology as a whole.

This chapter addresses the abovementioned deficiency in Calvin's scholarship by examining Calvin's understanding of childhood within the broader context of his theological anthropology and by asking whether Calvin's approach to childhood is relevant to the contemporary context. Although Calvin provides no systematic treatise on children and childhood, there are enough scattered references throughout his works to compose a clear picture of his theology of childhood.

The first section of this contribution discusses the social context within which Calvin worked and framed his theology. The social-historical setting of the 16th century in general and Geneva in particular is discussed, after which attention is given to the paradigm shift that the Reformation and Renaissance brought about with regard to child rearing. The following two sections focus on Calvin's ontology of the child and his understanding of child-rearing within the family, state and church. This is done whilst keeping in mind the broader framework of Calvin's theological anthropology. The last section concludes by examining the relevance of Calvin's concept of childhood within a modern setting.

■ The social context of the 16th century

Calvin's understanding of childhood cannot be abstracted from the historical setting of the 16th century. His sermons, letters and systematic

works were responses to the challenges that the Reformation faced in northern Europe as well as the questions and problems with which he was confronted in 16th-century Geneva. As pastor, Calvin was intensely involved in the daily affairs of the Genevan society, and his understanding of childhood would have been moulded by these practical experiences.

■ Social conditions in Reformation Europe

In the 1960s, the French medieval historian Phillipe Ariès developed the influential thesis that 16th-century parents did not possess a sense of childhood and that they were indifferent to their children in order to avoid the emotional distress that the death of a child might bring (cf. Ariès 1962). However, since then, various historians such as Steven Ozment (1983), Linda Pollock (1983), Ralph Houlbrooke (1984) and Hugh Cunningham (1995) established through the study of diaries, autobiographies and sermons that parent-child relations in the 16th century were affectionate in general and that harsh treatment of children was the exception rather than the rule.

After a stringent examination of 16th-century documents, Pollock (1983:97) concludes that a concept of childhood did indeed exist. Children were seen as passing through various developmental stages; indulging in play and in need of care, protection, guidance and discipline (Pollock 1983:98). In addition, there is evidence that parents wanted children, valued children and nurtured high ideals for their children (Pollock 1983:208). Pitkin (2001:163) also indicates the existence of a 'burgeoning body of literature' in the 16th century on issues such as the various stages of childhood, birth, paediatrics and education. This points to a real concern for children.

Children of the 16th century generally lived within large families, and most of their formative experiences occurred within the family (Cunningham 1995:79). They were slowly initiated into the adult world

from the age of seven by performing tasks around the home (Cunningham 1995:79). Given that schooling was not compulsory and that most parents did not possess the means to provide for their children's education, children became economically active at a relatively young age (Cunningham 1995:80). We need to keep in mind that 16th-century children composed the majority of society. It was thus inevitable that the broader society would require of them to contribute to the household and economy. If children were allowed to stay dependent for too a long period, society would not be able to sustain itself (cf. Cunningham 1995:96).

Social conditions in 16th-century societies were harsh and intensely affected children as a vulnerable group in society. Infant mortality rates were very high, and about a third of children did not survive past the age of five (Ozment 1983:101). Child abandonment was a constant problem whilst some parents used wet nurses for their children for reasons of convenience, health, safety or economic constraints (cf. Cunningham 1995:91). These practices increased the mortality rate of children because wet nurses were often poor mothers who also had to nurse their own children (Ozment 1983:118). Literature from the 16th century indicates that parents in general experienced deep anxiety and fear about the health of their children, and they expressed great sorrow when they lost children. Pollock (1983) makes the following observation in this regard:

Parents were very much aware of the frequency with which children died and a coldish cold or cough was enough to send most of the parents into a paroxysm of panic. (p. 128)

The fragile political, social and economic conditions of 16th-century societies forced society to maintain and preserve morals and discipline. If high sexual mores, orderly marriage arrangements, hygienic standards, religious orthodoxy, a strong work ethic, obedience to authority and altruism were not instilled in people, anarchy could set

in quite quickly. According to Ozment (1983:135), 16th-century societies were pre-occupied with discipline, and the 'consequences of anarchy always seemed more dreadful than those of tyranny'. In Protestant circles, children were not seen as human simply by birth but as a creature capable of evil. A child has to grow to maturity and adulthood. Only vigilant discipline and parental care could raise humans above animals by passing on to them a sense of rationality and self-control (Ozmont 1983:139). Moderate corporal punishment was encouraged as part of disciplining children, but harsh and arbitrary punishment was condemned whilst brutality towards children was punished by law (Ozment 1983:149). The texts that Pollock (1983:151) studied indicate that some parents inflicted physical punishment and some remonstrated whilst others tried to advise their children. Both Ozment (1983:162) and Pollock (1983:148), however, conclude that no direct evidence exists of widespread brutality or harsh treatment of children by 16th-century Protestants.

When Calvin entered the scene in Geneva in 1536, the city was striving to solidify its newly found political and religious independence (Spierling 2005:791). In order to preserve the political and religious independence of Geneva, the population had to be educated in the Reformed faith (Spierling 2005:791). After being exiled for political reasons in 1538, Calvin was recalled by the city council of Geneva in 1541 because of the deteriorating religious and moral situation in the city during his absence (McGrath 1990:86). He inherited a very difficult set of circumstances. Throughout the 15th century, Geneva was a relatively prosperous market town, but during the 16th century, it sunk into economic decline due to the establishment of rival fairs in Lyon (Naphy 2004:25). The already challenging economic situation was aggravated from the 1540s onwards by the large influx of refugees from conflict-infested territories in northern Europe. According

to Kingdon (1992:223), Geneva grew by more than 60% during the period 1550–1560. Many of the refugees were forced to leave their possessions behind and live in Geneva in conditions of impoverishment. Often they would spend only a short period in Geneva, after which they sought refuge elsewhere. The influx of refugees led to rising rent, property value and prices (Naphy 2004:32). With impoverishment came social problems that affected children as well. The city was overcrowded, and people were forced to share rooms, which left little room for privacy. Sanitation posed serious challenges; contagious diseases were endemic; and there was severe competition for work, food and resources, which heightened the possibility of social friction (cf. Kingdon 1992:106). The harsh living conditions in Geneva forced the city to develop an extensive social-welfare system for children. Amongst other things, the general hospital administered welfare to orphans and foundlings whilst an elected board of *procureurs* approved the allocation of food, finances and resources to orphaned children and arranged apprenticeships for them (cf. Pitkin 2001:178). Sometimes children were raised in the hospital, but some were also housed with foster parents (cf. Pitkin 2001: 179).

Calvin himself experienced the challenges of the times with regard to child-rearing. During his exile from Geneva, he and his wife Idelette lived in a limited living space in Strasbourg, being forced to let parts of their home to supplement their meagre income. The same living conditions awaited him in Geneva. Shortly after his return to Geneva, his infant son died, causing him great despondency and sorrow (Ganoczy 2004:14). After the premature death of Idelette in 1549, he had to act as a single parent for her two children from a previous marriage. These personal experiences certainly contributed to his understanding of children.

■ The moral agenda of the Renaissance and Reformation

Calvin's theology on childhood was clearly informed by the moral and educational agendas of the Renaissance and Reformation. The Reformation was strongly influenced by the Renaissance, which revived interest in the classical times and endeavoured to shape a more virtuous society. The Renaissance regarded the family as a prototype of the state, and children were seen as holding 'the key to the future of the state' (Cunningham 1995:42). Early education was seen as important, and the role of fathers in educating the young was emphasised (cf. Cunningham 1995:43). The Renaissance reshaped the nature of education by moving away from the highly philosophical and spiritual nature of Thomist education to a more comprehensive and concrete approach to education (cf. Reid 1992:239).

Before turning a Reformer, Calvin was imbued in the humanist tradition of the Renaissance and trained in classical languages and the classical tradition. He never relinquished his humanist roots and ideals as can be seen in the Christian humanism that permeates his works from start to finish. This is particularly evident in his understanding that all humans are created in the image of God, that the family is a micro-cosmos of church and state, that education is important, that society is a neighbourhood and that vocation is important.

From the Renaissance, the Reformers, and Calvin in particular, borrowed the ideal of the moral shaping of societies. Conscientious parenting was seen as important for both the public good and the well-being of the individual (Spierling 2005:789). Since humans are saved by faith alone, there was a concern for the salvation of the soul of the child and a sense that children had to become messengers of the gospel of Protestantism (cf. Cunningham 1995:41, 49). The household was spiritualised as a covenant

community that served as a prototype for the church. The moral formation of children received great attention, and families had to become more child-oriented in order to produce upright and virtuous future citizens. Ozment (1983) states the Reformation's high regard for education as follows:

Never has the art of parenting been more highly praised and parental authority more wholeheartedly supported than in Reformation Europe ... No age subscribed more completely to the notion that the hand that rock the cradle ruled the world. Today's children were tomorrow's subjects and rulers, and they would shape society as they were shaped at home. (pp. 132, 134)

Since the ideal was to build a society of 'social cohesion and harmony', 16th-century children in Reformation Europe were brought up to be social beings with a clear understanding of the duties they owed towards their parents and society (Ozment 1983:177). To achieve this goal, Reformers spread the idea and instilled the practice of schooling. Enormous efforts were made to increase the supply of schools and to promote attendance (cf. Cunningham 1995:101). This signified a fundamental shift in the prevalent notions of childhood at the time. No longer was the moral formation of children the task of the family alone, but the family and school had to work together to cultivate proper citizens. Whereas education in the Middle Ages was limited to the privileged, a concerted attempt was now made to provide education to most children. The General Council of Geneva made elementary education mandatory on 21 May 1536 although there was no realistic chance for the ideal of universal literacy to have been achieved in any 16th-century society (Watt 2002:449). Despite the importance they attached to education, the Reformers never intended for schools to replace the primary function of the family in the education of the young. The Reformation understood formal education in the words of Cunningham (1995:60) 'as working alongside the family rather than as repairing its deficiencies or as a substitute for it'.

Calvin's agenda in Geneva was definitely shaped by the preceding ideals of the Renaissance and Reformation. However, we must be cautious not to overestimate Calvin's influence on Geneva. In his well-researched biography on the life of John Calvin, Allister McGrath reminds us that the coercive power that Calvin possessed in Geneva was not as far-reaching as many scholars contend. During the Reformation, the relationship between the reformers and city councils of cities that had adopted the Reformed faith was 'sensitive' at best (McGrath 1990:85). The reformer was usually tasked to provide a coherent theological doctrine and form of church government that would strengthen the political and social structures of the city thereby preventing the city from descending into anarchy. Real political power, however, was in the hands of the city council, and reformers had to be cautious not to overstep their authority. Depictions of Calvin as the 'dictator' of Geneva are thus, according to McGrath (1990:86), 'totally devoid of historical foundation'. In fact, Calvin was a French immigrant and thus did not enjoy the legal and political rights of a citizen (*citoyen*) of Geneva. Until 1559, he was regarded as a *habitant* with no right to vote or to hold any position in the public administration of the city (cf. McGrath 1990:107–108). This limited Calvin's ability to use political coercive methods to enforce his agenda. Calvin exerted his influence indirectly through preaching, pastoral counselling and the Genevan Consistory⁴⁶ that he instituted in 1542 to promote religious orthodoxy and

46. The Consistory was a committee of the government of Geneva that oversaw the morality of the community. The men that served on the Consistory represented the various neighbourhoods in the city and served fixed terms. They were called the elders and were elected by the Council in consultation with the pastors. The pastors of the city served *ex officio* on the Consistory. The Consistory mostly acted as a compulsory counselling body, but they could also exact punishment by excommunication. If a moral transgression was regarded as serious, they could refer the matter to the Small Council of the city. Only the Courts were allowed to enforce secular punishment (for a detailed discussion, cf. Kingdon 1992).

address social ills. Since he was trained as a law expert, the Council also used his jurisprudential skills to help them formulate legislation.

■ Calvin on the ontological nature of children

The ontological question regarding children pertains to the issue of the nature of the child. Typical ontological questions that arise are whether children are innocent or sinful by nature, whether they possess inherent dignity and inalienable rights, whether they are born *tabula rasa* or whether they possess an inherent rational capacity, whether they are members of the private or the public sphere and whether they are morally accountable.

Since these ontological questions have direct implications for our understanding of a range of ethical issues concerning children, it is important to focus on Calvin's understanding of the nature of children and how it informs his ethical reflections on children and childhood. However, Calvin's understanding of the ontological nature of children cannot be abstracted from his theological anthropology as a whole.

■ The *visio Dei* as the *telos* of human life

Calvin's notion of the *visio Dei* as the *telos* of human life is a central premise of his theological anthropology. It entails that the purpose of human life is to have communion with the Trinitarian God, to respond to God's goodness in gratitude and to glorify God in the theatre of creation (Calvin 1847b):

This is indeed the proper business of the whole life, in which men should daily exercise themselves, to consider the infinite goodness, justice, power, and wisdom of God, in this magnificent theatre of heaven and earth. (p. 106, CO 23.32)

The *visio Dei* requires that the human race must contemplate God and seek to acquire knowledge of God and, in consequence of this knowledge, true and complete felicity (*Inst*, 1.5.10, *CO* 2.48). By contemplating the glory of God and the miracle of possessing eternal life, we develop a sense of virtue that is ‘holy’ and ‘honourable’ (*Inst*, 2.1.1, *CO* 2.176). The *visio Dei* naturally involves enjoyment of God. God created the creaturely reality for the benefit of humankind so that human beings may enjoy God’s gifts and experience true bliss in God (*Inst*, 1.14.22, *CO* 2.118). The *visio Dei* formed the central tenet of Calvin’s aspiration to have the young educated in godliness. Human beings, after all, cannot live in communion with God if they do not possess adequate knowledge of God’s work in their lives.

■ Created in the image of God

Roman Catholicism traditionally understood the biblical concept of the *imago Dei* in a substantialist and ontological sense. Calvin, in contrast, posited that the *imago Dei* is fundamentally a relational concept. The metaphor that he uses most commonly to explain the meaning of the *imago Dei* is that of a mirror. For Calvin, the mirror image conveys two features of the *imago Dei*, namely that humans resemble God in their actions and that they are living objects in which the glory of God can be observed (Calvin 2009:93, *Sermon on Gen 1: 26–28*, *SC* 11/1.57). A second understanding that he attaches to the *imago Dei* is that God and human beings stand in a Father-child relationship. This entails that human beings are from the lineage of God who resemble God’s attributes, that they are utterly dependent on God and that they are inheritors of God’s kingdom (Calvin 1854:198, *CO* 51.147; 2009:147, *SC* 11/1.99).

In his exposition of Psalm 8:2, Calvin (1845a: 96, *CO* 31.88) applies the mirror metaphor to children by describing them as 'preachers' who brightly shine forth God's glory, even before they can speak. He then proceeds to state:

The tongues of infants, even before they are able to pronounce a single word, speak loudly and distinctly in commendation of God's liberality towards the human race. (p. 96, *CO* 31.88)

The point that Calvin makes is that children are no less the image of God than adults because they are sufficient mirrors of God's greatness. God appoints children, 'even in infancy the vindicators of his glory' (Calvin 1845a:99, *CO* 31.88). By stating this, Calvin attaches the same dignity to children as to other groups of people. Children are neither mere biological products nor commodities to be used, but they are part of God's lineage and mirrors of God's works.

Children as gifts of God

Closely connected to the idea that children are mirrors of God's image is Calvin's description of children as gifts of God. In his commentary on the Sara-Lea story of Genesis 29, Calvin (1850) states:

This passage teaches us that offspring is a special gift of God, since the power of rendering one fertile, and of cursing the womb of the other with barrenness, is expressly assigned to Him. (p. 135, *CO* 23.405)

In his commentary on Psalms 127:3, Calvin reaffirms this point by describing children as 'the heritage of God and the fruit of the womb His gift' while in the story of the reunion between Jacob and Esau he refers to 'the fruit of the womb' as a 'reward and gift of God' (Calvin 1949:110, *CO* 32.324; Calvin 1850:208, *CO* 23.450). He grounds the gift of children, as opposed to the offspring of animals, in their createdness as image of God. Parents therefore need 'to celebrate the

singular kindness of God in their offspring’, and they ought to be grateful when ‘God confers on mortals the sacred title of parents, and through them propagates the human race formed after His own image’ (Calvin 1850:208, 146, CO 23.450, 411). When parents regard their children ‘as offspring of chance’, they deprive God of God’s honour and deny God’s providential reign (Calvin 1850:141, CO 23.408). Parents ought to realise, as was the case with Leah, that the ‘propagation of the human race flows from God alone’ (Calvin 1850:135, 145, CO 23.405, 411). Children are no small gift since they renew our posterity, save us from solitude and increase the mutual love between husband and wife (Calvin 1949:111; 1850:145, CO 32.325, 23.411). Parenting therefore needs to be undertaken in joy, gratitude and modesty (cf. Blanchard 2007:231). If parents do not regard their children as gifts of God, they will be inclined to neglect their children (Calvin 1949:111, CO 32.325).

■ Original sin

In contrast to Thomas Aquinas, who held that the child is born like an animal but gradually acquires reason and virtue through the infusion of God’s grace, Calvin maintained that the child is born fully human. Children are, however, born with the seed of sin that, instead of increasing virtue, leads to an increasing capacity for sin ‘that constantly produces new fruit’ (*Inst* 4.15.10, 11 CO 2.968; cf. Wall 2003:565). Calvin defines original sin as:

[T]he depravity and corruption of our nature, which first makes us liable to the wrath of God, and then produces in us which Scripture terms the works of the flesh. (*Inst* 4.15.10, CO 2.967)

He resisted the notion of some that infants who do not have rational faculties as yet cannot be regarded as sinful because sin can only be contracted by a voluntary act. He insisted that, even though infants as yet possess no reason, they are defiled by original sin because they already possess the root of corruption that later on produces the fruits of sin

(Calvin 1855:87, *CO* 25.192). Parents, therefore, have the duty to prevent original sin from dominating the lives of their children by educating them in God's promises (*Inst* 4.15.11, *CO* 2.968).

Unfortunately, Calvin often got carried away by his rhetoric on sin. If one, for instance, interprets his comments on Genesis 8:21 in isolation from the rest of his theology, one might get the impression that he believed that original sin transforms the human being into an evil being (cf. Calvin 1847b:284–286, *CO* 23.139–141). However, we need to take account of his rhetorical intent and the structure of his overall theological thinking. In his reply to Pighius, who accused him of turning the human being into a 'brute beast', Calvin points to the rhetorical intent of his doctrine on sin. By emphasising the depraving effects of sin, Calvin states, he attempts to extol the greatness of God's grace. Only if we realise how miserable we are can we fully contemplate the extent of God's grace (cf. Calvin 1996:38–39, *CO* 6.257).

From a theological point of view, Calvin indeed regarded human beings as so depraved that they cannot satisfy God's demand for satisfaction through their works. In that sense, human beings are lost and totally incapable of merit. Yet, Calvin did not demonise the fallen human being or the new-born child. The human image of God has been corrupted after the Fall, not destroyed. Even after the Fall, humans possess remnants of the image, the natural laws are accessible to them, they are still capable of distinguishing between right and wrong and they are able to produce admirable wisdom and virtues (cf. Calvin 1845b:108, *CO* 31.95; 2009:733, *SC* 11/1.476; *Inst* 2.2.12, *CO* 2:195; *Inst* 2.2.22, *CO* 2:203).

It is important to note that Calvin described children as gifts of God, despite their depravity. Marcia Bunge (2001:14) rightly notes that 'Calvin, the theologian of "total depravity" is more appreciative of the positive

character of children than are many Christians influenced by him'. The image of Calvin as a harsh and unkind disciplinarian with little sympathy for children is unwarranted.

■ Grace and the regeneration of children

In Calvin's thinking, God's grace overwhelms sin. The depravity of human beings cannot invalidate God's grace. Although parents condemn their children to be the prey of evil by transmitting to them the contagion of sin, God promised to be true to the covenantal promises by showing their children mercy (Calvin 1855:86, *CO* 25.192). By blessing the children, Christ indicated that he reckoned children amongst his flock (Calvin 1845b:391, *CO* 45.536). In fact, before our children are born, they are adopted by Christ as his own since he promises through the baptism 'that He will be a God to us, and to our seed after us' (*Inst* 4.15.20, *CO* 2.974). Calvin insisted that the Holy Spirit not only works in adults but also in infants according to 'the capacity of their age'. The power of the Spirit works in them by degrees until it matures at the proper time (Calvin 1845b:390, *CO* 45.535). Yet, Calvin was realistic about the effects of God's sanctification on the believer. Sanctification does not mean that corruption ceases in the believer. As long as we live, the 'remains of sin dwell in us' (*Inst* 4.15.11, *CO* 2.968). God's work in us will only be completed when we leave this life to go to the Lord (*Inst* 4.15.11, *CO* 2.968). Believers ought to find their comfort not in their ability to overcome sin but in being clothed in the righteousness of Christ (*Inst* 4.14.14, *CO* 2.951).

Calvin did not exclude the possibility that God can regenerate infants even before they possess a rational capacity. Just as all human beings possess the seed of sin from birth, the elect possess the seed of future repentance and faith (*Inst* 4.16.20, *CO* 2.990). He calls attention to the examples of John and Jesus and states that it is as 'possible and easy for

God' to regenerate infants 'as it is wondrous and incomprehensible to us' (*Inst* 4.16.18, *CO* 2.989):

In Christ we have a pattern of all the graces which God bestows on all his children, in this instance we have a proof that the age of infancy is not incapable of receiving sanctification. (*Inst* 4.16.18, *CO* 2.989)

By recognising the possibility that children can be regenerated, Calvin allowed for the possibility that children could have a capacity to gradually transform themselves into more virtuous beings who are able to transform the world.

The three stages of childhood

Like many of his contemporaries, Calvin distinguished between three stages of childhood. The first stage of childhood stretches up to the age of six. It is a period when children exhibit an exemplary form of modesty and humility and a lack of malice (Calvin 1845b):

The tender age of little children is distinguished by simplicity to such an extent that they are unacquainted with the degrees of honour, and with all the incentives to pride; so that they are properly and justly held out by Christ's example. (p. 333, *CO* 45.500)

Although infants are, in a sense, an example to us, Calvin (1845b:332, *CO* 45.500) rejects the notion of child innocence and warns that even little children are 'faulty in many things'.

The second period stretches from about 6 to 14. During this stage, the child's reason develops a capacity for intellectual, spiritual and moral formation although children of this age also display arrogance, haughtiness, rashness, immoderateness and a lack of self-control (Pitkin 2001:164; Selderhuis 2011:57). In his commentary on Genesis 8:21, Calvin (1847b:285, *CO* 23.140) states that, as soon as children are able to start forming their thoughts, 'they have radical corruption of mind'. If they

display rebelliousness, parents should discipline their children with love and patience without losing their temper (Selderhuis 2011:58). From the age of about 14, children reach adolescence. This is an age of ‘pride and rebelliousness’, fuelled by the child’s awakening sexuality (Pitkin 2001:165). As most theologians of the time, Calvin exhibited a negative stance towards human sexuality and regarded it as a source of many evils.

□ The covenant and infant baptism

Calvin used the biblical concept of the covenant as the organising principle in his reformation of marriage, family life and childcare in Geneva. He employed the theme of the covenant not only to assert the personal nature of the vertical relationship between God and humanity against Catholicism’s creational ontology but also to stress the importance of mutual love in human relationships. Calvin regarded the covenants of both the Old and New Testament as having the same meaning and containing the same promises although administrated through different signs. They find their union in Christ, who forms the foundation of the promises made through the outward signs of both the circumcision of the Old Testament and the baptism of the New Testament (*Inst* 4.16.3, *CO* 2.977, 978). Participation in the covenant of God does not rely on physical descent, as the Judaists asserted, but on faith in Christ (*Inst* 4.16.12, *CO* 2.978).

Calvin regarded the sacrament of the baptism as a sign and seal of God’s covenant. He developed his doctrine of infant baptism in response to two opposite views. Against the Roman Catholic view that baptism infuses God’s grace in children and washes away their original sin, Calvin (*Inst* 4.14.17, *CO* 2.988) posited that baptism is a sign and seal of God’s promises and not a mystical instrument of salvation.

In response to the Anabaptists who understood baptism as a sign of faith, and therefore excluded children from baptism, Calvin held that

baptism does not indicate faith but signifies God entering into a relationship with the child through the covenant. Children are as much inheritors of God's promises as adults (*Inst* 4.16.8, *CO* 2.989). By refusing children baptism, the Anabaptists do not only deny them the right to be members of God's church but also openly consign to eternal death youths who die before they are able profess their faith (Calvin 1844:122–123, *CO* 48.55; *Inst* 4.16.26, *CO* 2.995). In his comments on Matthew 19:14, Calvin (1845b:390, *CO* 45.535) states that nothing could be more 'cruel' than to exclude children from the grace of God. He (Calvin 1845b; *CO* 45.535) proceeds to state:

Since baptism is the pledge and figure of the forgiveness of sins, and likewise of adoption by God, it ought not to be denied to infants, whom God adopts and washes with the blood of his Son. (p. 390)

According to Calvin (*Inst* 4.16.9, *CO* 2.982), God's recognition of our children as belonging to Godself and God's involvement with and care for children should serve as encouragement for parents. At the same time, baptism serves as an assurance for children that they are recipient of God's promises and grace (*Inst* 4.15.17, *CO* 2.971, 972). Baptism also signifies that children belong to the church as a covenant community and the body of Christ. Therefore, they do not only belong to their parents but to all members of the church (*Inst* 4.15.15, *CO* 2.970; cf. Geluk 2009:153–154). The church as covenant community, therefore, has a God-given duty to nurture and educate the children in their midst (*Inst* 4.16.32, *CO* 2.1002).

Calvin (*Inst* 4.16.24, *CO* 2.994) regards all baptised children of Christians origin as belonging to the covenant of grace and worthy of receiving the promises of God's covenant. This, however, does not mean that all baptised children are saved. The promises of God's covenant must be embraced by children through faith as they mature. Yet, Calvin (*Inst* 4.15.22, *CO* 2.976) maintains that children who die before being baptised 'are not excluded

from the kingdom of heaven' because baptism does not 'officiate' God's covenantal promises but 'affirms them'. Those who suggest that children who die before being baptised are automatically lost belittle the covenant of God (*Inst* 4.15.22, *CO* 2.976).

□ **Vocation and society**

Calvin defines the human being as a social being and understands society as a 'neighbourhood'. In this neighbourhood, human beings serve each other through the diversity of their God-given gifts (*Inst* 3.7.5, 2.8.55, *CO* 2.509, 306). In his commentary on Ephesians 5:22, Calvin (1854:317, *CO* 51.222) defines society as consisting of groups of people who have a mutual obligation towards each other. Most importantly, Calvin affirms a universal understanding of the neighbourhood of society. It consists of believer and non-believer alike because all people find their origin in a common ancestor: 'Everyone must individually recognise his own flesh and bones, his own substance, in his neighbours' (Calvin 2009:181, *SC* 11/1.126). For Calvin, it is possible for believer and non-believer to be neighbours because sin has not totally destroyed the image of God in the non-believer. There is a natural law to which both believer and non-believer can subscribe, and God also uses the gifts of non-believers to the benefit of God's kingdom. Calvin's understanding of society as a neighbourhood naturally entails that he regards vocation as important. Lief (2009:5) rightly states that vocation signifies the 'means by which believers fully engage the cultural life', using their gifts to serve their neighbour. A true sense of vocation requires self-renunciation, which is the 'precondition for genuine service and love to the neighbour' (cf. Senior 2012:126). Calvin furthermore posits that every believer has a religious calling to be a king, prophet and priest that 'exhorts, ministers and rules' in his community (cf. Witte 1998:260).

■ Child-rearing in family, church and state

In Calvin's thought, child-rearing does not only serve the interests of the parents or our personal relationship with God, 'but it serves the entire social and moral order' (Wall 2003:567). He was therefore instrumental in increasingly bringing the intellectual and spiritual formation of children under the purview of the public domain. Calvin regarded the family and the church as the fundamental building blocks of society, who have the duty to preserve the morals of society and lead the young to faith, whilst the state has the duty to protect the spiritual regiment by safeguarding it against heresy and preserving law and order. Child-rearing can thus only come to full fruition if the family, church and state work together. Using the two natures of Christ as analogy, Calvin describes the various spheres of society as united but not to be confused. Each sphere possesses its own inviolable integrity, yet there is also considerable overlap (*Inst* 2.14.4, *CO* 2.356; 3.19.15. *CO* 2.616.). This overlap is particularly evident in the obligation of the whole society towards child-rearing.

□ The family

Reformers regarded parents as the primary agents responsible for the religious education of their offspring and therefore encouraged religious education as well as regular family devotions at home (Watt 2002:445). The Reformed doctrine on the covenant and baptism underlines this premise. By entering into a covenant with us, God indicates that the gospel should be transmitted from 'father to child in every family' (Calvin 1847a:230, *CO* 31.723). During baptism, the parents respond to God's demands by promising to educate their children according to the gospel

and to raise them in the covenant. In his commentary on Genesis 18:19, Calvin (1847b; CO 23.258) highlights the importance of the intergenerational transmission of the Christian doctrine:

It is the duty of parents to apply themselves diligently to the work of communicating what they have learned from the Lord to their children. In this manner the truth of God is to be propagated by us, so that no one may retain his knowledge for his own private use. (p. 481)

The minutes of the Consistory of Geneva reveal that much emphasis was placed on the role of both parents in the education of the young. According to Watt (2002:447), Calvin and the other clergy specifically wanted to enhance the role of the father in religious education at home. The contextual reasons for this are not clear, but there is theological evidence that Calvin tied the role of the father as educator to his duty to govern the household (cf. Calvin 1847b:483, CO 23.138).

Calvin's (*Inst* 4.15.11, CO 2. 968) ontological premise that all human beings are born in sin necessarily entails that he understood child-rearing as disciplining children from succumbing to their natural inclinations. However, his emphasis on the importance of discipline and order was not tyrannical in nature, as is often wrongly assumed, but he in fact shows remarkable pastoral sensitivity for the shortcomings of human beings. Calvin held that, although parents ought to discipline their children, it must be done in love and with patience and not with wickedness or cruelty because children are 'mirrors of God's grace' (Pitkin 2001:173). Clearly, Calvin's affirmation of the existence of original sin in children did not lead him to sanction the harsh punishment of children.

Since parents have a divine calling to care for their children, children have the duty to respect the authority of their parents (Calvin 1850:219, CO 23.457). In fact, in his commentary on Genesis 21:20, Calvin grounds

parental authority over children as part of the natural order. Since marriage is an institution of God's natural order and since children emanate from the marital relationship, it follows that children should subject themselves to their parents and 'obey their counsel' (Calvin 1847b:551, CO 23.306). In the authority that 'earthly fathers' exercise over their children, they resemble Godself who is our heavenly Father (*Inst* 2.8.35, CO 2.292). However, Calvin (*Inst* 2.8.35, CO 2.292) also states that parental authority has limits, and children cannot obey their parents if the parents require their children to be disobedient to God.

A practical example of Calvin's application of the principle of a responsible use of parental authority can be seen in his handling of the burning issue of parental consent to marriages. He insisted that children have to receive parental consent before marrying since 'natural equity dictates that', yet he was flexible enough to restrain parents from coercing their children into marriage (Calvin 1850:14, CO 23.331). Both parents and children have to consent before a marriage can be constituted. Clearly, although the parent's authority over his or her children is inviolable, it is not absolute in Calvin's thinking.

Church

To encourage and guide religious instruction, the Reformation produced a vast amount of catechetical literature that enabled parents to instruct their children in the basic tenets of the Reformed faith. Calvin himself wrote two catechisms for the use of raising children because he believed that parents cannot give instruction according to their own insight or discretion (De Jong 1967:173). Calvin was not satisfied with the first catechism he had written, entitled *Instruction et confession de foy* (1537) (Verboom 2009:132). His second catechism, *The Catechism of the Church of Geneva* (1542), was compiled in the form of questions and answers in order

to encourage dialogue between the educator and the learner. Through this dialogue, the child is drawn into a conscious response to the gospel and a personal relationship with God (cf. De Jong 1967:185).

Calvin (1847a:231, CO 31.723) regarded the church as ‘the pillar and ground of truth’ by which God diffuses God’s truth. He thus assigned a special role to pastors and ministers, as appointees of God, to instruct the young (cf. Calvin 1847a:232, CO 31.723). In doing so, the church complemented the religious instruction of parents by providing a systematic instruction to the young. Genevan youth had to attend catechism services every Sunday at noon, during which the catechism in use was explicated by a preacher in a sermon (Verboom 2009:136). Children also had to attend the church services, which were held on Sundays, Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays since preaching was regarded as a vitally important tool to educate the young (cf. Moore 1992:147). The aim of the ecclesiastical education of children was to bring the children to a profession of their faith. After an examination and interrogation by the ministers who had to ascertain whether they were sufficiently instructed, children were allowed to confess their faith before the congregation and become full members of the church (cf. De Jong 1967:172). Calvin identified the age of 10 as the best age for children to confess their faith.

□ State

Calvin succeeded in aligning the Consistory of Geneva and the Council in creating jurisprudence in Geneva that would regulate practices directly affecting children. Amongst these were legislation pertaining to parental consent for marriages; the prohibition of forced or coerced marriages by parents; the creation of sanctuaries for illegitimate, abused and abandoned children; the protection of impoverished widows and abused wives; the dissolution of the marriages of minors marrying without parental

consent; and the procedural measures to be followed in cases of inheritance (Witte 2006:580–581). According to Witte (2006:581), many of these jurisprudential reforms were taken over in Calvinist communities, and a good number of them found their way into modern civil law and common law traditions.

The minutes of the Consistory of Geneva provide clear evidence of the Reformed agenda to protect the integrity of the family at all cost. Strict rules were observed regarding sexual morality whilst alternative lifestyles to marriage, such as cohabitation or homosexual relationships, were not allowed. Besides sexual and marital issues, the minutes of the Consistory of Geneva reveal that people appeared before the Consistory in various cases concerning children. These ranged from the care of illegitimate children, the harsh punishment of children, child neglect, the removal of children from Geneva to Catholic territories and the neglect of religious instruction for children (Spierling 2005:796, 805). The most common problem seems to have been the overly violent beating of children. Kingdon (1992:101) notes that husbands and wives appeared quite frequently before the Consistory on the charge that they assaulted their children. Occasionally children were also charged with beating their parents.

Calvin spent a great deal of his energy on the development of public educational institutions (Moore 1992:140). He regarded education as necessary and essential for childhood because 'so long as we live in this world, we require, in some sense, education' (Calvin 1848:428–429, *CO* 49.513–514). Religious teachings in Geneva were conducted in churches whilst schools, though strongly religion-orientated, provided a more comprehensive form of education. Calvin was instrumental in creating a

public schooling system in Geneva in 1536. The *Collège de la Rive* provided education to all children. Poor children were taught free of charge (Reid 1992:243). Eventually three different kinds of educational institutions emerged, namely a school for girls, a separate school for boys and the Genevan Academy (Moore 1992:227). Of the school for girls, not much is known, but the school for boys lectured in languages, classics and philosophy. Calvin was the principal author of the *Ordre du Collège de Genève*, a piece of legislation that led to the creation of the Genevan Academy in 1559. This institution consisted of the *schola privata* that taught children up to about 16 years and the *schola publica* that provided university training in theology, the sciences and mathematics (Reid 1992:247). After Calvin's death, medicine and law were also incorporated in the curricula (Moore 1992:227).

Calvin's fixation on education was not only informed by his practical ideal to reshape the moral foundations of Reformed societies but also by his theological beliefs. Because creation is a mirror of God's works and since God manifests Godself in the whole structure of the universe, humans are bound to learn about God (*Inst* 1.5.2, *CO* 2.42). To know God not only entails understanding scripture as the special revelation of God but also to acquire factual and empirical data as revealed by the scientific study of God's creation. Since God uses nature to reveal Godself to 'all men everywhere', Calvin believed that the physical sciences should be taught, and he often applauded the insights of secular scientists (cf. Reid 1992:251).

Calvin nevertheless maintained that God can only be known truly through faith in Christ that coincides with the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit (*Inst* 1.2.1, *CO* 2.34). True knowledge of God cannot be found in nature, the liberal arts or science unless God first reveals Godself to humanity through Christian Scripture (Reid 1992:19). This naturally

implied that Calvin viewed religious instruction as of fundamental importance in public schooling. Catechesis, for instance, was a separate subject at the Academy of Geneva. The doctores who lectured at the Academy had to be nominated by the church, and they also held an ecclesiastical office (cf. Verboom 2009:136). Calvin regarded education neither as a means in itself nor simply as pertaining to factual and empirical knowledge but as providing us with knowledge of God. This knowledge comes to the human person, firstly, through history as presented in classical writings and nature as studied by natural science and, secondly, through the Word of God that enables us to have a proper understanding of God's works through the enlightenment of the Spirit (Reid 1992:257). Through both media, Calvin 'sought a quality of learning which involved a radical reorienting of an individual's lifestyle, one which drew him into a deeper and more personally comprehensive dependence upon God' (Moore 1992:151).

■ The contemporary significance of Calvin's theology of childhood

■ The child as gift and procreation

Blanchard (2007:242) rightly notes that Calvin's notion of the child as a gift of God created in the image of God is extremely important for modern day discussions on ethical issues such as conception, contraception and abortion. Procreative questions are often approached from a purely utilitarian and an economic cost-and-benefit point of view that dehumanises children by degrading them to biological products that are conceived by the human will (cf. Blanchard 2007:242). It is therefore important that theology once again affirms that children are neither commodities nor objects that

come into the world to fulfil the calculations and interests of their parents or to serve the ‘utilitarian ends of adults’ (Wall 2004:165). The church cannot allow economic considerations and utilitarian notions of pleasure and pain to set the tone for conversations about the child. Hereby, I do not suggest that Christians have no responsibility in planning families or that Christians can procreate indiscriminately. Rather, I suggest that they must decide on whether and how many children they conceive within the context of their covenantal relationship with God (cf. Blanchard 2007:243). The notion of the child as gift demands responsibility from both parents and the broader society because God’s gifts inevitably require the human being to receive and respond in gratitude. A pregnancy can never be regarded as unwanted or as disposable, except in cases of rape where a pregnancy originates through a violent crime and might inflict long-term psychological effects on a mother.

■ **The *visio Dei* as *telos* of childrearing**

Wall (2003:576) rightly notes that the public debate amongst policymakers is ‘often limited to the language of training children for maximum social productivity’. He expresses the concern that child-rearing is increasingly ‘colonised by the values of the marketplace’ (Wall 2003:576). The Westernisation of African societies and the impact of global companies on the continent transmitted this problem to Africans, who traditionally did not think in these terms. Calvin reminds us that the primary goal of Christian child-rearing ought to be to lead the child towards a contemplation of God and communion with God, not to create expendable commodities to society. The *visio Dei* should orientate our ethical goals. Our ethical goal is to return the gifts that God bestows on

us through a life of gratitude with the result that our lives are characterised by a cycle of receiving and returning God's gifts. As images of God, we return God's gifts by reflecting God's virtues and following the example of Christ. The unique contribution that theology can make to child education consists in this reflecting and following, cultivating a transcendent vision on life and nurturing an ethical life grounded in the person of Christ. Christian parents ought to be reminded that child-rearing is a divine calling that demands from parents and society personal sacrifice and altruism.

■ The child and the reality of sin

Calvin's understanding of sin as systemic provides a disturbing but very realistic view on reality that needs to be taken seriously in child-rearing. Children are not born evil, but they are not innocent beings either. They struggle to grow up and to mature amidst the many afflictions of a broken reality. Infants are as much inclined to anxiety, selfishness, unruliness, violence, oppression and anger as adults, and they internalise from an early age the sins of their social surroundings such as racism, hate, greed and materialism. Wall (2003:574) rightly notes that children have to contend with the reality of sin without yet having the mental capacity to deal with it. It is thus important that children are guided from an early age to deal with their own shortcomings, to fight against their natural inclinations and to exhibit virtues. By recognising the sinful nature of children and by incorporating it into how we understand and raise our children, we acknowledge their full humanity, and we address the human condition in a frank and honest way.

Calvin's remedy for sin is not to belittle the created dignity of human beings but to exhort human beings to a decentred existence that locates

these beings' sense of self-worth outside of themselves in their communion with God. Obviously, for the child, a sense of self-worth is of paramount importance. When children experience love, acceptance and self-worth, they are less likely to engage in destructive behaviour. The question is: How do we nurture a sense of self-worth in our children? In modern African societies, people often experience their self-worth as related to their inherent characteristics such as their intelligence, abilities, personality and appearance or to their descent and the tribe to which they belong. Calvin exposes such an egocentric understanding of self-worth as vanity and idolatry. In ourselves, we are lost, and our inherent characteristics can never provide us with a true sense of self-worth. Instead, our self-worth is located in our relatedness as created beings to God through Christ. It is the Holy Spirit in us that makes us magnificent beings. We are not magnificent beings because of who we are but because God relates Godself to us and loves us unconditionally.

■ The significance of the covenantal perspective

Calvin's re-appropriation of the biblical theme of the covenant and his understanding of children as inheritors of God's promises and members of the body of Christ to whom duties are owed provides an important corrective on the individualist nature of modern culture that regards child-rearing as a private concern. In modern families, the father often plays a secondary role in child-rearing as the protector of the family and the provider of income. Calvin aptly reminds us that both parents need to invest in the maturation of their children. This can only happen when parents are bonded to each other in a covenantal marital relationship. Wall (2003:579) rightly states: 'Children do better when their parents are

bonded to each other not just emotionally and romantically but legally and ecclesiastically as well'.

The erosion of marriage as institution has dire consequences for society as a whole because it leads to children being brought up in single-parent homes, and it deprives children from much needed security. Wall (2004:162) indicates that the decline of the institution of marriage in almost all developed countries has a severe impact on the financial well-being of children since marriage has traditionally protected children against poverty. In African countries, single-parent upbringing is one of the major causes of child poverty since single parents are rarely able to provide for their families in a viable and sustainable manner.

Theology, in particular, needs to take into account the importance of the unity between the covenant, baptism and the church as the body of Christ. Modern methods of pastoral care often separate children from the rest of the congregation by holding alternative services for the young and separating their activities from the activities of the adult members of the church. Although it is important that children should hear the Word of God in their own idiom, a separation between generations can endanger the corporate nature of the church, obstruct the intergenerational transfer of knowledge and wisdom and isolate the young in the church, making them feel as somehow less important than adults. Calvin affirms that all Christians are called to be spiritual parents in some way or another.

Wall (2003:572, 573) rightly notes that Calvin's covenantal perspective is an important concept for the public domain as well. He states that society as a whole has the duty to enter into a covenant with its children to empower children in the face of their vulnerability and to restructure the social order 'to liberate children from the systematic oppressions to

which they are currently subject' (Wall 2003:573). Obviously, modern societies cannot return to the theocratic ideals of Reformation Europe, but this does not mean that institutions such as the family, church, school and state can relinquish their duty to take responsibility for child-rearing in symbiosis with each other. The South African Constitution, which allows for religious devotions and religious instruction at public schools as long as these practices do not discriminate and are conducted on an equitable basis, provides a good modern example of how social institutions can act in plural societies in unison with each other and with different religions to promote social cohesion (cf. South African Government 1996:art. 15).

■ Society as a neighbourhood in a plural and diverse world

Calvin attempted to create in Geneva a society where citizens regarded each other as neighbours and reflected a real concern for one another's well-being. Kingdon (1992) states:

Everyone in Geneva felt concerned for their neighbours, responsible for them. There were many signs of real caring, of a desire to help those in need of help in resolving their personal problems, including their most intimate family problems. (p. 106)

Although the Genevan Consistory under Calvin's guidance often transgressed the limits of privacy, there is much that individualist modern societies can learn from this. The cultivation of tolerance and a general benevolence towards all people as well as a sense of serving my neighbour through my unique gifts is of utmost importance in any society. Too many churches are engaged in activities that actually nurture intolerance towards people who are 'not like me' or 'do not believe the same as I do'. Fundamentalist Christianity is particularly prone to such endeavours. Calvin was no universalist, but his theology equips us to be citizens in pluralist societies.

Calvin provides us with important contours to improve social cohesion through the education of children. Wall (2004:164) rightly notes that modern education tends to focus on excellence and underemphasises the importance of virtue. Children are brought up to maximise their market potential, to out-compete others and to get ahead of others. The result is an education that commodifies and instrumentalises the young to serve consumerist culture instead of equipping them to serve the social good and to contribute to social cohesion. Calvin, however, enables us to see children not as images of ourselves but as images of God that possess a unique and special dignity. He encourages us to see the image of God in our neighbours and not to value our fellow human beings for their utilitarian ends but as neighbours with the same bones and flesh, whom we should value as created by God.

Vocation

Calvin made a unique contribution to theological anthropology through his notion of vocation that entails that all Christians are kings, priests and prophets. It is important for pastors to cultivate amongst children a sense of vocation and to encourage them to develop, nurture and actualise their gifts. This sense of vocation differs from naked ambition and idealism in the sense that it is not about personal success but about serving God's kingdom. To become what God intended us to be is important and demands cultivating a sound work ethic amongst our children. To nurture a sense of vocation in children, we not only need to provide them with intimacy and care, but they also need to be initiated into moral beliefs and social institutions that form their character and transmit values to them (cf. Hauerwas 1981:160).

■ Conclusion

Calvin's theology of childhood has much to offer to modern societies. He affirms the fundamental dignity of children by defining them as gifts of God, as created in the image of God, as inheritors of God's promises, as proclaimers of God's glory along with the entire universe, as mirrors of God's grace and as in need of physical, spiritual and intellectual care. In doing so, Calvin provides us with resources to assert the special dignity of the child in an age when children are often seen as natural products of the human will. Moreover, through his understanding of society as neighbourhood, Calvin assists us in developing social ethics that enhance social cohesion and counters the gradual fragmentation and social fracturing of African societies because of tribalism and Westernisation. His emphasis on the social significance of marriage and family and the importance of social institutions working together in unison to serve the best interests of the child are as important today as it was in his time.

The history of theologies of childhood in African churches

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Introduction

Children are an important and undeniable part of the history of the churches in Africa. There have been different attitudes towards, understandings of and views on the status, position and role of children in the history of the church all over the world as well as in the history of the church and societies in Africa. These different attitudes towards, understandings of and views of children form the background to the development of a theology of childhood. To embark on discovering the status, position and role of children in the history of the churches in

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Africa and thus the theology of childhood that had been informed by these factors, the following questions will function as guiding themes although they might not be addressed directly (cf. ed. Bunge 2008: 20–21):

- What terminology is used by the different churches in Africa to refer to children and young people, and how is this terminology defined?
- Regarding the status of children in the church, how do the church and African people speak about children and their value in the community?
- Regarding the position of children in Africa, what is the view of the church in Africa with regard to her duties and responsibilities towards children in Africa?
- Regarding status and position, what is the relationship of the church towards children in Africa, and what does the church say about the education and spiritual formation of children?
- Regarding the role of children in Africa, what are the role and responsibilities that the church in Africa ascribes to children, and what are the role and responsibilities that adults in Africa ascribe to children?
- What is the impact of children on the church in Africa?

After examining the history of the church in Africa by means of these questions, the same questions will be used to guide the church towards the implications for a current theology of childhood⁴⁷ in Africa. It is also important to clarify whether we may talk about one theology of childhood. Is the concept of childhood the same all over Africa or are there different views on childhood in Africa? Can we talk about Africa as a homogeneous community?⁴⁸

47. Childhood is the age span ranging from birth to adolescence.

48. Studying Africa, this article follows a homogenising system in which there is no room for an in-depth discussion of the unique and complex religious system of each people (cf. Adogbo 2005:76).

■ A South African, Dutch-Reformed historical perspective

The description of a theology of childhood for the African continent is crucial for many different reasons such as the shift in Christianity towards the South and the number of children in the population of Africa. However, the statement of Bediako and Walls (quoted in Oduro *et al.* 2008:4) captures the imagination regarding a current theology of childhood in Africa: ‘Africa is the place to try new things with the Christian faith in two ways: it is a testing ground to see how faith can work in society; and it is a place to try new kinds of churches’. African-based Westerners and Westernising Africans must work together to determine the historical implications of different theological and anthropological understandings of childhood.

Trying to find information on the status, position and role of children in the history of churches in Africa is like looking for a needle in a haystack. In the research, I randomly selected a number of mission books, specifically telling the story of the development of the church in Africa. Except for some reference to the establishment of schools, there is almost no reference to children. Some of the books that were consulted are *The evangelisation of Pagan Africa* (Du Plessis 1929), which has no reference to children; *Recent developments in the South African mission field* (Gerdener 1958), which also has no reference to children; and *New faces of Africa* (eds. Hofmeyer & Vorster 1984), which contains one chapter on children and youth, mostly within the Dutch Reformed Church.

What became clear is that, although very little has been written about children and youth ministry in Africa within the history of mission, children have always been part and parcel of a holistic

missional approach, especially through the establishment of schools.⁴⁹ Evidence of this is found in the work of Crafford (1982) who does not only refer to schools and Sunday schools but also, for example, to youth societies (Crafford 1982:207–209) and orphanages (Crafford 1982:436–437). Since schools have been an important part of the mission of the (Dutch Reformed) Church,⁵⁰ it is important to show their impact and the number of children involved in the church schools. Cronje (1981:139) gives the following statistics concerning the African Reformed Church in Malawi: The number of children in schools was 5098 in 1916, 20 300 in 1941 and 76 661 in 1966. He also mentions that mission personnel visited small towns during September holidays to do evangelism. During these outreaches, they ‘especially involved the youth, which was known as ‘warriors’ (*Varwi VaKristu*)’.⁵¹ Cronje also mentions youth workers such as Rev. Japie le Roux and Rev. J.L. Vos. The youth work grew in such a way that Rev. J.S. Bvumburia was appointed as youth organiser of the Africa Reformed Church in Malawi in 1979. This is an indication of the importance of the children and youth for the church in Malawi.

The abovementioned facts indeed clarify the specific focus on children in Africa, especially regarding education. Firstly, it can be attributed to the view in the 18th and 19th century that viewed ‘Africa and Africans as inherently inferior to Europe and Europeans’ (Bediako 1995:5). This view

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49. In the Kimerû and Gikuyû languages of Kenya, ‘conversion to Christianity was referred to as “Guthoma,” literally “to read” or “to become literate,” while to slide back or fall away from Christian faith was “guthomoka,” literally “to revert back to illiteracy”’ (Gichaara 2014:257).

50. It is a well-known fact that almost all of the different mainline missionary churches were involved in developing schools all over Africa. These statistics are from the Dutch Reformed Church.

51. The author’s free translation of ‘veral ook jongmense wat as “stryders” of “strewers” (*Varwi VaKristu*) bekend gestaan het’.

did not originate with the missionaries but with Europe's first contact with Africa through slave traffic. However, it must be added that, in many instances, 'Christianity was used by upholders of slavery and racial discrimination to induce Negro submissiveness' (Bediako 1995:7). Secondly, the focus on education can be attributed to what Wesley Black (2001:40–60) describes as the 'preparatory approach' where children and youth are viewed as disciples in training. This approach 'suggest[s] that youth ministry be viewed as a laboratory in which disciples can grow in a culture guided by spiritual coaches' (Black 2001:40). It is my submission that mission schools in Africa were viewed as laboratories in which African children could first be turned into Europeans⁵² and then into disciples since many of the children stayed on at the mission stations. It must also be noted that some of the tribal leaders in Africa asked the missionaries to educate their children in schools.

Taking cognisance of the above, the main research question of this chapter is the following: Why do we know so little about children in the history of churches in Africa? Firstly, it is important to take note of the fact that, although children were always recognised and attended to in Christian thought, not much attention was given to their status, position and role within Christianity (cf. Bunge 2001). In most instances, children were only included in theological thinking when the sacraments were discussed, mostly when the question arose whether they should be included in the sacraments or not. It is only recently that the importance of children has been recognised in theological reflection, ecclesiology and missiology. Secondly, the reason that we know so little about children in Africa is because of Africa's oral tradition. There are very few academic works on African anthropology that

52. In an ironic sense, the missionary and the colonialist wanted to turn Africans into 'Europeans', except for the colour of their skin, which did not leave them with many options (Gichaara 2014:256).

have been written by Africans. What we have is what Luzbetak (1961) calls ‘missiological anthropology’, which was written by Western missionaries. These anthropologies did not elaborate on the status, position and role of children and usually described only the relationships within the family.

In attending to the status, role and position of children in the church of Africa, I firstly investigate the views of some African theologians as well as some of the views on and theological understandings of children with which the mainline missionary churches came to Africa. Secondly, I investigate the possible impact of different world views on the understanding of children in Africa. Thirdly, I discuss the implications for a theology of childhood in Africa.

■ Understandings of childhood

■ Theological views of childhood

In this section, a random selection of theological views on childhood from African theologians or theological interpretations that influenced the church in Africa is mentioned. The purpose of the section is not to have an in-depth discussion on the different views but to gain insight into some of the many theological views that influenced the understanding of and ministry to the children in Africa.

It seems fair to start with early views that African church fathers held concerning humanity. The African theologians, Tertullian⁵³ and,

53. Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus, anglicised as Tertullian (c. 155 – c. 240 AD), was a prolific early-Christian author from Carthage in the Roman province of Africa. He is the first Christian author to produce an extensive corpus of Latin Christian literature. He was also a notable early Christian apologist and a polemicist against heresy, including contemporary Christian Gnosticism. Tertullian has been called ‘the father of Latin Christianity’ and ‘the founder of Western theology’.

almost 200 years later, Augustine⁵⁴, saw all people (including children) as sinners and therefore in need of salvation ministry. They distinguished between the created nature and fallen nature of human beings (Stortz 2001:90). Augustine had a twofold understanding of sin as both exemplary and essential. The exemplary character of sin consisted ‘in repetition of sinful acts or personal sins’, and essential sin was the fact that ‘all of Adam’s progeny were born into the one mass of sinning’ (Stortz 2001:91). It was on these grounds, ‘the burden of sin passed on to them by Adam’, that Augustine argued in favour of the baptism of infants (Stortz 2001:94). North Africa was known for intense persecution and frequent martyrdom, therefore ‘baptism signified a renunciation of the world and its ways. ... In North Africa, the rite of baptism was long a focal point of North African theology and spirituality’ (Stortz 2001:95). According to Augustine, baptism did not ‘create either “the righteous of God” or “the authentic Christian”’, and it also did not ‘admit one into the visible and true church’ (Stortz 2001:95). He viewed the baptised Christian as a pilgrim. Baptism admitted one into the hospital of grace, where one spent a lifetime convalescing. Augustine’s repeated references to Christ ‘the Physician’ reinforced this metaphor of healing’ (Stortz 2001:95). Understanding the ancient rite in the way that Augustine knew it changed a familiar rite into something strange since he ‘repeatedly appealed to parts of the rite that featured exorcism’⁵⁵ (Stortz 2001:96). For further discussion

54. Augustine of Hippo (13 November 354 – 28 August 430), influenced the development of Western Christianity and Western philosophy. He was the bishop of Hippo Regius (modern-day Annaba, Algeria), located in Numidia (Roman province of Africa).

55. ‘We credit Augustine as being “the first modern man” and forget that he inhabited a world populated with demons and that he knew people who had been possessed. Evil was an external, palpable, personified presence. We too easily project onto Augustine’s world the scientific sensibilities of our own world from which all spirits have departed’ (Stortz 2001:96).

on a theology of children in Africa, it is important to take note of the concept of healing and exorcism which can be linked directly to the African world view. It is clear that the early theologians from Africa who influenced Western Christianity, for example Augustine, worked with a holistic world view (spiritual and physical) and not the dualistic world view that we find in Western theology.

Moving away from African theologians, we take a glance at some theologians of the Reformation and their views on children that had influenced the work of the mainline missionary churches. In Martin Luther's (1483–1546) theology, children were primarily described in terms of what they should become, namely 'mature, seasoned confessors of the evangelical faith and responsible members of family and community' (Strohl 2001:134). This links closely with the preparatory approach of youth ministry as discussed earlier. Luther also stated that it takes more than a family to raise a child. He emphasised the critical role of the wider community and the civil authorities in the vocational guidance of parents (cf. Strohl 2001:134). The context in which he made this statement is different from the original African view on the importance of the extended family since the 'late medieval Europe has been described as enduring a crisis of the symbols of security' because 'this period witnessed unprecedented upheaval in social, political and economic life' (Strohl 2001:136). Against the background of the unstable and changing community in Africa, Luther's view on children may be relevant to a current theology of childhood in Africa in 'a crisis of the symbols of security'.

Luther emphasised that God created the human realm to be social ('everyone is born as someone's child') and that the staging platform and foundation for the advancement of the gospel is therefore the home

(Strohl 2001:139). As a Reformed theologian, the foundation for evangelism was described as 'obedience' (Strohl 2001:138). Discipleship, directly linked to baptism, was described as learning to 'use Baptism aright', according to Strohl (2001:142). Luther described the whole of Christian life as 'a daily return to baptism'. The most defining relationships in a baptised person's life 'are with the God of the Gospel and with the church' (Strohl 2001:143). Luther regarded a relationship with the family (as the small church) as just as important as the relationship with the church. Departing from this view on relationships, Luther developed his catechisms, writing that 'when faith comes, baptism is complete' (Strohl 2001:144). Catechism was viewed as 'the responsibility of the church and more particularly the parents, since the family is viewed as "the natural locus of education"' (Strohl 2001:134). Due to the circumstances of the 1520s, the responsibility for education was transferred from negligent parents to 'superior paternal authority' and catechising became part of the school curriculum (Strohl 2001:146). In this regard, it is important to note that the church was the chief provider of education in the medieval period. Luther also lobbied for the education of girls but with the view 'that women were for the most part barred from participation in public realm' (Strohl 2001:151). This corresponds with the fact that, for many years, the church was the main provider of formal school education in Africa.

Calvin's theological understanding of predestination led him to the conclusion 'that the elected are from birth full inheritors of God's covenant and members in the church' (Pitkin 2001:164). This influenced his understanding of baptism, and he argued 'that the sacrament assures parents by word and sight that their off-spring are in God's care' (Pitkin 2001:171). It is important to note that baptism was only the assurance, which implies that children belong to God before baptism. According

to Calvin, the caring and instruction of children are the responsibility of both the family sphere, especially the fathers, and the public sphere. Society has the obligation to provide conditions in which to raise children to be godly. For this purpose, the ecclesiastical offices of deacon and teaching doctors were called into existence by Calvin's Ecclesiastical Ordinances (1541) and had immediate bearing on children's lives (Pitkin 2001:174).

Other influences on the theological engagement with children in Africa are movements like German Pietism that had a great influence on the education on children in the 18th century. Bunge (2001) refers to Francke, a German Pietist, in the following way:

[He] advocated education for all children (including girls and the poor), rejected coercion and harsh disciplinary measures, paid attention to individual needs and abilities of students, recommended teaching students in the vernacular (instead of Latin), and emphasized not only the acquisition of knowledge, but also the development of character. (p. 249)

From a Methodist (John Wesley) perspective, the attitude toward children in 18th-century England was formed by a theological debate on the nature of humanity. On the one hand, children were viewed and treated as 'little adults' who are by nature innocent and good beings. On the other hand, England (Europe) experienced the 'discovery of the child' in the 18th century and therefore viewed children as being evil and depraved by nature. Two major concerns in child rearing were education and the example that was provided by adults (cf. Heitzenrater 2001:279–282). John Wesley's view on children was driven by his evangelistic zeal:

[His] concern for children was the same as his concern for all humankind – to help them to know and love God ... This goal was not part of an intellectual or doctrinal program that was primarily educational or social or religious. (p. 298)

Other very important and relevant theological understandings were not mentioned here but influenced the understanding of African children. These include the Roman Catholic Church and Puritanism. It is clear that the experiences of and views on children in Europe were transferred to Africa without listening to Africa's views on children.

Much has been written on theological understandings and teachings that influenced the missionaries who came to Africa and their work, but as Oduro *et al.* (2008:3) indicate, 'it was mostly Africans who made the work of these missionaries possible'. It has been realised recently that the missionaries 'were not the main messengers of the Gospel in Africa' (Oduro *et al.* 2008:3). Most Africans became Christians when they saw the changed lives and heard the witness of fellow Africans.

It is thus clear that there is no single understanding of how children are viewed and that all these different understandings of children were brought to Africa via the missionaries of the different denominations. In the rest of this Chapter, I discuss the application of these different views within the African context and their influence on the ministry of the churches in Africa.

African world views and childhood

Western dualistic thinking (either/or thinking) is evident in the abovementioned theological perspectives. One of the outcomes of this dualistic view was that converts to the Christian faith were required to live at mission stations. 'The missionaries did this, as they said, to protect the new converts from their heathen background. Missionaries acted as the "fathers" to their "children"' (Oduro *et al.* 2008:5). In studying the status, role and position of children in Africa, it is important to understand the critical role of community and to emphasise 'that Africans do not think in

“either/or,” but rather in “both/and” categories’ (Bujo 2015:1). You can be both a Christian and maintain the traditional beliefs of African religion. In African thought, the principle of the vital force⁵⁶ is a central dimension ‘and this means that the vital force is a consequence and goal of ethical conduct rather than its basis’ (Bujo 2015:3). In Africa, the existential ‘I am known, therefore we are’ is decisive (Bujo 2015:4). From this perspective, it seems to be a mistake to ‘protect’ the converts in mission stations since ‘the missions undermined the unity of the traditional society and the authority of the traditional rulers, thereby calling forth their anger and resentment of Christianity’ (Pobee, in Oduro *et al.* 2008:5). The important issue for a theology of childhood in Africa is how to acknowledge and apply the traditional principle of the importance of the community to children whilst making children aware of the Trinitarian God’s community with them. This is a very complex situation, as Gichaara (2014) indicates:

The missionaries came preaching freedom of the individual through Christ who came to make people free and ‘free indeed’ (John 8:36). They preached, also, that Christ came to give people life in abundance (John 10:10). It is a recorded fact that in the Kikuyu tradition, for example, whereas some young girls were free to choose their partners for marriage, not all girls had this free choice. Some of the young girls had to run away to the mission stations to flee unwelcome marriage arrangements. (p. 257)

From a human perspective, the closest community to anyone, especially children, is family or the household.⁵⁷ When trying to understand children within the African family, it is important to note that, according to Bujo (2015), many African languages have no word that expresses the term ‘cousin’:

56. The vital force is closely linked to the importance of the community and might even be viewed as the community.

57. These concepts, namely ‘family’ and ‘household’, are used as synonyms. In this chapter, ‘family’ is used as an inclusive concept and is defined by narratives. A family might thus be described as follows: ‘Any group who refer to and experience themselves as a family must be regarded as a family’. ‘Family’ then becomes a functional concept (cf. Muller 2009:11).

In these African languages, ‘cousins’ (in European languages) are ‘brother’ and ‘sister’, in the case of children of one’s father’s brother or one’s mother’s sister. Even the children of what Europeans would call two cousins can be brother and sister. Further the brother of one’s father is equally ‘father’, just as the sister of one’s mother is equally ‘mother’. They are not ‘uncle’ and ‘aunt’.
(p. 15)

In his book, *Family-based youth ministry*, Mark DeVries (2004:21) describes the ‘traditional youth ministry’ as ‘the isolation of teenagers (and children) from the adult world and particularly from their own parents’. He states that it creates a crisis within the church. In many instances, mission work in Africa has led to the isolation of children and teenagers from their families since they stayed on mission stations.⁵⁸ The spiritual transformation of children must not be built on a theology that has been designed by experts from afar. According to DeVries (2008:77), ‘transformation doesn’t happen primarily because specific tasks got accomplished or because of consistently excellent programmes. Transformation becomes habitual for youth ministry when a unique climate of transformation is established’. Mission stations created this climate, but the problem was that it occurred in isolation. The crisis was that the theological understanding of the covenant as foundation for family ministry and infant baptism was not applied to children and in youth ministry. This happened because people in Africa had a different understanding of the concept of family, as discussed above. The implication of this difference in understanding was that, in many instances where individuals turned to Christ, Christianity brought division in families, which led to an identity crisis for the individual and

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58. At best, African Christians had to abandon all their traditional values because they had become new creations (1 Cor 5:17). This is attested to by the fact that the early converts to Christianity abandoned their relatives and went to live in the mission stations with the priests and other converts (Gichaara 2014:256).

the family. In Africa, spiritual transformation does not only entail the changing of a belief system but also the leaving behind of a social structure. Spiritual transformation, in the sense of ‘conformed to the image of Christ’, means to shape one’s life according to the life of Christ, but in many instances, the church has not been effective in leading children (people) to mature Christian adulthood (Knoetze 2015:7).

With the above in mind, it is important to note that the first chapter of Bediako’s (1995:3–16) book, *Christianity in Africa*, is called ‘Is Christianity suited to the African?’ He proceeds by asking about identity, which is crucial, especially in children and youth ministry. Bediako (1995:216) states: ‘One African theologian has even remarked that “to take the ancestors from an African is robbing him of his personality”’. In Africa, the concept of ‘family’ includes the departed as well as those who are about to be born (Mbiti 1991:115). It must be clear that a theology of childhood in Africa that does not deal clearly with the traditional African world view on family will not be relevant to or beneficial for Christianity in Africa. The neglect of biblical theology in the ministry to children and youth caused children and youth to be ministered to outside or without their families’ consent. It seems that this kind of children and youth ministry created a crisis in the African family. Might this be one of the reasons why so many believers from the mainline missionary churches leave the church to join the African Independent Churches?

Nurnberger (2007:9) discusses the fact that ‘traditionalism does not distinguish between religion, world view [sic] and culture’. The implication for a theology of childhood in Africa is that it cannot only be an ecclesiology or a soteriology; it must be a theology of the *missio Trinitatis Dei*. This becomes even more important when taking into

account the African belief that reality is determined by animism (spiritual beings) or dynamism (impersonal forces). Africans further believe that the ultimate source of all power is deemed to be the Supreme Being. Although the Supreme Being is usually personified, 'it is not necessarily experienced as a person in the Western sense of the word' (Nurnberger 2007:10). Although Bediako (1995) argues that the Supreme Being and the God of the Bible is the same, Nurnberger (2007) draws a clear distinction between the God of the Bible and the Supreme Being. Also important in traditional African religion is authority and power that are closely intertwined with the understanding of the family, especially the role of ancestors within the family.

Mbiti (1991) also adds a number of perspectives on how children are viewed in Africa and how essential they are to the family. According to him (Mbiti 1991:112–115), children are greatly valued in Africa. They are viewed as the 'seal of marriage' since they 'prolong the life of their parents' and add 'social stature of the family' because of their 'usefulness' in the eyes of their families. From the above, it is clear that a theology of childhood in Africa must include the family.

■ Developing a theology of childhood in Africa

■ Theology described

As a Reformed theologian, I believe that theology is biblical (cf. Erickson 2001:16) or, as described by Barth (1963), evangelical. According to Barth (1963:9), 'the object of evangelical theology is God in the history of his deeds. In this history, He makes Himself known'. It is logical to conclude that if God is the object of theology then the subject of theology is the faith

community⁵⁹ (or in the context of this article, children in Africa). As will be argued later, in trying to move away from the object-subject thinking, theology is not a noun but a verb. God is not a dead object of study but the missional living God who is actively involved in his creation. Theology, as stated by Barth (1963), entails the following

[It] is primarily and comprehensively interested in God himself. ... If theology wished to reverse this relationship, and instead of relating man to *God*, related God to *man*, then it would surrender itself ... It would become the prisoner of some sort of anthropology or ontology that is an underlying interpretation of existence, of faith, or of man's spiritual capacity. (p. 8)

I would prefer to talk about a biblical theology for childhood in Africa. Biblical theology is focused on the God of the Bible and how God reveals Godself. Barth (1963:10) describes it as follows: 'Again and again, there must be distinguished between what God made happen and will make happen, between the old and the new, without despising the one or fearing the other. It must clearly discern the yesterday, today, and tomorrow of its own presence and action, without losing sight of the unity.' We therefore have different (anthropological, e.g. Western and African) views and even different interpretations of how God reveals Godself, but we have a biblical theology that is different from Western or African theology. This biblical theology is also Trinitarian theology; it is therefore not a dead theory or dogmas about God but a living, active and fluent theology because it is about a living Trinitarian and missional God. The task of the faith community is to discern how this one God is working in and through

59. Although 'local faith community' is a broader term than 'church', it is used as a synonym for church to include the different faces and shapes of the church, for example, not only the church as institution but also family or faithful volunteers working at non-governmental organisations and Christian-based organisations.

children within the different contexts and cultures of Africa. Within this understanding of theology as biblical, we do not have different theologies. We might have different interpretations, which are part of the discernment process,⁶⁰ and we have different anthropologies and different contexts that need to be addressed through the different faith communities in the discernment process, but it is one God who reveals Godself.

Hendriks (2004:24) states that the essence of theology is to know God as the Trinitarian and missional God. Mission is then ‘an extension or amplification of God’s very being’. It is also described in the concept of *missio Dei* (cf. Bosch 1991; Wright 2006). This implicates that if we accept humans as *imago Dei* (Gn 1:26–28) and the church as the body of Christ (1 Cor 12; Eph 4:11–16), both our understanding of childhood and our ecclesiology have a profound missional⁶¹ basis. Migliore (2014) explains it as follows:

[T]he image of God is not to be construed primarily as a set of human faculties, possessions or endowments. It expresses self-transcending life in relationship with others – with the ‘wholly other’ we call God, and with all those different ‘others’ who need our help and whose help we also need in order to be the human creatures God intends us to be. The image of God is not like an image permanently stamped on a coin; it is more like an image reflected in a mirror, that is, human beings are created for life in relationships that mirror or correspond to God’s own life in relationship. (p. 145)

Theology is a verb, not a noun. Barth (1963:41) states that ‘the inquiry and doctrine of theology, therefore, are not an end in themselves, but rather

60. According to Barth (1963:39), questions that need to be asked in the discernment of truth are questions like the following: ‘Does the community properly understand the Word in its purity as the truth? And is the community in a position to render its secondary testimony responsible and with good conscience?’.

61. ‘Missional’ must not be associated with Western missionary practices, including imperialism and colonisation, but with the doctrine of the Trinity.

functions of the community and especially of its *ministerium Verbi Divini*'. Following Luther, Nurnberger (2007:6) indicates that the Word of God is always an 'external' Word (*Verbum extternum*), based on the apostolic witness and proclaimed to us by someone else. Biblical theology happens in a faith community where believers pray, reflect and, guided by the Word and the Spirit of God, participate in God's mission and discern Gods will (Hendriks 2004:24). Therefore, biblical theology can be pursued in different contexts such as an African context, but it has a special relationship with the church (Migliore 2014:10). It is the faith communities and laity within a specific context and time that respond to the actions of the living, mission-driven God, and as a result, biblical theology is always contextual. I therefore make a choice for a theology *for* childhood in Africa and not for African theologies of childhood.

The particular characteristic of African theologies is the concern to create an encounter between the biblical text and the African context, in the words of Ukpong (2000):

This involves a variety of ways that link the biblical text to the African context, such that the main focus of interpretation is on the communities that receive the text rather than on those that produced it or on the text itself, as is the case with the Western methods. (p. 4)

As argued above by Barth (1963), the problem with African theologies is that they reverse the relationship, and instead of relating man (Africans) to *God*, they relate *God* to *man* (*Africans*). Theology then surrenders itself and becomes the prisoner of some sort of anthropology or ontology.⁶² It is

62. Nyamiti (1991:3–23) describes two main types of African theology, namely African enculturation theology and African liberation theology. Within these different theologies, he then describes different Christologies. For example, within African enculturation theology, we find an African Christology that is based on the Bible and an African Christology that is based on the African cultural background.

important to work from a biblical anthropology of Africa's children because of the danger that the church can be more interested in the calling to transform Africa's children than in the children of Africa as 'ontological contingent gifts'. This often leads to a reductive understanding of what constitutes 'relevant' anthropological scholarship in the African context, narrowing it down to 'issues' such as poverty, development and the HIV/AIDS pandemic (cf. Becker 2012:19).

■ African theologies of childhood

White (in Barnett 2009) defines theologies of childhood as follows:

Theologies of Childhood provide sophisticated theological understandings of children and childhood and our obligations to children, take into account various perspectives on children and childhood from both the Bible and the Christian tradition and ideally honour the dignity and complexity of children. (p. 41)

If it is understood from the argument above that the object of theology is God (Barth 1963), we cannot talk about theologies, except if we are not talking about the Trinitarian God as revealed in God's Word and actions. What we might find are different perspectives on this God by people from different cultures and contexts who are discerning God's will from their specific perspectives. However, it remains the same Trinitarian God. Although there may be many differences between cultures (which are being studied in the field of anthropology), the fact is that people as human beings are very similar. All children (people) have the same physical, social, psychological and spiritual needs, irrespective of age, race or culture. It is also the biblical view that all people, including children and youth, are equal before God and thus need to be treated equally. This fact was already indicated earlier on in the chapter when the theological views of the African church father Augustine were discussed. If we want to enrich our theology, we need to listen to how different people relate to the God story.

■ Implications of a theology for childhood in Africa

Regardless of one's own position, one of the questions that are posed by a theology of childhood in Africa is 'how we look and act effectively toward other children beyond our own treasured children' (Brueggemann 2008:411). Therefore, a theology of childhood⁶³ can be described as follows (White in Barnett 2009):

[A]n investigation that considers and evaluates central themes of theology historical, biblical and systematic in the light of the child standing beside Jesus in the midst of the disciples. This child is like a lens through which some aspects of God and God's revelation can be seen more clearly. (p. 39)

A theology of childhood in Africa will thus ask at least the basic questions that bear upon every phase of Christian life and ministry (cf. Migliore 2014:11–15).

The first question is: 'Are the proclamation and practice of the community of faith true to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ as attested in Scripture?' (Migliore 2014:11).

This question relates to the very identity and calling of the faith community since theology is practised within the faith community. The faith community must answer the question about the implications of the good news of God, made known in Christ, for the status, position and role of children in Africa. In Christ, God reveals Godself as Father of all people. God is involved in a special way in the 'giving' of children; they might be seen as a 'reward' from God (Ps 127:3). God is involved with every child, and God hears even the outcast's cry (Gn 21:17). Children are not mere receivers. Empowered by the Spirit, they are actively involved in the coming of God's people in a dialogical way

63. White (in Barnett 2009:39) uses 'child theology' and not 'theology of childhood' in this quotation. The quotation is White's definition of child theology.

(cf. Brueggemann 2008). In the words and deeds of Jesus Christ, God confirms God's love for and protection of children against any society, culture and person who cause them to stumble (cf. ed. Bunge 2008; Nel 2000:9–13). Nel (2000) makes the following important statement:

We can therefore deduce the Bible is not a book about the youth; it can never be that. It is a book about God and his dealings with people. Children and other young people are essentially a part of these people. (p. 12)

The same must be said about theology, which cannot be reduced to children and youth because it is about God and his dealings with people. Children and youth are essentially part of these people and must be treated as such. As a result, God included them in the covenant from the very beginning.

Theology is not only about what we believe, but also about how it is proclaimed and practised by the faith community. Reading the history of the church in Africa, it becomes clear that, even with the best intentions of the missionaries, Christianity has been experienced in a negative way by many Africans and is experienced negatively by Western people today. The reason for this is that they observe that the proclamation and the practice of the gospel were and are not always true to the revelation of God as it is proclaimed (cf. Bediako 1995; Mbiti 1991; Oduro *et al.* 2008). Gichaara (2014) opines:

The newly introduced colonial system was a pyramid super structure, with the White colonialists and missionaries on the top end of the super structure and the Africans on the bottom. ... People were classified, viewed, and treated on the basis of the colour of their skin. The Africans could not help observing double standards or outright hypocrisy, especially on the part of the missionaries, who preached one thing [*people are equal before God*] and then practised something different. (p. 253)

The second question is: ‘Do the proclamation and the practice of the community of faith give adequate expression to the whole truth of the revelation in Jesus Christ’ (Migliore 2014:12) for the children in Africa?

Theology is not only about the true gospel but also about the whole gospel. Theology is about ‘the breadth and length and height and depth’ of the love of God in Christ (Eph 3:18–19). A theology of childhood in Africa cannot be derived from a single principle or group of principles. Such a theology of childhood would lose touch with the living Word of God. Theology cannot master the revelation of God in either a rationalistic (Western) or a relational (African) way. The only way in which theology can give expression to the whole truth is when the faith community discerns God’s whole revelation faithfully under the guidance of the Word and the Spirit (cf. Hendriks 2004:30–32).

A theology of childhood in Africa cannot be a disparate selection of symbols and doctrines of one’s own will or organised in any pattern; it must include the whole truth as revealed in Jesus. Therefore, within the context of Africa, we may not ascribe characteristics to Jesus according to our experiences of him⁶⁴ since our experiences are limited. We must allow the *Verbum extternum* [the word from outside ourselves] to appeal to our theology. Experiences can only be tested against God’s complete revelation in scripture since we need to discern amongst the spirits (1 Jn 4:1). Migliore (2014), for example, states the following:

[E]ven expressions of faith that laudably aim to be ‘Christocentric’ would be seriously defective if, for example, they neglected the goodness of creation or minimized the reality of evil in the world or marginalized Christian hope in the coming reign of God. (p. 13)

64. See *Faces of Jesus in Africa* (ed. Schreiter 1991).

When discerning God's will on the status, position and role of children in Africa where evil is an external, palpable, personified presence, we need to reconsider Augustine's teaching on baptism with regard to exorcism and healing. Does the faith community deal with the whole truth of Christ's death and resurrection in baptism?

Theology of childhood, especially in Africa, is not only about the child – it must include the family and the whole of humanity. Ratzinger (in Bujo 2015) holds the following opinion:

Christian faith does not find its starting-point in the atomized individual, but comes from the knowledge that the merely individual person does not exist. Rather, the human person is himself only in an orientation to the totality of humanity, of history, and of the cosmos. This is an appropriate and essential dimension of the human person as 'spirit in a body'. (p. 4)

This idea was also addressed promptly by Luther's and Calvin's theological views on baptism.

A theology of childhood in Africa might therefore be a disturbing voice to the church who assumes that it is already in possession of the whole truth. The task of a theology of childhood is as follows (Migliore 2014):

[T]o keep alive the quest for the whole gospel that alone can bring unity without the loss of enriching diversity, community without the loss of personal or cultural integrity, peace without compromise of justice. (p. 13)

The third question is: 'Do the proclamation and practice of the community of faith represent the God of Jesus Christ as a living reality in the present context' (Migliore 2014:13) of the children in Africa?

The question that a theology of childhood in Africa needs to answer is the following: What does Christ mean for the children in Africa today? What good news can be proclaimed for and practised by the children in Africa

today? Hendriks (2004:27) writes that theology is about a specific time and place (and, I would add, specific people). From a Western perspective, we talk about contextual theologies. Wright (2006) puts it as follows:

This term itself betrayed the arrogant ethnocentricity of the West, for the assumption was that other places are contexts and they do their theology for those contexts; we, of course, have the real thing, the objective, contextless theology. (p. 42)

A theology of childhood in Africa will at least engage the children of Africa to discover with them and through them the presence of God in their midst and relate it to the bigger picture of God's revelation. A theology of childhood in Africa cannot discharge its own theological responsibility by simply repeating the thinking of the West, Africa or other theologians. It has to involve an own discovery and discernment in Africa amongst the children of Africa. This is a process that calls for faithfulness, creativity and imagination.

The fourth questions is: 'Does the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ by the community of faith lead to transforming practice in personal and social life' (Migliore 2014:14) of the children in Africa?

Bosch (1991) writes the following about Christians:

[A] Christian is not simply somebody who stands a better chance of being 'saved', but a person who accepts the responsibility to serve God in this life and promote God's reign in all its forms. (p. 488)

A theology of childhood in Africa must lead to a responsible faith and discipleship within the particular contexts of Africa. How do children participate in the Triune God's missionary praxis to transform Africa? Participating in God's mission is not only about evangelism. It is also about discipleship since faith and obedience are inseparable. A theology of childhood seek to understand what it is that children are called to do as those who have been set free by the gospel. This implicates a rethinking of

the status, position and role of children within the church. The task of a theology of childhood is thus not only to ask how the gospel might reform and transform children but also how children might form and transform the church in concrete ways in Africa, as Knoetze (2015) argues:

Real transformation happens when a person (child) addresses difficult situations in life as opportunities to live out his or her faith. ... The goal of spiritual transformation is not to 'solve' everything. Spiritual transformation is effective to the degree that African children and youth, through spiritual interactions with the living God of the Bible, are in a better position to manage their life situations through participating in the use of spiritual resources and opportunities (the Bible and faith community) to live their lives more effectively. (p. 7)

A theology of childhood in Africa must remind us of God's gifts and commands by continuously asking the question: What would it mean for the children personally and corporately to bear a faithful and concrete witness to the crucified and risen Lord in Africa?

Conclusion

From the history of the church in Africa, it becomes clear that the status, position and role of children can be described as 'not there yet' or preparatory. They were viewed as objects of the ministry in need of 'something', whether instruction, salvation or maturity. As indicated by Bunge (2001:24), current theology either ignores children altogether or defines them too narrowly.

Regarding the status, position and role of children in Africa, a theology of childhood in Africa needs to confirm and re-establish the following:

- Biblical concepts and terminology in biblical anthropology in language for children, for example the image of God, belonging to God and inheritors of the kingdom (anthropology).

- That in the church everybody is a disciple and that children are not only objects of teaching, guidance and training but that they also participate in God's mission through modelling their faith by prophesying, proclaiming and serving (discipleship).
- '[The] breadth and length and height and depth' of the love of God in Christ (Eph 3:18–19), especially for children, orphans and others who do not belong (*diaconia*).
- Biblical traditions, sacraments and other rituals that include children as an important part of God's story with the world and Africa in particular (*koinonia*).
- the obligation of children to God, their families, communities, neighbours and strangers (missional).

Hurting children and the dangerous rite of ritual male circumcision

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Introduction

Thinking about the children of Africa most often conjures up mental and physical pictures of hurt and suffering. However ironic this might be – given the high regard for family and children in Africa – Africa is a mother whose children are hurting, if not by the cruel hands of perpetrators then in the clutches of poverty, famine or nature and most often as the victims of someone else’s war.

In this chapter, the focus is on the hurting children of Africa who live at the southernmost tip of Africa. From a pastoral perspective, I address

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this hurt, a hurt from within, caused by the age-old African ritual of male circumcision as a rite of passage into manhood.

For a long period of time, the ritual male circumcision of African boys was not much more than a social peculiarity for many South Africans. Travelling in the rural areas of the country, some of us were perhaps afforded a glimpse of little groups of African youths at the roadside, adorned with white body paint and covered in blankets. Only suspecting that it was part of some kind of African ritual, not many of us considered what the youths were doing and what any of it meant. Over the past few years, this has changed as the attention of the general South African public was drawn to ritual male circumcision through news reports on the growing number of fatalities amongst black youths during their time in initiation schools. In June 2014, it was estimated that close on 490 boys had died during initiation rituals in three provinces over the previous 6 years and that an astonishing number of 455 628 boys were hospitalised because of circumcision-related complications during the same period (Mapumulo 2014). Apart from those who had lost their lives, many initiates have also suffered physical and mental damage as a result of mutilation or the loss of their genitalia (Malan 2013). Another cause of suffering was ill-treatment and abuse during their time in initiation schools (Mail and Guardian 28 December 2013). On top of this, the African custom is further marred by reports of ill-meaning individuals who are running illegal initiation schools for financial gain (Mail and Guardian 23 December 2013).

As a result of this, different stakeholders have attempted to address some of the major areas of concern. In this regard, local authorities and government passed a number of laws. In 2001, the legislature of the Eastern Cape introduced the Application of Health Standards in Traditional Circumcision Act to address hygiene standards and to

regulate the conduct of all participants. Traditional practitioners now had to obtain written permission from the Health Department to conduct initiation rites. It involved, amongst others, an inspection of the medical tools that are used during circumcision procedures. This intervention gave rise to a distinction between legal and illegal initiation schools as only those approved by the Department of Health were deemed legal. Unfortunately, this created tension between traditional leaders and the government as traditional leaders felt that government was trying to regulate a traditional institution. The strong cultural and spiritual beliefs surrounding this matter became especially evident in a local chief's opinion that the deaths of youths could be attributed to the dissatisfaction of ancestors who did not approve of the government's interventions (Meissner & Buso 2007:373). It was therefore no surprise that this act was met with gross non-compliance from most people involved and has since been viewed by many as ineffective in addressing the problems that it aimed to solve (Meissner & Buso 2007:371).

Another government intervention was the Children's Act, No. 38 of 2005. This act explicitly protects the rights of male children to refuse ritual circumcision: 'Taking into consideration the child's age, maturity and stage of development, every male child has the right to refuse circumcision' (South African Government 2005:Ch. 2, s. 12, Social, Cultural and Religious Practices). Although the act can be applauded for defining the rights of minors in the current dispensation, it proved of little or no use for the protection of young males when it comes to ritual circumcision, most probably indicating that circumcision represents something that Africans do not want to avoid. It is therefore known that many boys even defy the instructions and wishes of their parents about initiation and allow

themselves to be lured into the initiation process by initiation schools that are operating in their area (Nicolson 2013).

Another initiative in which government is playing a leading role is the drive for voluntary male medical circumcision. Mainly spurred on by (contested) scientific evidence that male circumcision significantly reduces the risk of female to male transmission of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) (Coates 2005; Wasamu 2013), this initiative has two obvious benefits, namely reducing the safety concerns that are associated with traditional initiation schools and, of course, the spreading of HIV. Vincent (2008b), however, builds a very strong case, arguing that medical circumcision cannot be considered to be more acceptable than traditional circumcision as it represents two totally different matters: Especially strongholds amongst traditional communities, like the Xhosa of the Eastern Cape, initiation schools facilitate a rite of passage into manhood whilst medical circumcision is a mere medical procedure. Moreover, it is also argued that medical circumcision can have the opposite effect, namely to encourage unprotected sex, thereby creating a greater risk for the spreading of HIV. The reason for this is that circumcision leads to a loss of feeling in the male sex organ, encouraging men to discard protection (Sorrells *et al.* 2007) and thus rendering this intervention dubious.

Meanwhile, the current reality remains that deaths and mutilations due to unsuccessful circumcisions are continuing unabatedly. Even the current pleas of politicians seem to be the same as a decade ago, indicating that government interventions have not succeeded in making this practice safer for youths. The most notable of these pleas is the one from President

Jacob Zuma, who slammed unsafe circumcision practices (Mail and Guardian 23 May 2013); the former North-West premier, Thandi Modise (Mail and Guardian 23 December 2013), who called for the eradication of illegal initiation schools and the ANC Youth League (Mail and Guardian 10 July 2013), who insisted on the further regulation of existing practices to ensure the safety of initiates, thereby underlining the enduring nature of the problems surrounding ritual male circumcision.

■ Identifying the research problem

Traditionally, studies on male ritual circumcision were done from a cultural or anthropological (sociological) point of view (cf. Crosse-Upcott 1959; Gluckman 1949; Tucker 1949; Van Gennep 1960). In the light of media reports on deaths and casualties that are associated with this practice, a growing number of studies have emerged, investigating the physical causes of complications during circumcisions (cf. Peltzer *et al.* 2008). Even studies about the effects of political interventions in this cultural institution are documented, like that of Vincent (2008a). Since the occurrence of the HIV pandemic, many studies on medical circumcision have seen the light, especially as a result of the suspected link between circumcision and a diminished rate in the transmission of HIV from women to men (cf. Coates 2005; Malisha, Mahara & Rogan 2008; Westercamp & Bailey 2007). Thus, from a descriptive and statistical point of view, a sound corpus of knowledge about the phenomenon of ritual male circumcision has emerged over the last years.

Entering the ritual-circumcision discourse from a theological point of view, however, seems a unique challenge. Literally and figuratively speaking, ritual male circumcision, from a traditional point of view, is strictly a matter for the initiated. As Vincent (2008b:434) points out, it is

one of the most secretive and sacred of African rites, and women or uncircumcised men are frowned upon if they talk about it. Equally, initiates do not take kindly to outsiders who speculate about it. According to Rain-Taljaard *et al.* (2003), Western ideas on African traditions are not taken seriously either. Apart from its exclusive nature, it is also saturated with meaning, complicated by the fact that it is practised in different ethnic groups (Vincent 2008a:79) within the broader African culture. This means that not every aspect of this rite may have the same meaning within different ethnic groups, making the challenge for research about this phenomenon all the more challenging and coming up with valid findings even more so. The rite is also shrouded in a type of reasoning that mystifies the Western mind, such as the link drawn between the deaths of initiates and unhappy ancestors as a result of government intervention, as mentioned earlier. It is also noteworthy to realise that the church in general is not mentioned as a role player when it comes to solving the problems surrounding ritual circumcision (cf. Meissner & Buso 2007:371).

These factors should, however, not deter theological and moral reflection on the phenomenon of circumcision, especially as it has currently become a life threatening practice. In fact, it could be argued that the current state of affairs requires nothing less than an ethical response that could guide families when they are challenged by difficult decisions that are forced upon them by their culture and world view.

The goal of this chapter is therefore to provide a pastoral ethical exploration of ritual male circumcision as a currently dangerous rite of passage in the South African context. Embedded in this goal is an attempt to suggest a pastoral-theological response to the question of how people (as well as their families and spiritual caregivers) who

approve of initiation should respond to this type of circumcision in the light of its current state in South Africa. On an even more practical level, the following question may be asked: How can African youths be guided pastorally in a culturally sensitive fashion on this contentious issue?

By elucidating ritual male circumcision from various perspectives, this contribution hopes to encourage critical thinking on the dangerous rite of passage and to provide some suggestions for an ethically orientated response to this worrying phenomenon. Laying no claims to being definitive or comprehensive, the suggested pastoral-ethical exploration will unfold by addressing three main areas.

The first focus area is the theological and ethical orientation of the chapter. In order to design an ethical frame of reference from which this contribution will respond to the topic at hand, the ethical dimension of pastoral care will be highlighted. In this chapter, the ethical dimension of pastoral care will be placed specifically within the framework of Christian ethics. There are many ethical systems, but this contribution wants to argue in favour of a Christian response to ritual male circumcision.

In an attempt to provide a theory which is also grounded in pastoral praxis, the chapter will latch onto the model of practical moral theology or practical moral thinking as suggested by Don Browning (1983) to illustrate how youths and their families could be guided from a Christian perspective in making decisions in the light of dangerous, yet compelling, cultural prescriptions.

The second focus area of this chapter can most probably be regarded as a phenomenological exploration of ritual male circumcision as a rite

of passage. To enable a culturally sensitive response, pastoral guidance should remain cognisant of some of the cultural values that are represented by the rite of passage under discussion. In this regard, aspects like the communal and familial aspects of ritual male circumcision, the educative function of the initiation process and initiation as expression of the African world view and culture will be discussed. In order to understand why so many young Africans are still lured into participation in this currently dangerous practice, ritual male circumcision will also be considered as the cultural stronghold that it still remains today.

The final part of this chapter will be dedicated to a synthesis of the theological and phenomenological theories, in other words how practical moral thinking and ritual male circumcision can be brought together. Hopefully, this will provide a preliminary answer to the question of how the Christian faith community can respond from a pastoral-ethical perspective to the currently dangerous rite of passage of ritual male circumcision.

■ The ethical dimension of pastoral care

This chapter intends to explore the issue of ritual male circumcision from a pastoral-ethical point of view. In order to obtain this goal, it would be important to articulate what is meant by 'pastoral ethics'.

Pastoral ethics usually refer to the ethical framework in which pastoral work, specifically counselling, is done. As Lukens Jr. (1997:43) suggests, counselling ethics are all about the guidelines and limits of counselling praxis and include aspects such as confidentiality, informed consent, the keeping of records, the management of the treatment process as well as the

management of relationships within the counselling setting in order to ensure ethical counselling.

In this sense, however, pastoral ethics refer to the (scriptural) normative nature of pastoral care, not excluding the first meaning and mindful of the conviction that the counselling that is provided by pastoral care is based on certain values or an ethical frame of reference and is therefore not value-free or neutral. This frame is usually implicitly or explicitly present in pastoral counselling. Good examples of pastoral-counselling scenarios that explicitly require ethical considerations are, for example, divorce counselling and the counselling of a suicidal person. In this type of counselling, counsees often seek advice to aid them in the decision-making processes that are normally part of their crises. In these cases, pastoral counselling remains deliberately cognisant of the ethical principles that are found in scripture around these issues in order to provide guidance to counsees.

Browning (1983:31), however, points out that, in some cases, the opposite was true. Especially during the modern era, ethical neutrality has characterised pastoral counselling, partly because of the fear of falling into the trap of moralism (Browning 1983:34). This trend towards ethical neutrality has continued throughout the postmodern era where neither the Word nor the situation of counsees has been indicative of the outcome of the pastoral process. Rather, the personal stories of counsees were merely reinforced or reconstructed within counselling. Counsellors have deliberately chosen to follow a 'not knowing' approach (cf. Brunson 2014:6), giving counsees the opportunity to reconstruct their own stories. Browning's (1983) thesis in this regard is that pastoral care must always have a sound, religious and ethical basis.

Reflecting on the essence of pastoral care, it would be hard to uphold the view that pastoral counselling per se can be neutral or value-free. Traditionally, pastoral care has always denoted a Christian-orientated form of helping (Gerkin 1997:21; Purves 2004:xv), already implying some type of value system on which the counselling will rely. This becomes clear even in a random consideration of a few definitions of pastoral care. In the classic definition of Clebsch and Jaeckle (1964:4), powerful value-based terminology like ‘ministry’, ‘Christian’, ‘healing’, ‘sustaining’ and ‘guiding’ abounds. From the point of view of Black Theology, Wimberly (1982:20) contends that the goal of pastoral care is to be sought in the ‘growth toward God, the self and others’. In South Africa, Louw (2010:73) argues that pastoral care can be seen as ‘the expression and representation of the sensitivity and compassion of the Scripture’s understanding and portrayal of God’s encounter, intervention, interaction and involvement in our being human’. Buffel (2004:40) emphasises that pastoral care is directed towards the well-being of ‘all God’s people’ within specific ‘socio-economic, political and cultural contexts’. From these definitions, it should be clear that pastoral care is enmeshed with scripture, faith, life and how that life is responsibly lived towards God, the self and the community within specific contexts, rendering it an inherent Christian ethical character. Browning (1983:96) states the following: ‘Pastors are inevitably leading their clients somewhere, even if only by silently drawing certain boundaries and eliminating certain options’.

Christian ethics

Following the above, it is important to explicate what is meant by Christian ethics and how these ethics find expression in pastoral-theological thinking. There are many ethical systems around us, and not all of these can be labelled as Christian. Generally speaking, ethics deal with what is morally right or wrong,

but decisions deal with what choices should be exercised. What constitutes good or bad can sometimes depend solely on aesthetic, logical or economic considerations (cf. Clouser 2005:299), having no Christian character at all.

Christian ethics, in contrast, deal with what is right or wrong from a Christian perspective, based on God's revelation in scripture, which is in accordance with God's own unchangeable moral character and moral attributes (cf. Geisler 2010:15). This means that Christian ethics are ultimately divinely based.

There are different opinions on the parts of scripture that should be regarded as the source of Christian ethics. Can the double imperative of love or the Ten Commandments (cf. De Bruyn 2013), for example, be seen as sufficient for deriving Christian ethics (cf. Heyns 1982:225), or should the whole of scripture (also known as God's special or specific revelation) be seen as the source for Christian ethics? Geisler (2010:125) suggests that the whole of scripture, together with God's general revelation as found in nature, should be seen as the source for Christian ethical thinking. His reason for this view is that there are many phenomena in our current pluralistic societies that are not directly addressed in, for example, the Ten Commandments but for which we may find guiding principles and norms in the rest of scripture.

Relevant to the subject of this chapter would also be the question pertaining to the authority of Christian ethics. Geisler's (2010:15) observation that 'Christian ethics deals with what is morally right or wrong for a Christian' creates some suspicion about exclusivity and that Christian ethics will only be binding for Christians, posing the inevitable question on the relevance of evaluating an African institution like ritual male circumcision from a Christian ethical point of view.

In this regard, Browning (1983:16–17) argues that Christian ethics are indeed relevant in pluralistic societies as no clear pastoral guidance is

possible without an ethical framework. For Browning, Christian ethics comprise more than an ‘either/or’ scheme; they contain ‘practical moral theology’. He (Browning 1983) further expounds this idea:

This will be necessary for handling issues of care for diverse publics within specific churches ... and ... for addressing ... the diversity found in the public world outside the church. (p. 17)

What Browning means with ‘practical moral theology or thinking’ warrants a short discussion.

■ Practical moral theology or thinking according to Don Browning

Browning (1983:53) argues that there are five levels involved in what he denotes as ‘practical moral thinking’. Thus, when the faith community is confronted with ethical questions, practical moral thinking happens on these five levels, which can be verbalised as questions. I paraphrased them as follows:

- What kind of world or universe constitutes the context of our actions?
- What are we obligated to do?
- Which of our needs are we morally justified in satisfying?
- What is the immediate context of our actions?
- What roles, rules and communication should we follow to accomplish our moral ends?

The above questions can also be seen as opening up the following levels of ethical discussion:

- a metaphorical level
- an obligational level
- a tendency-need level

- a contextual-predictive level
- a rule-role level.

In pastorally addressing issues in an ethical way, we must first engage with the *metaphors* that we hold about God as the ‘ultimate and most determinative aspect of experience’ (Browning 1983:58). An example of these metaphors can be that God is Creator, Governor and Redeemer. The metaphors we hold about God or that are provided to us through revelation will have implications for our ethical conduct. In other words, they will *oblige* us to behave in a certain fashion. Within practical moral thinking, these moral obligations will, however, have to be weighed against the so-called *tendency-need levels* of human beings (Browning 1983:68). Information about human needs is available from our own intuitive experience, our religious and cultural traditions, and the findings of human sciences such as psychology and sociology (Browning 1983:69). It also needs to be considered in the light of the obligations that are provided by our metaphors of God. Within practical moral thinking, it then becomes necessary to consider the *context*, particularly the sociological, psychological and cultural trends and forces that have a bearing on the situation (cf. Browning 1983:70). After carefully considering these, practical moral thinking proceeds to the formulation of *rules and roles* by which we make our choices and organise our actions. An application of this practical moral thinking will, according to Browning (1983:57), lead to faith, moral, emotional-motivational, ego and rule-role development in the individual.

Such practical thinking holds mainly three benefits. It establishes a value context or moral frame of reference. It improves understanding

of the ethical issues that people struggle to come to terms with, and it communicates to the public that the church is indeed engaged in a critical reflection on its own metaphors and the morals it advocates (cf. Browning 1983:96–97).

Commenting on Browning's model of practical moral thinking, one should first of all mention that, three decades ago, Browning tried to address the absence of ethics in pastoral work in the USA that arose from the fear of moralism. As has already been indicated, the spirit of relativism that sometimes accompanied post-modern thinking after the era of modernity had the same effect locally. The call for a greater focus on moral guidance in pastoral care is still relevant. The greatest benefit of Browning's model is arguably its sensitivity for understanding the needs of the individual and culture in which ethical questions arise without compromising the metaphors of God and the obligations that stem from them (cf. Browning 1983:71). It also forces stakeholders to think critically in the light of complicated challenges.

This model has obvious benefits in guarding the pastoral process against pitfalls such as Biblicism and cultural insensitivity. Unfortunately, it does not really address the issue of how binding Christian ethics are in pluralistic societies. My opinion is that a Christian ethical opinion should be given when it is requested but in a culturally sensitive fashion as a Christian perspective on the issue at hand. Although it cannot be seen as binding on the conscience of the non-believer or believers of other faith convictions, it still provides a tangible option to consider in the decision-making process and an

opportunity for the Holy Spirit to guide people in what Christians believe to be the right way of doing.

■ The phenomenon of ritual male circumcision

Exploring ritual male circumcision obviously implies that the phenomenon itself must also be afforded closer inspection. With the problems currently surrounding this practice in South Africa, ritual male circumcision has specific bearing on the practice as found in South Africa and other parts of the African continent as a rite of passage.

From a medical point of view, there are basically three distinctions in terms of male circumcision: ritual or religious circumcision, prophylactic circumcision and therapeutic circumcision (Modgil, Rai & Anderson 2014:21). In all three cases, the physical procedure points to the removal of the foreskin of the male organ, denoted by the Latin *circum* [around] *caedere* [cut]. The difference between the cases lies in the motivation for the circumcision as all the above adjectives indicate that the procedure can be undertaken for a variety of reasons. *Ritual and religious circumcision* is undertaken because of a certain belief system or world view and is predominant in African cultures. It is also prevalent in religious denominations like the Jewish and Muslim faith communities. Muslims are the largest single religious group to circumcise their male offspring in a ritual called *tahara*, which is done on the grounds of cleanliness that forms an integral part of the Muslim faith (BBC 2009b). Adherents to the Jewish faith also circumcise their boys on religious grounds in the belief that it is required of them in scriptures (BBC 2009a). Whilst religious circumcision is prescribed in the scriptures of those religions, ritual male circumcision seems to be culturally ordained, undergirded by the world view that are held by

that particular culture. Usually it forms part of a rite of passage (becoming the person one is destined to be). In ritual male circumcision, the initiate is an active partaker in a much larger process of learning and acquiring skills rather than being a passive receiver of something like in the case of infant circumcision. Ritual circumcision is not limited to males, but is a well-known and documented practice amongst females in some African cultures such as the Gikuyu of Kenya (cf. Githiga 2009:30). It is also not limited to the African continent but is known amongst the Aborigines in Australia (cf. Sansom 2010); the Aztecs and Mayans in the Americas; and inhabitants of the Philippines, Eastern Indonesia and various Pacific Islands, including Fiji and the Polynesian islands (UNAIDS 2007). *Prophylactic circumcision* is done mainly for medical reasons, based on certain assumptions about the medical benefits of circumcision such as hygiene. More recently, these reasons include circumcision as a precautionary measure against sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and the spread of HIV. *Therapeutic circumcision* refers to a medical intervention in cases of infection or cancer of the foreskin where circumcision can contribute to addressing the medical problem (cf. Modgil *et.al.* 2014:23).

This chapter calls for a closer investigation of ritual male circumcision as it is practised amongst a variety of African groups in South Africa and the rest of Africa. This will be done by attempting to identify some of the key themes that are present in ritual male circumcision in order to assess its cultural meaning and implications as part of an initiation rite. The main sources that are utilised in this part of the research depict initiation amongst the *Xhosa*, mainly concentrated in the Eastern Cape Province of Southern Africa (cf. Vincent 2008a, 2008b), and the *Gikuyu* of Kenya (cf. Githiga 2009).

■ A rite of passage

It is generally accepted that ritual male circumcision forms part of a rite of passage that leads males from boyhood to manhood. This is usually how the issue of ritual male circumcision is introduced in most literature (cf. Malisha *et al.* 2008; Meissner & Buso 2007; Westercamp & Bailey 2007). For individual adherents to cultures where such rites exist, it is the only way of attaining adulthood and therefore a highlight of their personal journeys. Mtuze (2004:48) depicts the completion of initiation as the 'greatest day' in a boy's life and Githiga (2009:21) describes initiation as a moment that youngsters 'yearn' for. He is of the opinion that 'children knew that it was only initiation that would make them men and women' (Githiga 2009:21). According to the classical assessment of Van Gennep (1960), a rite of passage, including elements such as separation and marginalisation, eventually leads to incorporation into the tribe as full/adult members. Usually, a rite of passage also includes different phases, each with their activities and tasks. The latter may include physical testing, seclusion, demonstration of fitness and male approbation (cf. Silverman 2004). Therefore, ritual male circumcision only forms part of a bigger initiation process.

■ The communal and familial aspects of ritual male circumcision

Although initiation can be deemed a personal highlight for individuals, it is also embedded in a communal/tribal and familial value system, and is therefore a process in which the community and family are involved. Vincent (2008b:434) states that 'it (ritual male circumcision) is a central public endorsement of a culture's accepted norms of heterosexual manhood'; in other words, ritual male circumcision is something that

communities expect from their members. In Kenya, there is growing pressure on government from pro-initiation groups who request decrees to make circumcision compulsory for all males (Githiga 2009:13). Reports of initiated people who are trying to enforce initiation on the uninitiated are not foreign (cf. Githiga 2009:15). Within this framework, tribal leaders and chiefs act as the custodians of these practices. In this regard, it is understandable that they have voiced their concern when government intervened by imposing regulations on this custom in South Africa (Meissner & Buso 2007:373). The communities further express their participation by means of the fact that traditional surgeons who perform circumcision (*ingcibi*) must be someone of standing and trustworthiness in a certain community who entrusted him with this practice (Vincent 2008b:434).

The familial aspect of initiation becomes apparent in the fact that the families of initiates participate actively in the process. It is customary for a family to appoint a custodian, traditional surgeon and nurse of their choice (who must tend to their son during initiation) long before the son is sent away for this initiation (Vincent 2008b:435). In cases where a son still has a biological father, it is part of the *Xhosa* custom that the father of the boy will be present at the actual circumcision and has the privilege of feeding the severed foreskin for the initiate to swallow as part of the rite (cf. Vincent 2008b:435). The communal and familial involvement in initiation is also well illustrated by the fact that boys are not just 'sent off' to initiation by their families, but 'received' back into their communities as men. On their return to the communities, they do not only receive new blankets and are decorated with red ochre paint on their faces to highlight their new status, but are also awarded new responsibilities and roles that befit their newly found manhood (cf. Turner 1982). Unfortunately, this familial side of initiation also imposes

much stress on boys in female-headed households. As it is forbidden to discuss initiation with women, these boys have challenges to communicate their readiness for initiation with their mothers and will usually join initiation schools without permission – sometimes landing at disreputable schools and thus exposing themselves to various risks (cf. Vincent 2008b:441). In the light of this, it should be clear that initiation is not only an individualised rite, but that much obligation from their communities and families rests on the shoulders of boys to complete this rite of passage.

■ **The educative function of the initiation process**

Circumcision forms only a part of the initiation process, and the main thrust of the process is instructional. According to Vincent (2008b:436), three main areas can be distinguished.

Firstly, initiates are trained in the ‘secret code of the bush’ to help distinguish them in future from unauthentic (hospital) initiates. Secondly, certain character traits such as courage, forbearance and strength are instilled upon them through deprivation, criticism and even physical punishment. Thirdly, they are educated on what it means to be a man or adult in their culture. Especially this part contains instruction on how a man should conduct himself in marriage, family and social life, and it has a strong cultural and sexual basis. The same pattern is discernible amongst the Gikuyu in Kenya where knowledge on conduct in the community as adult and partner in marriage features prominently (Githiga 2009:39).

■ **Initiation as expression of the African world view and culture**

Initiation as rite of passage into adulthood must be understood against the background of the African world view and culture. Walsh (1989:9) defines

a world view as a 'vision of life ... a perspective through which to make sense out of life'. As a result, a world view leads to 'social-cultural-historical action' (Walsh 1989:10).

According to Naugle (2002:xix), a world view can be understood as a 'system of narrative signs that establishes a powerful framework within which people think, interpret and know'. Here, world view and culture are used interchangeably as the latter is seen as the expression of the former. A closer definition of culture can be that it is a private and collective practice that is based on a world view that has endured for generations and that defines and gives meaning to being within a collective and larger world.

Cognisant of the fact that it would be difficult to claim the existence of a generic African world view or culture, there are typical traits that most African cultures share (Van der Walt 2008:171). Some of these include sociality, conformism, the view of time, relationship to authority and the view about ancestors (cf. Van der Walt 2008:172–175). From these unique beliefs stems what can typically be labelled as 'African culture'. Relevant to ritual male circumcision is the African view that one is not born fully human but that a person becomes human through processes which are communally sanctioned and recognised (cf. Vincent 2008b:444). Therefore, traditional African life is saturated with different rites of passage, denoting this process of 'becoming'. Githiga (2009:45–56) names the following rites: birth, weaning, rebirth, marriage, middle adulthood, handing over of authority and the death rite, demonstrating that the whole of the earthly life cycle is covered by rites of passage. Within the African world view, it would be hard to imagine that one could move on to a next stage of life without completing the previous rite, underlining the importance of each.

Magezi and Myambo (2011:163) point out that contemporary African Christians often find themselves ‘oscillating between two worlds, namely Christianity and traditional African beliefs’. In some instances, the African way is deemed better than the Christian way (cf. Magezi & Myambo 2011:163), and therefore, the reality is that Africans embrace a variety of cultural practices, irrespective of whether they are Christians or unbelievers, educated or illiterate (Vincent 2008a:80). This view is partly responsible for the notion that the church, with its accompanying value system, is viewed as a sub-community within a larger community and that Christians within the larger community are first and foremost part of the larger community (Magezi & Myambo 2011:163). Within this framework, African Christians still take part uncritically in cultural practices which seem questionable from a Christian and Western view, respectively.

When considering the African world view and culture, an important question that also comes to mind is that pertaining to the relationship between biblical circumcision and African ritual male circumcision. Is there any reason to believe that African ritual male circumcision has, in fact, biblical roots? Although it is not uncommon for African authors to draw attention to the fact that Jesus Christ was also circumcised and to draw parallels between African rites and the life of Jesus (cf. Githiga 2009:77–85), it seems questionable to lay claims to a biblical foundation for ritual male circumcision as practice within African culture. In a recent comparative study between the Old Testament version of circumcision and African ritual male circumcision, Rugwiji (2014:251) not only concludes that it denotes two different practices but also that ‘the role of the biblical text in influencing MGM [*male genital mutilation* – AB] is inconceivable’. Doyle (2005) asserts that African tribes were probably first exposed to circumcision by Jews or Muslim Moors around 1492 and that

the practice became assimilated as part of their culture as a result of their exposure to these groups. Conclusive evidence on the origin of the practice is, however, frail. It seems safe to assume that it is a practice that is congruent with the African world view of humans as beings that becomes human by moving through different rites of passages.

A last remark about the African world view pertains to the perceived fixed nature thereof. Even though it seems like an enduring world view – as is evident from the ongoing support for, amongst other, initiation rites – this practice has not been left unscathed by the Western world view and changing times. As a result of this, ritual male circumcision has waned in African cultures where it previously abounded such as the Zulu (cf. Vincent 2008a:79). Apart from this fact, it seems that some of the meaning that was previously attributed to aspects of initiation has changed in the minds and hands of current generations. Vincent (2008b:442) points to a worrying example in this regard, namely that where initiation previously implied readiness for marriage, young men currently see it as a right to have sex, even out of wedlock, thus contributing to existing problems regarding the abuse of women in South Africa. Sansom (2010) refers to the same phenomenon amongst Aborigine initiates in Australia where the inner change that should accompany initiation is no longer visible, indicating that the deeper meaning that was carried within the culture is blurred amongst members of the current generation.

■ Ritual male circumcision as cultural stronghold

Although some clarity on the importance of ritual male circumcision within African culture may have been achieved, a few remarks that

highlight its stronghold on youngsters still need to be made. Given the high incidence of mutilation and death that characterises the practice currently, one would expect a decline in the number of men participating in it. The fact that it is not the case points in the direction of some type of stronghold or force that this practice is exerting on young Africans.

Vincent (2008b:440) sees the main power of circumcision in the fear amongst the uninitiated that they might be ostracised by the community. This ostracism has many faces. Obviously, because circumcision is seen as a rite of passage in the journey to become fully human, the uninitiated are not regarded as human, earning them derogatory names such as 'dogs' and causing them to be excluded from certain privileges, especially in the social sphere. An uninitiated boy, for example, will not be included in a family's budget for new clothing. The uninitiated will not be granted entrance to certain social gatherings either. Above all, they will not be considered for sexual intercourse by females. The social perception that circumcised men are of stronger moral fibre than the uninitiated also causes African societies to lay the blame for crime or misconduct on innocent uninitiated men. Candidates for initiation are thus constantly weighing the perceived dangers of initiation against the social ostracism that awaits them if they do not submit to this institution, and the fear of ostracism is clearly winning.

The fear of social isolation is further accentuated by the negative reaction to medical circumcision by traditionalists. Traditional leaders, for example, discourage the use of regulated circumcision actively by labelling those who go to hospital for their circumcision *amadoda phepha* (paper

boys) or comparing them to women who gave birth in a hospital ward by plainly referring to these men as women (Vincent 2008a:81). Given the innate sociality as trademark of the African culture, it should be understandable that ostracism may outweigh the risks of traditional circumcision for many young men.

■ Preliminary synthesis

Before the notion of practical moral thinking will be applied to the issue of ritual male circumcision, the foregoing discussion warrants a number of remarks.

From a phenomenological point of view, it should be clear that ritual male circumcision plays an important role within the African paradigm of life as a journey in becoming human. As a rite of passage, its role is pivotal in the process of boys becoming men (and in some African cultures, girls becoming women). The family and communal involvement stands out as commendable whilst also being illustrative of how the collective is involved in the raising of children. Along the same line, its educative function in terms of social and relational skills is noteworthy as it passes on values that African children will not necessarily learn in the public-school environment. On an objective level, the intention of ritual male circumcision as a rite of passage can thus be highly regarded as a necessary part of the African way of being and, as a result, be respected.

Unfortunately, it should also be recognised that it has currently become a dangerous rite of passage that kills, disfigures and emotionally scars African youngsters in a seemingly uncontrolled fashion. As even

government intervention and changing world views do not seem to change the fate of African youths, the stronghold of this practice urgently calls for a change in the way that future approbates of this rite of passage think about their participation in it. To this end, pastoral guidance can most probably appeal to the capacity of Africans to think critically about the merits of ritual male circumcision in its current state and, more specifically, whether it is ethically justifiable to subject oneself or one's children to the risks that this practice is currently posing for participants.

■ Practical moral thinking and ritual male circumcision: A suggested answer

In this last part of the chapter, I attempt to apply practical moral thinking to the issue of ritual male circumcision in order to suggest an ethical-pastoral response to this currently dangerous rite of passage.

Starting with the so-called God metaphors (or scriptural metaphors), the Christian paradigm provides the pastoral process of guiding African youth with a wealth of possibilities. One can argue that a complicated issue in which great risks and uncertainty are involved calls for the gifts of discernment and wisdom that are promised to those who seek it from God, as Paul teaches the young Timothy in 1 Timothy 1:9. Another appropriate metaphor would involve the sanctity of life and the calling to nurture it, as found in the positive call of the sixth commandment in Exodus 20:13 and Deuteronomy 5:17 (cf. De Bruyn 2013:114). The metaphor of abundant life (Jn 10:10) is also applicable as call to preserve oneself in order to engage with life fully.

On an obligatory level, these metaphors caution the would-be initiate to act with discernment and wisdom regarding initiation. During pastoral guidance, youths can be encouraged to engage the issue by means of critical considerations like the following: Is it wise to engage in a practice that is engulfed in so much ill repute? Is it necessary to become human in culture whilst I am already whole in Christ? Why have other Africans abandoned this practice? What must I do in order to preserve my own life as well as my physical and mental integrity in order to share in the abundant life that God has already reserved for me in this world?

On a tendency-need level, an honest assessment needs to be done of what the young African male's needs really are. As literature has shown that 'man making' can fail if a real commitment towards culture lacks, it should be pointed out that the whole rite of passage can be meaningless if a real commitment towards traditional African culture has waned. Thus, the pastoral process should be instrumental in establishing how keen African youths still are on participating in a cultural practice of this nature. Providing that current laws protect children's rights to choose whether they want to participate in cultural practices, this avenue calls for practical exploration during pastoral guidance.

At a contextual level, the sociological, psychological and cultural trends and forces bearing upon the practice need to be articulated and investigated in order to nurture discernment about the wisdom and ethical implications that are involved when participating in a dangerous rite. If Magezi and Myambo (2011:163) are taken seriously in their claim that Africans are currently oscillating between different value systems, the pastoral guidance of African youths should take seriously

the issue of discernment. Why do I want to (or why do I have to) participate in a life-threatening practice when I have already become a new person in Christ? What are the sociological factors compelling a young man (in this case) to endanger himself? What are the psychological drivers compelling young men to expose themselves to obvious dangers? What is the role of culture in the decisions that people make? These are but a few of the critical questions to facilitate discernment on these issues.

Finally, practical moral thinking proceeds to the formulation of 'rules and roles' by which people make their choices and organise their actions. If a young approbate decides through pastoral guidance against participation in ritual circumcision, the pastoral process should concentrate on reinforcing such decisions and be prepared to support youths who anticipate to bear the brunt of their families' or communities' wrath (who may not necessarily share their convictions and decisions).

■ Conclusion

In the theological quest to accommodate children, the current state of ritual male circumcision and the resulting casualties and fatalities cannot be ignored. Irrespective of the positive intention of this rite of passage within the African paradigm, the loss of mental and bodily integrity as well as irreplaceable life calls for theological intervention. In this contribution, I suggested a pastoral-ethical response as a culturally sensitive way to engage approbates in critical reflection about their

participation in this rite of passage, providing alternative avenues of thinking through the use of Christian metaphors. Engaging Africans on different levels of critical thinking can hopefully provide alternative avenues to avoid the dangers that currently reside in a cultural practice that is held dear by many.

Welcoming children to the *diakonia* of the congregation

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Introduction

Several researchers have pointed to the fact that large percentages of young people are leaving the church (Dames 2006:23; Goheen 2011:51; Joubert 2009:37; Marshall & Payne 2009:18–20; Pieterse, Dreyer & Van der Ven 2000:53–81; Smith 2007:129). Everywhere in the world, there are problems in the life of children, and Africa has its unique problems with its children (Bansikiza 2004; Gunnestad & Thwala 2011; LenkaBula 2002; Nwaigbo 2004; Richter & Müller 2005; Swart & Yates 2012). This leads to the following questions: How can the

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children of Africa be welcomed in the church? How can the unique problems and needs of children be addressed, and how can they be equipped to serve God, one another and people who are still outside of the church?

Strommen and Hardel (2000:79–80) say that a close personal relationship with God flows out of faith ‘as an affair of the heart and commitment of the mind that results in service and moral behaviour’. According to them (Strommen & Hardel 2000:80), ‘[f]aith creates a dynamic interaction between heart, mind and action; in turn, this dynamic interaction promotes greater faith’. Involving children and young people in service work within a congregation can thus be seen as part of this dynamic interaction and can contribute to making children and young people feel at home in a congregation. Beckwith (2010:19) also formulates this truth as follow: ‘Becoming a Christian is the actual practicing of being Christian, over and over again’.

The research question of this article is: What should the *διακονία* [service] of a child in Africa entail? Questions that flow from this main question are as follows:

- Should a child be part of the *διακονία* of the congregation?
- What is the place of a child in the *διακονία* of the congregation?
- How can a child be welcomed to the *διακονία* of the congregation?

Answers to these questions will be sought in 1 Corinthians 12. An exegesis of 1 Corinthians 12 within the context of the letter and scripture as a whole serves as a starting point. Where necessary, other parts of scripture will be visited to address the questions that flow out of the exegesis of 1 Corinthians 12. Out of the exegesis, practical guidelines will be gleaned for child and youth ministry.

■ What is a child?

In this chapter, a child is defined as a person under the age of 12. The age of 12 is also the age when, according to the Jewish law, the moral consciousness of children has developed to such an extent that they can be held legally responsible (Dorff 2012:30; cf. Grobbelaar 2008:204–205). Grobbelaar (2008:291) describes the cultural background within which the New Testament’s witness should be understood. It was a time where the Hellenistic and Jewish social-cultural contexts met. The Jews rejected many of the brutal practices towards children (cf. Gundry-Volf 2001:35–36) but was nevertheless influenced by these Greek-Roman practices (Balla 2003:109; Botha 1999:316). According to the Jewish law, ‘children are not only an obligation: they are a blessing’ (Dorff 2012:23). According to the Bible, children are ‘gifts from God and sources of joy’, and they are developing persons, in need of instruction and guidance. They are also human beings made in the image of God and ‘models of faith and sources of revelation’ (Bunge 2012:62–66). In general, however, children were not given high regard in these times. At the same time, the New Testament shows a deeper respect for children than the views that were prevalent at the time (Grobbelaar 2008:291).

The way the church think about children is reflected in the way they minister to children (Wyse 2004:211). In research and in ministry, children were neglected or limited to a few aspects of the ministry for very long. Children should be fully integrated in the ministry of the church, and research should establish a well-founded theology of children from which a sound ministry can be deducted (Breed & Kruger 2014; Dean 2010:25–42; Grobbelaar 2008:139–190; Strommen & Hardel 2008).

■ The structure of 1 Corinthians

It is important to understand the overall structure of a book in order to position oneself in terms of the book as well as in terms of the section under discussion. It is important to understand what the whole contributes to the understanding of a specific section and what the section contributes to the understanding of the whole (Du Toit 2009:226–259).

The congregation of Corinth, as every congregation, was made up of broken people, some of them saved and others still under the rule of sin. The reality of sin is still part of the reality of being a Christian. In this congregation, there was mutual rivalry. Members fought about whose leader they deemed best and who had the most important gifts (1 Cor 1:10–13). They allowed gross immorality within the congregation (1 Cor 5:1). Some thought themselves better than the rest and treated the poor uncharitably during communal meals (1 Cor 11:20–22). They treated Paul disrespectfully and doubted his apostleship because he was, in their view, an unimpressive figure (1 Cor 4:1–21). This situation induced some members to write to Paul and to ask him questions (1 Cor 1:11; 7:1). 1 Corinthians mainly consists of Paul's answers to these questions (Kok 2012:1–3).⁶⁶

Thiselton (2000:900) says that the central theme of the Letter to the Corinthians is that you may not elevate yourself above others, that you may not say that you will never need anyone else and that the stronger members should accommodate and help the weaker ones. He says about 1 Corinthians 11:2–14:40 (Thiselton 2000):

This whole section (11:2–14:40) takes up, in turn, the theme of 'respect for others' which characterizes Paul's demand and plea for 'the strong' to put themselves in a position of understanding and respect for 'the weak' in 8:1–11:1. (p. 900)

66. For the social, economic and cultural environment in the city of Corinth, see Ng (2012:89–107).

He furthermore says that Paul's main message to the congregation is that '[t]he church of God ceases to be the church if it remains no longer characterized by an inclusive mutuality and reciprocity' (Thiselton 2000:900). Thiselton (2000:900) refers to Barth, who states that the unity of the letter centres on the contrast between glorifying God and revelling in your own faith in God or your leader or experiences and gifts. Paul gives 1 Corinthians 3:21 and 1:31 in opposition to such an attitude. 1 Corinthians to a large extent deals with the inclusivity that should exist within the church of Christ. It is clear that 1 Corinthians addresses the subject of welcoming.

Du Toit (2009: 226–259) describes discourse analysis thoroughly and also points out the advantages of this method for the exegesis of the New Testament. Goede (2004:182) illustrates the structure of 1 Corinthians as in Figure 1 (as adapted from Goede 2004:182).

■ 1 Corinthians 12

1 Corinthians 12 is part of the smaller unit in 1 Corinthians made up of 1 Corinthians 11–14, which focuses on the worship service. It is simultaneously part of the smaller unit made up of 12–14, which deals with the utilisation of spiritual gifts:

Goede (2004:183) presents the composition of 1 Corinthians 12–14 as in Figure 2.

□ Theme

Chiu (2007:236–238) indicates that 1 Corinthians 12:1 reveals the subject on which Paul will teach in Chapter 12–14 – πνευματικῶν [*pneumatikon* = spiritual things/people] in this verse means either spiritual gifts or spiritual people. He (Chiu 2007:236) points out that the question of whether πνευματικῶν [*pneumatikon* = spiritual things or people] (1 Cor 12:1) is

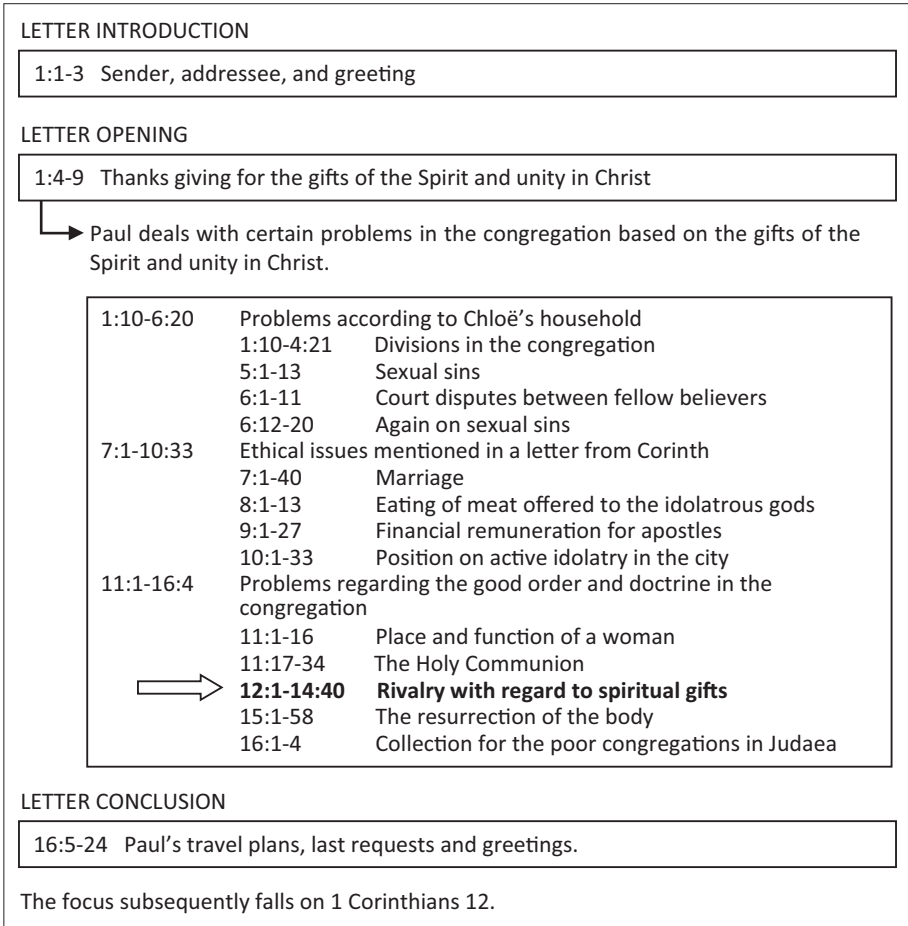


FIGURE 1: Structure of 1 Corinthians.

male or neutral should not be all that important since all people that have the Spirit of God will have spiritual gifts.⁶⁷ The fact that Paul in verse 4 changes over to the use of the word *χαρισμάτων* [*garismatōon* = gifts] rather than *πνευματικῶν* [*pneumatikōn*] indicates that he wants to guide

67. Cf. Erikson (1998:210) who sees the wordplay as intentional because Paul did not want to directly attack those who describe themselves as spiritual.

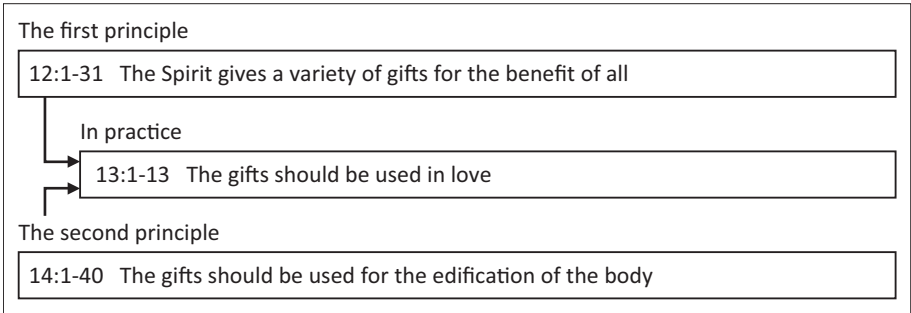


FIGURE 2: Structure of 1 Corinthians 12–14 (Goede 2004:183).

the readers away from practicing gifts that focus the attention on personal achievements towards practicing gifts as the grace that comes from God. The body of Christ is a body of grace, a servant of grace (Thiselton 2000:930).

1 Corinthians 12:4–6 within the structure of 1 Corinthians 12

The position of these verses within the structure of the chapter is important. Some researchers feel that the verses only serve as an introduction to the chapter. In emulation of Hays (2011:207), Harrington (1999:449) and Thiselton (2000:449), these three verses are here seen as an announcement of the structure of the chapter. Verse 6 introduces the subject of the *charismata* [gifts], which is discussed further in verses 8–10. Verse 7 is a transitional verse. Verse 5 introduces the subject of the *διακονία* [*diakonia* = service] and this is discussed further in verses 12–26. Verse 11 is a transitional sentence. Verse 27 is a transitional sentence as well. The subject of the *ἐνέργημα* [*energema* = workings] is announced in verse 6 and discussed at length in verses 28–30. Verse 31 is a transitional sentence to Chapter 13.

Verses 7 and 8 together with verses 28–30 form an *inclusion* that binds the verses together into a chapter, with verses 1–6 as an introduction (cf. Thiselton 2000:929).

The structure of 1 Corinthians 12 can be presented as in Figure. 3.

■ Should a child be part of the *diakonia* of the congregation?

An important question to ask is if all that is said in 1 Corinthians 12 are applicable to children. The question about the necessity of every member in the congregation is convincingly answered in verses 22–24:

22 On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable,
23 and on those parts of the body that we think less honourable we bestow the greater honour, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty,
24 which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honour to the part that lacked it.

In these verses Paul deals with those people in the congregation that can for some or the other reason be seen as weaker than the rest. He compares the people in the congregation with the parts of a body. He says that there are parts of our body that we do not show in public. We cover these parts with greater care than those parts that do not need it because these parts are essential to the body. The weaker parts are essential to the congregation and the members who cannot claim any glory should be treated with greater care than those who do not need such care. This links up with Jesus' teaching to his disciples when they tried to keep the children from approaching him (Mk 10:13–16). He admonishes them, receives the little children and blesses them, but more than that, he holds them as an example of how the kingdom should be received. Jesus welcomes the little children who have no claim to be received by him and he then shows how important they are

Welcoming children to the diakonia of the congregation

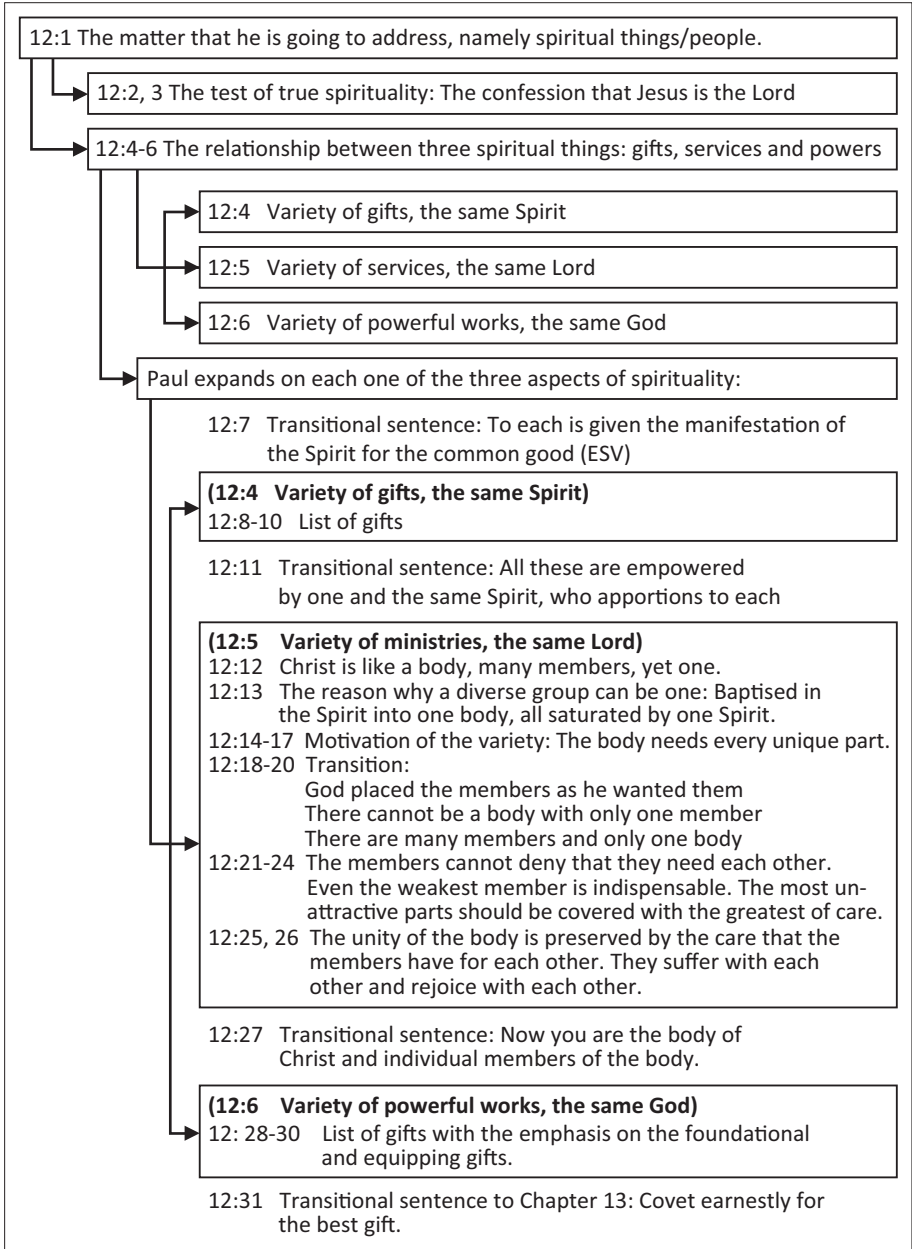


FIGURE 3: Structure of 1 Corinthians 12.

in the kingdom. Children can easily be overlooked when ministering in a congregation. For instance, when there is trauma in a family, only the parents receive pastoral guidance. The children are left to their own devices. When congregation members are equipped for ministry, children are mostly not involved. Children, like other vulnerable groups, should receive special ministry according to God's plan for his congregation. This correlates with Jesus' parable of the farmer who leaves 99 sheep in the pen to go and search for the one sheep that is lost. 1 Corinthians 12 therefore clearly addresses the child's place within the *diakonia* [service] of the congregation. Makant (2012:2) says the care of children should be part of the DNA of a congregation. 1 Corinthians 12:22–24 can be applied to children because they can easily be overlooked when work has to be done and when special care has to be given.

■ The place of a child in the *diakonia*

An analysis of verses 4–6 shows that there are different emphases. In the first place, the unity and variety of gifts, ministries and powerful work is emphasised. Although there is a variety of gifts, ministries and powerful work, these things are brought together by the fact that the triune God is the origin of all of them. The Spirit originates the gifts in every believer (1 Cor 12:4). Christ is the commander and the leader in the *διακονία* [service] (1 Cor 12:5). The Father is the one who ensures powerful work (1 Cor 12:6a). The triune God empowers everything in everyone (1 Cor 12:6b). Strommen and Hardel (2000:289) say that there should be a shift in thought regarding the ministry. Ministry should not be seen as something required of a human being

but as the ministry of the triune God. This ties in with 1 Corinthians 12:6, which says that God establishes everything in everyone. Children should therefore be welcomed to the ministry of God. The better children can understand the grace God has for them, the more they would be able to serve others with their gifts based on the security of God's love. God may also use people to guide a child to insight and practical knowledge.

There is also a causative link between χάρισμα [gift], διακονία [service] and ἐνέργημα [workings]. The gifts make ministry possible, and when these gifts are used to serve, God works powerfully and establishes things in human beings. The coherence of verses 4–6 is also very important. The other parts of scripture that deal with spiritual gifts and the διακονία (cf. Eph 4:7–13; Rm 12:4–8; 1 Pt 4:10) reveal that διακονία is made possible by the gifts given to believers through the power that God works in them (Eph 3:20). It is furthermore clear that the special gifts of apostle, prophet, shepherd and pastor play an activating role through the equipment that it provides believers to enable them to use their gifts for service work (Eph 4:12; Breed 2014). 'Apportionments of activities refer to the execution of ministries, made possible by the gifts' (Orr & Walther 1976:281). Clark (1935) compares the different places in the New Testament where the *energe* [power or capacity of work] word group is used. He convincingly argues that, time and again, it is a description of divine activity and that this activity brings victory over the forces of evil. This observation links up with what is written in 1 Corinthians 12:1–6. In 1 Corinthians 12:2 and 3, Paul deals with the contrast between people who get carried away by powers that are against Jesus Christ and those who act under the influence of the Holy Spirit. The first matter that Paul communicates to the Corinthians with regard to the πνευματικῶν [spiritual things] is that the

χαρισμάτων [gifts], the διακονιῶν [service] and the ἐνεργημάτων [working/activities] are inextricably linked to the triune God and that the gifts are gifts of the Spirit. Furthermore, the διακονιῶν is a directive of Christ, and the ἐνεργημάτων is the work of God. If believers use the gifts to serve, God works powerfully to establish what God wants in people and congregations (cf. Dean 2010:62, 63).

Children who are made part of the *diakonia* of the congregation experience this dynamic and witness how divine energy is freed by believers who obey the Spirit of God and use their gifts to serve those around them. In a similar fashion, Paul connects gifts and service in Ephesians 4:7, 11 and 12. Peter overtly does so in 1 Peter 4:10. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul contrasts himself with those in the congregation who use their gifts to elevate themselves above others. These people thought that they themselves could work powerful things. Paul emphasises that the gifts of grace are the first step, that the result comes from God and that the directive comes from Christ and should be obeyed in emulation of him. Thiselton (2000) says about 1 Corinthians 12:4–6:

[W]hat we are concerned with is not the phenomena in themselves, but their whence? and whither? To what do they point?... it is not so much a matter of having a gift as of being a gift. (p. 931)

Welcoming the children of Africa means to welcome them to the grace of God, the calling to understand the *diakonia* of Christ and their own calling to *diakonia*. They should also be welcomed to the energising work of the triune God in people that serve and are served by the congregation. Breed and Kruger (2014:6–11) show that it is necessary for children, together with their parents, to become involved in the *diakonia* of the congregation.

Beckwith (2010:18–19) speaks of two types of education other than formal education: ‘informal education’ and ‘nonformal education’. Informal education is a lifelong process through which attitudes, values, skills and knowledge are acquired. These are acquired by means of daily experiences and educational situations. Through these experiences, the child absorbs the behaviour and foundational attitudes inherent in the experiences. ‘This form of education permeates every area of a child’s life and cannot be regulated to a few hours a week spent learning inside the walls of a church’ (Beckwith 2010:19). ‘Nonformal education is described as any organised educational activity outside the established formal system of education that is intended to serve an identifiable learning community and learning objectives’ (Beckwith 2010:19).

When children are lead to do their *diakonia* with their parents and siblings, it entails informal education and training. When the church organises a project to build houses for poor people and involve the children, it entails non-formal education.

After their research, the Barna Group⁶⁸ (2015) came to the following findings:

Millennials who remain active in church are twice as likely as dropouts to say they served the poor through their church (33% versus 14%). They are also more likely to say they went on a trip that helped expand their thinking (29% versus 16%) and more likely to indicate they had found a cause or issue at church that motivates them (24% versus 10%). (n.p.)

Due to HIV and other reasons, Africa has many children without parents or with a single parent (Dimmock 2003:97; Williamson 2003). The church

.....
68. ‘Barna Group (which includes its research division, Barna Research Group) is a private, non-partisan, for-profit organization under the umbrella of the Issachar Companies. Located in Ventura, California, Barna Group has been conducting and analyzing primary research to understand cultural trends related to values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors since 1984’ (Barna Group 2015:[n.p.]).

should welcome these children by connecting them to adult role models and by creating a kind of family atmosphere for them to experience what it is to serve together, loving each other and those with whom they serve.

Some children are abused, addicted or neglected (LenkaBula 2002: 55–56). These children experience powerlessness and are sometimes without hope. When they are part of a service group where they meet other people who are from similar circumstances – and they experience how these people are helped to grow out of their problems, and they see God’s power through service – they could also start to believe that there is hope for them.

■ **How can a child be welcomed to the *diakonia* of the congregation?**

From the exegesis of 1 Corinthians 12 and other parts of scripture, the following can be deducted.

□ **Welcoming a child to Jesus Christ as Lord**

The very first matter that Paul addresses in his teaching on the gifts of the Spirit is the unity between the work of the Spirit and the work of Christ. The Spirit will not guide anyone to execrate Christ, and no-one can confess Christ as Lord except when the Spirit leads him or her to it (1 Cor 12:1, 2).

With this, he also provides a test that can be used to establish whether someone’s actions during exaltation are under the guidance of God’s Spirit or whether they are under the influence of evil forces.

Handing out the gifts of the Spirit and *diakonia* is linked to Christ’s kingship in several places in the New Testament. In Ephesians 4, Christ

is depicted in his triumphal procession after his victory over Satan and his forces (Breed 2014). As conqueror-king, he shares the gifts. He hands out gifts of grace to all believers so that they can do their *diakonia*, and he hands out the special gifts through which the congregation has to be equipped to do their service work. When the congregation is equipped and serves, a powerful change occurs in that they grow to maturity, and as a result, they are prepared for the attacks by heretics. In John 12, Christ is presented in different ways as the king who will expel evil forces (Breed 2014:4). He will reach this victory with the radical method of the *diakonia* through which he is glorified on the cross. He conquers by greeting his hour of glorification on the cross willingly in obedience to the Father. He conquers by sacrificing his life as the ransom so that people from all over the world may come to him. He conquers by means of his *diakonia* because he did not come to be served but to serve (Mk 10:45). He calls on his followers to share in this manner of victory. They too will conquer when they are, during the performance of their *diakonia*, willing to deny themselves to glorify the Father and in expectation that the Father will glorify them (Breed 2014:2–3). When children get to know Jesus as the Lord that rules with servitude, the one who has all the power and yet becomes the slaughtered lamb, then the Spirit of God can work in them the willingness to surrender fully. They then come to understand the power of *diakonia* because *diakonia* is the use of the gifts of the Spirit that activates the power of God in people's lives.

To learn this, children need consistent and trustworthy role models. The talk and the walk of the models must be determined by the confession that Jesus is the Lord. Also, children must be required to surrender completely to Jesus as Lord. This is the only way a child can be welcomed

to the body of Christ. To be welcomed to Jesus as Lord is to be welcomed to the security of the covenant promises. God promised Abraham that God would be a God to him, and in Christ, the believer is an heir to these promises (Gl 3). Jesus is the Lord of the covenant in whom all promises are fulfilled. Out of this knowledge flows trust and love, and out of trust and love flows obedience (Ps 78; Brown 2011:49). Children must be welcomed to see examples of obedience to Christ that flows out of trust and love as well as to hear the call for them to follow Christ even if it means that they will lose their life (Jn 12, Breed 2014). Without trust and love, Jesus cannot be followed truthfully, and without truthfully following Jesus, there can be no real *διακονία* (Breed 2014:2). Children learn this when they are served with the *διακονία* of Christ.

Horton (2008:160–180) describes the Gnostic beliefs of some of the American churches today. The inner self and experience has become God in people's lives. Christ 'is no longer really even a distinct historical person, but has become a personal experience' (Horton 2008:171). With this comes a rejection of prescriptions and dogma. People's own inner thoughts become their guideline for life (Horton 2008:171). Dean (2010:65) says that a congregation's focus should be on Christ, and when this is done, they will not need arbitrary human boundaries. The Spirit of God guides the congregation in the full truth and in so doing ensures that there is no relativism or legalism. Some members of the congregation of Corinth were convinced that, when someone is in rapture and curses Christ, it is not wrong since such a person is guided by the Spirit. Paul corrects this heresy with his words in 12:1–2 and the rest of the chapter by describing the work of the triune God through which the congregation is activated. Mueller (2005:78) points to the fact that many young people of this generation are wandering aimlessly in the world, needing

somebody to show them the way home. He says they need somebody to bridge the gap between the truths of the King, Jesus Christ, and their culture, hurt and pain. The children and the youth of the church live in the same world and culture and can more easily bridge the gap to other children and youth. However, they first have to know and love the way (the Word of God) and the Lord of the way (Mueller 2005:130, 170–190; Robbins 2004:391–402).

The Barna group (2015) indicates the following from their extensive research amongst young people:

Millennials who remain active [*in church*] are more likely, than those who dropped out, to say they believe Jesus speaks to them personally in a way that is real and relevant (68% versus 25%). Additionally, actives are much more likely to believe the Bible contains wisdom for living a meaningful life (65% versus 17% of dropouts). (n.p.)

In Africa, welcoming a child to Jesus as Lord can be a real challenge. Children who grow up in the religion of worshipping the forefathers find it very difficult to understand the concept of one Lord and saviour (Breed & Semenya 2015):

Part of the African philosophy of *ubuntu* is that the spirits of the deceased still form part of the community and care must be taken to not anger the spirits of the fathers. Adversity is considered punishment for wrongdoing, and individual prosperity is seen as limiting the overall benefit to the community in that the prospering person is using more than his share. (p. 3)

Children must be lead to understand that when they accept Jesus as their Lord and saviour they do not have to fear other spirits and that these spirits cannot determine your life. The security of never having to fear punishment from God and the reign of Jesus Christ who let all things work together for good can create an environment of peace and growth for a child. The knowledge that no spirit can touch the child of

God who is under the reign of the Lord Jesus Christ can create a safe place for the child in the church and an alternative culture without fear.

Welcoming a child to uniqueness and God's diversity

Paul uses the image of a body to explain the relationship between Christ and the congregation of Corinth as well as the mutual relationship between members. He makes two things clear: No member is dispensable, and no-one may say that he or she does not need the others. In fact, the members who look the weakest are of crucial importance to the body.

The words of 1 Corinthians 12:11 are applicable here: 'And all these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines'. 1 Corinthians 12:18 also applies: 'But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be'. One also has to note 1 Corinthians 12:22: 'On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable'.

All children in the congregation should be guided to continuously discover their gifts and to understand that God placed them in the congregation as people who are needed, just like God created the human body with body parts that each has its own purpose. Kinnaman (2011:13) says: 'Disciples are handmade, one relationship at a time'. Individual attention and relationships are crucial to help children discover their identity and uniqueness in Christ. This is why Kinnaman (2011:13) says it is necessary that we 're-examine the substance of our relationships and the shape of our institutions'. Every congregation will therefore have to examine whether its ministry structures serve these principles (Strommen & Hardel 2000:289). Breed (2012) proposes a biblically based ministry structure that can serve this purpose.

Beckwith (2009:56) discusses the pressure on the children of the 21st century to succeed. Many children feel inferior during their teenage years because they are not part of the group of top achievers. When these children use their gifts in the church to serve others, experience the effects within themselves and see it in others, it can counter this feeling of inferiority. When they experience that each person's contribution to the growth of the body is important without it being compared to the contributions of the others, they feel that they have value in Christ. God placed each person in the congregation where he wanted them, and therefore, each person is necessary and indispensable.

Children have to be guided to appreciate the wonder of God's diversity. Verses 4–6 do not only emphasise the unity between gifts, *diakonia* and powerful works but also the rich diversity of these things. The wealth of the triune God is described in these verses. 1 Peter 4:10 is a good commentary on this: 'As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace' (ESV). Children are taught to value each other and not to compete with each other all the time. They praise God for the grace that was given to other members and children in the congregation. South Africa is a multicultural country. Thus, to understand God's variety is to learn to accept people from all cultures and races. A multicultural congregation can grow into a unity, also with their children, through understanding God's plan with its variety. Children should be guided to accept their identity in Christ and their identity as unique individuals. They should learn to understand that their worth rests in the love and care of God and not in what other people say about them. When they come in situations of racism or xenophobia, they would be able to resist the urge to retaliate but rather serve even those who do them wrong.

The Barna group (2015) indicates that churches can deepen their relationship with their children and youth by teaching and helping them discover and live out their vocation, or calling. According to Ephesians 1:18, Paul prays that the believers should know the hope that is in their calling from God. The Barna group (2015) comes to the following finding:

Millennials who have remained active are three times more likely than dropouts to say they learned to view their gifts and passions as part of God's calling (45% versus 17%). They are four times more likely to have learned at church how the Bible applies to my field or career interests (29% versus 7% of dropouts). (n.p.)

Welcoming a child to unity in Christ

Belonging is a special need amongst children and the youth. Many young people have been enticed to sin, even to risk their lives, because they do not want to be rejected by their peer group (Mueller 2007:246, 247, 254). In 1 Corinthians 12, the emphasis is on both our unity with Christ himself and our being part of his body as seen in 1 Corinthians 12:27: 'Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it' (cf. 1 Cor 12:12). The fact that every member has a place and function in the body and that this place and function is awarded by God, God can create the space and security within which children experience that they 'belong'. This 'belonging' does not depend on the acceptance of others or the child's achievements but is an awarded reality that cannot be taken away. Children should be guided to continue to make their unity with the body of Christ part of their identity as a human being. Mueller (2007:251) says that, as a result of the fact that family structures are deteriorating, children and their parents spend less and less time together. The effect of this is that children lack intimate contact with people who they can trust (Mueller 2007):

So, after years of little or no family time, an entire generation of 'baby busters' has moved through their teenage years and into adulthood with a hunger for deep, meaningful relationships. (p. 251)

This need has to be addressed by congregations in different ways⁶⁹ but especially through family ministry. De Vries (2004:71–80) says that the family is the primary place where the transference of faith takes place. When a family is in crisis for whichever reason, this function is undermined. Other family members, like grandparents or uncles and aunts, also partially fulfil this role (De Vries 2004:71–88, 89; Strommen & Hardel 2000:175–176). However, it is clear that healthy families and healthy marriages contribute to bringing children to Christ and the church. When parents are at home in the church, it opens the door for children also to become at home in the church (Dean 2010:119–120). When other believers in the congregation also care and irradiate love for children, it increases the possibility that children will grow in their faith (Strommen & Hardel 2000:170). Dean (2010) expresses it as follows: ‘When we attempt faith formation through programmes instead of people ..., they hear the gospel as a wooden translation’ (cf. Dean & Foster 1998:28–30).

The Barna Group (2015) indicates the following out of their research about factors that contribute to the youth staying active in their congregation:

Those who stay are twice as likely to have had a close personal friendship with an adult inside the church (59% of those who stayed report such a friendship versus 31% among those who are no longer active). (p. 1)

Welcoming a child to care

Goede (2004:183, 184) distinguishes four characteristics of the body of Christ as described in 1 Corinthians 12:12–27. In agreement with his division, the following characteristics can be distinguished:

.....
69. Veerman (1992) deals with the potential of small-group ministry as part of child and youth ministry.

- 12:12–13 – Christ is like a body with many parts that is still a whole because we have all been baptised by the Spirit into one body even though there are a variety of kinds of people.
- 12:14–18 – Diversity is crucial in the body. God has designed the body in such a manner that there is a variety of parts that complement each other.
- 12:19–24 – The diversity in the body means that the members are interdependent and need each other.
- 12:25–26 – The unity of the body is conserved by the care that the members have for each other. They suffer with each other and rejoice with each other.

1 Corinthians 12:12 and 27 clearly link up and form an inclusion of the section of 1 Corinthians 12:12–27. It is only in these two verses of the section that the ‘body of Christ’ appear, and both are summaries of what was said in the other verses, namely that there is a variety of members but only one body. 1 Corinthians 12:27 also serves as a transitional sentence to the third part of the chapter, which deals with the ἐνεργημάτων (cf. structure above).

1 Corinthians 12:25–26⁷⁰ therefore clearly addresses the purpose of the gifts, namely that people should not look for their own gain and so cause division but that the diversity of gifts becomes a variety of *diakonia*. The division is countered by care for each other. Children should, as part of the body, also be part of taking care of the body. They should be taken care of according to their need and should be guided to take care of others with their gifts. When they share in the care in this manner, they will also be unified with the body, and they will come to be at home in the body. Beckwith (2009) says the following:

.....
 70. 1 Corinthians 12:25 – ‘That there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. 26 If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together’. (ESV).

Spiritually forming children means we help them see that in the economy of the kingdom of God being successful is loving others, showing mercy, fighting for justice, and walking humbly with God. (p. 57)

Barnes (2012) writes about children with special needs and how they, together with their parents, struggle to find congregations where they are welcomed by being cared for according to their needs. She shows the advantages that it has for an entire group of children when they are guided to accommodate children with special needs.

Du Plessis (2013) did research on women in townships that care for vulnerable children. These women are called Mamas Africa, and they are characterised as follows (Du Plessis 2013):

[*They*] are examples of people who make a difference in society every day by utilising the minimum resources available. The concept Mama Africa indicates all women from all races who are making a difference in the South African society by promoting mutual bonding. (p. 2)

The church can assist these women and train some of their members to care for vulnerable or traumatised children. Dimmock (2003) writes about community-based orphan care where extended families are helped by churches to care for orphans, to educate them and to integrate them in the community and church. He (Dimmock 2003) says about these projects that the church is the epicentre of this challenge:

Integrated, community-based child care centres cater for the nutritional and basic health needs of all pre-school children. Community grain banks and shallow wells assist in providing continuous food and clean water to the communities. Now, nearly all preschool children are participating and getting a 'head start'. The network of trained volunteers continues to expand. (p. 98)

In this way, children can experience the love and care of Christ via other people and can find one safe welcoming place within a hostile and scary world.

□ Welcoming a child to equipment

As indicated above, 1 Corinthians 12:28–30 can be viewed as a further expansion of 1 Corinthians 12:6. Several commentaries offer no definite explanation for the ranking of apostles, prophets and pastors and also not for the word ἔπειτα [after that] followed by the different gifts. Horsley (1998:173) says that Paul's primary focus concerning the speaking in tongues is to show that it is inferior, and for this reason, he places it last. He furthermore says that Paul indicates some gifts as inferior to others with the ranking and the use of ἔπειτα. However, this explanation is contrary to what Paul indicates in the preceding verses, namely that the one gift is not more important than the others. Trail (2001:166–167) investigates the meaning of the word πρῶτον [before] and finds that it may be either an indication of time or an indication of source, namely that the other gifts originated from the work of those who are ranked (cf. Louw & Nida 1988:607). The apostles did the primary foundational work after which the prophets proclaimed the doctrine of the apostles, and after the prophets came pastors. These first three (apostles, prophets and pastors) are persons who are named whilst the rest of the list consists of services. These three are also preceded by the words οὗς μὲν [some] similar to the way in which Paul indicates the gifts that should equip believers for their service work in Ephesians 4:11 (Lenski 2008:538). When verse 28 is linked with verse 6, the ranking of the first three gifts makes sense. They are the gifts that God used and still uses to activate the other gifts. In this case, the use of ἔπειτα before the other gifts can be seen as an indication, not of order of importance, but of the sequence of the gifts that flow from the work that the apostles, prophets and pastors performed.

Children are welcomed into the congregation when the activating gifts, the gift of pastors, elders and deacons, function as people who equip

the congregation. God's plan to activate the *diakonia* in the congregation is by equipping the members. When members not only hear what they have to do but are actively and purposefully equipped for their service, they can start their work with confidence. An equipped congregation will serve one another better. Equipped marital partners will serve each other in marriage, equipped parents will serve their children, and equipped families will serve each other. Members should consciously be encouraged and equipped to minister to children as part of the weaker group of members who need special care. When members do this, all according to their own gifts, children will experience the love and grace of God in the congregation. When children are guided to discover their own special gifts and are equipped to use it, they experience the powerful work of God in themselves and in other people. When children are involved with the service work of God and with the congregation, they are confronted with a choice: You are either part of a body where you are cared for and where you take care or you withdraw. God brings awe to those who experience God.

Horton (2008:40–41) describes the disease of the church in America as 'moralistic, therapeutic deism'. In this persuasion, God is a harmless 'nice guy' who wants people to be 'nice' to each other so that everyone can be happy and can feel good about themselves and go to heaven when they die. However, God is not especially involved with what happens in your life, except when God has to solve a problem for you. Dean (2010:25–44) calls this the 'Cult of Nice'. God does not demand anything from humans. Religion is meant to be of some personal advantage to people. She calls it a 'loveless faith' with no love for the kingdom of God, only love for the self and own advantage. In this religion, Jesus is not the Lord, and God is an uninvolved provider for our needs (Dean 2010:5).

In contrast, 1 Corinthians 12 directs the church to allow children to find a home in a body where Jesus is the Lord, where the Spirit and the Father constitutes the body as they want and where God works powerfully through God's servants who use their gifts with great sacrifice to serve others for the sake of the edification of the body.

■ Conclusion

- Welcoming children to the *diakonia* of the church in the first place implies welcoming them to the ministry of the triune God.
- The Spirit hands out the grace of God in the gifts that people receive according to God's will. The Spirit unifies people with the body of Christ through the rebirth that is symbolised by baptism. The Spirit also equips people through the special gifts (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, elders, deacons) that are given to them by the same Spirit.
- Jesus Christ reconciled God's children with God through his service (*διακονία*) so that they can take part in the *διακονία* of the triune God. He lived, died and was resurrected, and he conquered both Satan and death to distribute the victory gifts through which the believers conquer sin, Satan and his evil forces day by day. Believers are members of his body, and Christ is their Lord who demands that they use the gifts of grace to edify his body. The parts of his body each have a function in the congregation and need each other. They do not disregard anyone and realise that the members who look the weakest (like children with disabilities) are also crucial to the body. Those members who do not have anything on the basis of which they can claim glory and care (like children) are looked after with greater care. The mutual service to each other ensures that there is no division in the body.

- God the Father constitutes the body according to God's perfect will. God also gives activating gifts to the congregation and works more in and through the believers than what humans can pray for or think. God establishes all in everyone and uses the service of believers to do so. Children who are equipped and guided for their gifts to develop into service learn about this powerful work of God, and they get to know God with awe.
- Children of Africa, in their unique situations, can be welcomed in the church by applying the directives found in 1 Corinthians 12.

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The topic is timely, important, and challenging. Most of the literature on children and theology is oriented towards North American, Anglo-Saxon or German contexts. The African milieu is less noticeable in the discourse. This book is interdisciplinary and gives a broad overview of the area of childhood studies and theology, all related to African children. It meets a great need.

Professor Annemie Dillen, Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium

This collected work brings to the burgeoning field of childhood studies in theology fresh perspectives by South African authors. Simply raising to consciousness in yet another world context the problems of adult-centred theology and the need to include children is itself a genuine contribution. Attending to children in theology fosters new theological insights. The book's strength is its diversity of academic viewpoints. It brings expertise in practical and systematic theologies, New Testament studies, childhood studies in theology, historical studies, and ethics. The book underscores the utter importance of greater scholarly attention to children among theologians, given the urgency of their plight in Africa and beyond.

Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Professor of Religion, Psychology, and Culture, The Divinity School, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee

This book is a significant contribution to understanding the constructions of childhood in different religions and the role normative sources and texts play in the formation of these constructs. It covers various topics such as the nature and status of children, gender and sexuality, the role of children in religious practices, the relationships between parents and children, societal obligations to children, and the moral and spiritual formation of children. Child-focused advocacy and programmes present in a particular religious context are enriched by a better understanding of the position of children in a multi-religious environment.

Professor Andries G. van Aarde, Emeritus Professor, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria, South Africa

