

## THE BIBLICAL THEME OF WELCOMING CHILDREN

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It has been said that the Bible is a book for adults and about adults. Since the key players in the Christian scriptures are adults,<sup>1</sup> it seems that, at first glance, this statement is true. However, there are important stories and passages that discuss children and young people in short, but significant ways. While children may not seem to be the stars of the Bible, their supporting roles are necessary and vital to the narrative of God's interventions with humankind.

Throughout the pages of the Christian holy texts, children are repeatedly welcomed into the faith community as essential members of God's family. From the words of the Torah to Paul's letters, children and young people are seen as vital members of the community of faith. The words and stories of the Bible demonstrate the inescapable truth that "the church is fully the church—the people of God—only when children are present"<sup>2</sup> and welcome.

### *Children in the Hebrew Bible: A Background to the New Testament*

#### *A General View of Childhood*

Although the bulk of this paper will discuss children in the New Testament, it is important to examine material in the Hebrew Bible that discusses children. By exploring specific pericopes and attitudes, one can

1. Although the stories of some biblical figures, such as David and Samuel, include pericopes discussing their childhoods, the stories focus on their adult lives.

2. Scottie May et al., *Children Matter: Celebrating their Place in the Church, Family, and Community* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 143.

gain background knowledge that is important to keep in mind when considering the material in the New Testament.

In general, the writers of the Hebrew Bible seem to have adhered to a relatively positive view of children and childhood. Infants and young people were viewed as the Lord's gifts to the Israelites.<sup>3</sup> This view is demonstrated throughout the narrative literature and Psalms, for example in the words of Joseph, who, when presenting his sons to his father, said, "They are my sons, whom God has given me here" (Gen. 48:9). The Israelites reveled in having children, who were seen as "a heritage of the Lord... a reward from him" (Ps. 127:3).

The birth of a child was an important occasion, for offspring demonstrated that God's promise to bless Israel remained true. Births were wonderfully joyous occasions in which God's people rejoiced in the blessings of God. The psalmist proclaimed, "He settles the childless woman in her home as a happy mother of children. Praise the Lord!" (Ps. 113:9). Having children was indeed seen as cause for ascribing praise and thanks to God.

While fertility and the birth of children were blessings from the Lord, infertility and barrenness were considered to be the most tragic of curses. Barren women and childless men cried out for God to break the curse of childlessness. Abraham is recorded as moaning, "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless?" (Gen. 15:2). Consequently, the Psalms record curses wished upon enemies dealing directly with their progeny: "happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us—he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks" (Ps. 137:9). Remaining childless was seen as a sign that one was excluded from the blessings, gifts, and promises of God, so childlessness was a source of great anguish and misery.<sup>4</sup>

3. Michael Shire, "Learning to be Righteous: A Jewish Theology of Childhood," in Karen Marie Yust et al., (eds.), *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality: Perspectives from the World's Religious Traditions* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), pp. 43-52 (44). Judith Gundry Volf, "The Least and the Greatest: Children in the New Testament," in Marcia Bunge (ed.), *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 29-60 (35).

4. Shire, "Learning to be Righteous," p. 44.

*When Your Children Say to You: Children and Worship*

Throughout the Hebrew Bible, children are repeatedly seen as involved in the worship of God. When the Lord commanded his people to commemorate the Exodus out of Egypt, children played a key role. Children (especially sons) were to carry the role of triggering the narratives of God's redemptive work in Jewish history, which were not to be told until a child asked about the meaning behind the ceremonies. Similarly, children were to inquire as to the meaning behind the "stipulations, decrees, and laws of the Lord" (Deut. 6:20),<sup>5</sup> which would in turn instigate teaching about God's greatness. It was (and still is) the responsibility of children to initiate conversation and storytelling that announces that "The Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deut. 6:4). Jeffrey Tigay summarizes the role of children in these celebratory events by saying:

Children will be curious about the instructions and ask about their meaning, just as the book of Exodus expected children to ask about the ceremonies commemorating the Exodus... In answering, one is to go beyond the intrinsic value of the individual laws and explain the reasons for obeying God altogether... Exodus expects children to ask about the ceremonies commemorating the Exodus. Here, Moses assumes that they will be curious about Israel's entire way of life.<sup>6</sup>

Children were to utilize their natural, God-given curiosity to initiate the telling of serious and formative stories about "the essence of covenant theology in ancient Israel."<sup>7</sup> Children and young people were important participants in Hebrew worship. Not only did the writers of the Torah know this, but the psalmist demonstrated this truth by writing, "through the praises of children and infants you have established a stronghold against your enemies" (Ps. 8:2).

*My Sons, Listen to Me: Instructing Children*

The book of Proverbs is filled with information for "children" or "sons." Much of the material in this book is, in fact, meant for the instruction and

5. This role of children is also disclosed in Exod. 12 and 13.

6. Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), p. 82.

7. Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1–11* (WBC, 6a; Dallas: Word Books, 1991), p. 152.

training of children. Proverbs, therefore, offers clues about the religious upbringing and formation of children in ancient Israel.

It is presumed that mothers had a strong influence on the education and training of young children. Fathers, however, assumed the role of instructor once children passed through early childhood. Since the writer of Proverbs says, “Hear children, a father’s instruction,” it can be assumed that the instruction contained within the pages of this book is meant for relatively older children—those that had completed the mother’s early training.<sup>8</sup> The father had now become the primary trainer and planned on passing on the instruction and advice that he received from his father (Prov. 4:3).

The very existence of this book and the advice directed toward the father’s children demonstrates the love that ancient Hebrew parents had for their children. While professional teachers or pastors had a degree of influence upon young Hebrews, the greatest responsibility and influence fell on the father and mother. Since this book (or at least sections of it) is written by a father to his children, one can conclude that the writer had so much love and concern for his children that he took the important task of training his child into his own hands. Therefore, “this text more than any other brings out this urgency of parental love.”<sup>9</sup> The belief that children are divine gifts and blessings that must not be taken for granted is demonstrated in the fact that Proverbs was written by a loving father who truly believed that if one trained a child in the way he should go, when he was old he would not turn from it (Prov. 22:6).

Proverbs 22:6 offers an interesting view of children in ancient Israel. Some believe that this verse means that one should train children according to their individual natures, taking into account individuality, personality, and idiosyncrasies. As such, the methods of instruction and education must vary and be personalized to each child taught.<sup>10</sup> As we shall see, this view parallels those of Jesus and Paul, who, centuries later, would welcome and affirm children for who they were—not for their potential or yet-to-be traits, but for their gifts and character as children.

8. Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs* (WBC, 22; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), p. 27.

9. Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (New American Commentary, 14; Nashville: Broadman, 1993), p. 86.

10. Garrett, *Proverbs*, p. 187.

The book of Proverbs stands as an example of parents' love for their young, who were blessings from the Lord. The training and instruction of a child was too precious to delegate, for the father wanted to ensure that his children were raised properly. Furthermore, in "training a child in the way he should go," the writer was perhaps affirming and welcoming children for the individuality that God had granted to them. While they must be instructed, the children's personalities and special traits must be taken into account and nurtured.

*A Little Child Will Lead Them: Children in the Prophets*

The prophetic voices of Israel, as many scholars have noted, continue the biblical tradition of valuing children as important members of the community of God. The prophets Isaiah and Joel specifically exemplify this.

In chapter eleven of his book, Isaiah speaks of a time to come when God will restore creation to a state of universal peace.<sup>11</sup> The common descriptions of this time and place are well known—the wolf will live with the lamb and the lion will lie down with the calf. These depictions of the natural peace that will reign in the world are powerful and awe-inspiring. In my opinion, however, the most powerful characteristic of this time is that, "a little child will lead them" (Isa. 11:6). In this future time, "all relationships of hostility and threat, in the animal world as in the human environment, shall be overcome."<sup>12</sup> A child—one who belongs to a group that has been marginalized throughout history—will become the leader of God's creation. What powerful words Isaiah is speaking "about deep, radical, limitless transformation in which we...will have no hunger for injury, no need to devour, no yearning for brutal control, no passion for domination."<sup>13</sup> With these character traits in mind, it is no wonder that a child will rise up as leader—it is little children who perhaps best exemplify the peaceful world that is yet to be. Not only are they welcomed into God's perfect kingdom, but they will prove themselves to be leaders!

11. Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p. 104.

12. Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1–39* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), p. 102.

13. Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1–39*, p. 103.

Joel, in chapters three and four of his book, tells of a future time when the creation of God—both animals and people—will be restored and freed from those under whom they are oppressed.<sup>14</sup> One of the signs that this time is upon Israel will be that the Spirit of God is poured out on all people and “your young men will see visions” (Joel 2:28). The word translated as “young men,” is *bâchûr*, which denotes a youthful male. While this word does not directly translate to “child,” it speaks of a young person who, by today’s standards, would still be considered a child and wield little power of his own. With that in mind, this passage agrees with the theme in Isa. 11, and demonstrates that young people are key players in the divine drama to be played out in a time to come.

Throughout the Hebrew Bible, children are valued and loved for who they are at the present moment. While spiritual formation and instruction are necessary, children play key roles in the community of Israel—from demonstrating the living covenant between the Lord and his people, to being leaders in the prophetic future. Children rise up as key players in God’s divine drama and must be accepted and embraced as important members of the people of God. Through leadership, worship, and instruction, children are welcomed into the community of faith—even at birth! Let us continue to examine this biblical theme of welcoming children as we study the New Testament.

### *Children in the Gospels*

Throughout the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell stories of Jesus’ encounters with children. He calls them to him, opens his arms to them, puts them on his lap, and reveals their importance in the kingdom of God. Perhaps no pericopes in the Christian Scriptures present more inviting, accepting, and inclusive pictures of children as do those of the Synoptic Gospels.

References to children and young people are found throughout these three texts. The authors include stories about Jesus’ birth and childhood (Mt. 1–2; Lk. 1–2), healings and exorcisms of children (Mk 7:24–30; Lk. 9:37–43), and numerous references to children and childhood (Mt. 11:25;

14. Marvin A. Sweeney, *Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah* (The Twelve Prophets, 1; Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000), p. 171.

21:15; Mk 7:27; Lk. 7:32). Two stories, however, stand out—stories that all three writers include in their narratives. They are those in which Jesus lifts children into his arms, blesses them, and reveals their true worth (Mk 9:33-42; Mk 10:13-16 and parallels).

As one attempts to study these stories, the question arises as to which version should be studied—Matthew, Mark, or Luke? For our purposes, Mark’s Gospel comes to the forefront for a number of reasons. First, Mark often includes details that are absent in Matthew and Luke. Furthermore, as Mercer notes, “children in Mark have the primary role of moving the story along... In short, children become a primary means for Mark to tell his version of the story of Jesus.”<sup>15</sup> They are important and necessary figures to Mark’s portrayal of the life of Jesus. Mark’s Gospel is a counter-cultural text, for in a world of hierarchy and the subordination of lower classes, the author reorders power and authority using those at the periphery of society,<sup>16</sup> including women, tax collectors, and children. Finally, since many scholars agree that Mark’s account of the life of Jesus is the earliest of the three Synoptic Gospels,<sup>17</sup> his version is perhaps the most accurate representation of Jesus’ words and actions. For these reasons, the Gospel of Mark will serve as the source of the two pericopes under discussion.

15. Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2005), p. 44.

16. Mercer, *Welcoming Children*, p. 44.

17. See Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), pp. 26, 30; and Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 3rd edn, 2000), p. xxxii.

*The Child in their Midst: Mark 9:33-37*

On their journeys with Jesus, the disciples bickered with each other regarding their position and status in the kingdom of God, a question that was “not uncommon in the Mediterranean world, including Jewish Palestine.<sup>18</sup> This typical situation, however, became radically atypical when Jesus responded to their argument by placing a little child among them and saying that whoever welcomes a child welcomes Jesus and God.

To fully understand the depth of Jesus’ actions, some background information is needed. At the time of Jesus’ ministry, the Greco-Roman world had a bleak perspective on children. Due to poor living conditions, poverty, abortion, infanticide, and child exposure, about fifty percent of children perished before their tenth birthday.<sup>19</sup> Since losing a young child was a common yet painful experience, parents were often reluctant to develop and maintain intimate relationships with their young offspring.<sup>20</sup> Given that so many children died young, one could assume that those who lived would be highly valued by their parents. While it would be difficult to argue that parents did not love their children, there is significant evidence that children in the Greco-Roman world were not appreciated nor highly esteemed by adults. Young people were seen as paradigms of negativity. They symbolized fear, irrationality, stupidity, weakness, foolishness, vulnerability, and the absence of *logos*, or reason<sup>21</sup>—all of which stood in opposition to the characteristics of adult males.<sup>22</sup> Judith Gundry Volf summarizes this dominant perspective on children by saying, “people considered children fundamentally deficient and not yet human in the full sense... Children occupied a low rung on the social ladder.”<sup>23</sup> Infants and children were the lowest of the low—they were relegated to the margins of

18. Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20* (WBC, 34b; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), p. 61.

19. O.M. Bakke, *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), p. 23.

20. Bakke, *When Children Became People*, p. 45.

21. Bakke, *When Children Became People*, pp. 15-22. Thomas Wiedemann, *Adults and Children in the Roman Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 17-25.

22. Wiedemann, *Adults and Children*, p. 8.

23. Gundry Volf, “The Least and the Greatest,” p. 32.

society and considered to be in the same class as women, tyrants, and animals.<sup>24</sup>

Since those who followed and surrounded Jesus were mostly Jews living in Greco-Roman Palestine, it can be surmised that their perspectives on children blended the theoretical Jewish appreciation of children with the common negative Roman views of young people. Children, however, were seen as a sub-form of humanity lacking in reason, status, and formation. Jesus' disciples probably shared this opinion.

Let us return to the pericope at hand. After learning about the nature of his disciples' argument, Jesus put a child in their midst and suggested that those who are to be great in God's kingdom are the ones willing to welcome children. *Dechomai*, the Greek word translated as "welcome," often refers to the hospitality and service of guests.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the mark of true greatness in God's eyes is bestowed upon those who reach out and serve children in an attitude of welcome and hospitality.

With Jesus' actions and words, the disciples witnessed a great reversal of the norms and expectations of the day. Until then, children were seen as those who needed to be educated—they were pieces of raw material that were to be shaped by teachers and pedagogues. They were valued and measured by their future potential that could only be realized through education.<sup>26</sup> When Jesus lifted the little child into his arms, perhaps his followers assumed that the child was about to be educated by their master. Rather, Jesus radically reversed the assumed roles of the day by using the child as a teaching assistant to educate his disciples. As Weber notes, instead of the assumed one-way teaching from adult to child, Jesus re-orders the educational process using a child "not as the one who receives instruction, but as the one whose very presence becomes the clue to answering the disciples' questions... A reversal in the teaching/learning situation occurs,"<sup>27</sup> thus demonstrating that those who are least in the world are the greatest in the kingdom of God.

24. Wiedemann, *Adults and Children*, p. 8.

25. Gundry Volf, "The Least and the Greatest," p. 43.

26. Hans-Ruedi Weber, *Jesus and the Children: Biblical Resources for Study and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979), pp. 34, 37.

27. Weber, *Jesus and the Children*, p. 43.

A second component to the great reversal that Jesus demonstrated in this passage involves the value of the child in his midst. It has been mentioned that children in Jesus' day were valued for their future potential; they had no present worth. But Jesus did not attempt to educate or bring out the potential of the child in their midst. He valued the child as his representative—one to be welcomed in the names of Jesus and the Father. As he welcomed the child, Jesus affirmed the inherent worth of children as his disciples and representatives. They did not need to grow or be educated before they had worth—they were already important members of Jesus' spiritual family. Yet again, Jesus radically reversed the assumptions of his day by welcoming a child.

Jesus demonstrated the final element of this great reversal when he took the child into his arms. In doing so (and repeating this action in Mk 10), Jesus demonstrated his command to welcome children. Taking a child or infant into one's arms was a sign of saving it from impending danger and subsequently caring for it, a low-status job that was often reserved for women.<sup>28</sup> In embracing the child, Jesus expressed that all people—men and women—are called to welcome and care for children.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, he stated that anyone who welcomes a child in his name, welcomes him and God. Jesus made two daring claims in this statement. First, he “made the scandalous claim that Christ...represents God.”<sup>30</sup> Perhaps the more outrageous claim, however, is that children are representatives of Christ and subsequently of the Father! In the Jewish tradition, this meant that children could act on behalf of Jesus and the Father, who supported them with wholehearted authority.<sup>31</sup> For Jesus' disciples to completely welcome him, they must welcome those who represent him—not high-status individuals, but those of the lowest status—children. This action is the mark of true discipleship.

28. Gundry Volf, “The Least and the Greatest,” pp. 43-44.

29. Gundry Volf, “The Least and the Greatest,” p. 44.

30. Eugene Boring, *Mark: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), p. 281.

31. Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 159.

*Let them Come: Mark 10:13-16*

After leaving Capernaum, Jesus continued his journey to Jerusalem. He departed from Galilee, traveled through Samaria, and arrived in Judea, where he once again welcomed children into his presence and into the kingdom of God.

While Jesus was responding to a question posed by Pharisees, some people began to bring little children to him to receive a blessing. Jewish patriarchs,<sup>32</sup> famous rabbis, healers, and other holy men were often asked to perform such a task.<sup>33</sup> After scolding his disciples for attempting to send the children away, Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (Mk 10:14-15). He then embraced the children and blessed them, reiterating the command to welcome and care for the young.

Just a few verses after Jesus placed a child in the midst of his disciples and commanded them to welcome such young people in his name, his followers failed to follow their Master’s wishes, for they tried to send children away. Jesus again offered himself as an example to be emulated by taking children into his arms and welcoming them. Not only is Jesus an example to his followers in this passage, but the children also become models. In fact, children themselves become the exemplary characters in this passage, modeling true membership in God’s kingdom.

There is some debate as to the meaning behind Jesus words, “the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.” Some scholars believe that Jesus is not speaking about actual children, but people who receive God’s kingdom as a child does—those who “make no self claims, unself-consciously assume their own utter dependence, and are not concerned about rank, status, and self-image.”<sup>34</sup> Others believe that Jesus was referring to actual, flesh-and-blood children—“children *qua children*...are the *intended* recipients of the kingdom of God. It has come for them.”<sup>35</sup> I would argue that

32. Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary*, p. 162.

33. Weber, *Jesus and the Children*, p. 15. R.T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 396.

34. Boring, *Mark*, p. 290.

35. Gundry Volf, “The Least and the Greatest,” p. 38.

Jesus, in making this statement, is referring to literal children who, by virtue of certain qualities, are included in the kingdom of God. This is not to say, however, that others do not also have a share in the kingdom. R.T. France summarizes this nicely by writing, “It is the literal children whom Jesus tells the disciples to allow to come to him [and are a part of the kingdom], but the reason is that they belong to and represent a wider category of [such as these], who are the ones who matter to God.”<sup>36</sup> Jesus demonstrated that children are in fact a part of God’s kingdom when he laid his hands on them and gave them a thorough blessing<sup>37</sup>—another radical example of the great reversal that he discussed in Mk 9.

Jesus teaches that children, as kingdom members, are models and examples to be emulated by adults. Not only do they belong to the kingdom of God, but young people teach adults about the qualities and characteristics of kingdom recipients.

What is it about children that allows them to exemplify kingdom qualities? Basically, it involves their low status and utter dependence on others. Since children in the Greco-Roman world occupied a low rung on the social ladder, Jesus’ claim that “anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (Mk 10:15) was a direct challenge to the social order of the day.<sup>38</sup> As Gundry Volf puts it, he demonstrated that the kingdom “is for the unworthy. It is based on radical grace. Children are exemplary recipients of God’s kingdom precisely because they are so obviously unworthy.”<sup>39</sup> It is not the rich and powerful who are members of the kingdom of God. Rather, it is the lowest ones—children—who are not only recipients of the kingdom, but models to be emulated.

Jewish children, unlike adults, were not obliged to maintain all the laws and statutes of the Lord. Yet it was by following these rules that many believed they achieved their status as kingdom members. In placing children at the heart of the kingdom, Jesus challenged the Law and any claims that it was obedience to the Law that allowed one to enter the kingdom.

36. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, p. 397.

37. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, p. 298.

38. Mercer, *Welcoming Children*, p. 53.

39. Judith Gundry Volf, “New Testament Insights on the Spiritual Life of Children” (lecture presented at the second *Triennial Children’s Spirituality Conference*, River Forest, Illinois, 4-7 June 2006).

Rather than relying on their own merit and achievement, children were utterly dependent on God and trusted him to bring them into the kingdom. These two qualities—trust and dependence—were kingdom characteristics that adults needed to emulate.<sup>40</sup>

Overall, children receive the kingdom not because of virtues they possess—such as innocence or humility—but for what they lack. They lack status, power, and worth, and are thus dependent on God for their inclusion in the kingdom. They come with no “presumptions of self-importance and self-empowerment.”<sup>41</sup> Therefore, “to receive the kingdom of God as a child is to receive it as one who has no credits, no clout, no claims... Little children are paradigmatic disciples, for only empty hands can be filled.”<sup>42</sup> It is not what children possess, but rather what they lack, that makes them, in the words of Gundry Volf, “kingdom kids par excellence.”<sup>43</sup>

In Mk 9:33-37 and 10:13-16, Jesus welcomed children into his arms and into God’s kingdom. In these actions, Jesus modeled to his disciples the kind of care that he commanded them to extend to the weak, dependent, and little ones of the world. When anyone welcomes a child, they welcome the Master himself and the Almighty God who sent Jesus into the world. Furthermore, children are to be seen as models of true kingdom recipients, not because of their virtues, but because of their lack—lack of status, worth, and power. Carroll comments, “A child models discipleship in a way the Twelve cannot; indeed, the child is the surprising—or rather, shocking—paradigm of God’s character and ways in the world.”<sup>44</sup> Welcoming children affirms their inclusion in the kingdom of God and sets them apart as examples to be emulated. “It is in such extraordinary actions and sayings in the midst of everyday scenes of life with seemingly

40. Gundry Volf, “The Least and the Greatest,” pp. 39-40.

41. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20*, p. 94.

42. James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 307.

43. Gundry Volf, “New Testament Insights.”

44. John T. Carroll, “Children in the Bible,” *Interpretation* 55 (2001), pp. 121-34 (129).

unimportant people like women and children that the very core of the Gospel is revealed.”<sup>45</sup>

### *Children in the Pauline Epistles*

The writers of the New Testament epistles regularly refer to children, young people, and infants. The image of children is often used metaphorically to refer to immature or inexperienced Christians.<sup>46</sup> Early church leaders used child–parent imagery for their relationships with the recipients of their letters—people such as Paul, James and Peter saw themselves as the metaphorical parents of those to whom they were writing.<sup>47</sup> Although metaphorical language regarding children is used extensively throughout the New Testament epistles, literal children are rarely discussed. In the writings of Paul, only a few such passages are extant. By looking at Pauline passages that address children metaphorically and those that do so literally, one can gain a sense of Paul’s attitudes regarding children and childhood.<sup>48</sup> While he does not display a view of childhood that is as radical or revolutionary as that of Jesus, Paul demonstrates a positive disposition to children as people who must be welcomed into the church as they are.

### *Putting Childish Ways Behind: 1 Corinthians 13:11*

In the first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul discusses spiritual gifts and the importance of love. After the famous “love passage,” the apostle uses childhood briefly as a metaphor. He writes, “When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me” (1 Cor. 13:11).

This passage appears to subscribe to common views of childhood as a negative stage in life in which incomplete pseudo-persons are being

45. Weber, *Jesus and the Children*, p. 17.

46. W.A. Strange, *Children in the Early Church: Children in the Ancient World, the New Testament and the Early Church* (Eugene, Oreg.: Wipf & Stock, 1996), p. 67.

47. Peter Balla, “Child–Parent Imagery in the Catholic Epistles,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 6 (2002), pp. 66-77.

48. Reidar Aasgaard, “Paul as a Child: Children and Childhood in the Letters of the Apostle,” *JBL* 126 (2007), pp. 129-59 (132).

formed into complete and whole adults. Childish ways (thinking, talking, and reasoning like a child) are viewed rather negatively. One should be striving to put these ways behind oneself and take on ways of thinking, talking, and reasoning that are those of adults—especially adult males. These negative views of childhood can be seen to line up with the popular opinions of the Greco-Roman world of Paul (children were symbols of fear, stupidity, weakness, folly, irrationality, vulnerability, and a lack of reason).<sup>49</sup> Thus, Paul’s words in this passage, at first glance, seem to demonstrate that he views childhood negatively and disapprovingly.

This, however, is not the case. Rather, I would argue that what Paul is doing here is simply utilizing what Hans Conzelmann refers to as a “standard rhetorical theme.”<sup>50</sup> The antithesis of a child and an adult male was a common contrast that was often employed by rhetors and writers in the Greco-Roman world. Paul was simply utilizing a metaphor familiar to his readers. Most people in the pagan world of Paul held extremely low views of children and anticipated the time when their child would come into full adulthood, at which point a boy would give up his *bullā*, shave his face, and exchange his childhood toga (*toga praetexta*) for the white toga of the adult male (*toga uirilīs*).<sup>51</sup> In contrasting the ways of children to those of adults, Paul is simply speaking in a way his readers would understand.

Although it can be presumed that, in making the contrast in v. 11, the apostle looks on children negatively—as “childish” creatures that need to grow up—this is not his intention. “Paul’s point in context does not have to do with ‘childishness’ and ‘growing up,’ but with the difference between the present and the future,” notes Fee.<sup>52</sup> Essentially, Paul is stating that childishness is appropriate during childhood, but as one increases in age, those ways need to be put aside and one must behave in manners appropriate to adulthood. With this, his intention is to illustrate

49. Bakke, *When Children Became People*, pp. 15-22. Wiedemann, *Adults and Children*, pp. 17-25.

50. Hans Conzelmann, *I Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (ed. George W. MacRae; trans. James W. Leitch; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 226.

51. Beryl Rawson, *Children and Childhood in Roman Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 144.

52. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 647.

that although spiritual gifts are important, there will be a time in the future when these gifts will pass away and only faith, hope, and love will remain.<sup>53</sup> The apostle is not downgrading children; rather, he makes this statement quite matter-of-factly.<sup>54</sup> Read in this context, Paul's comment about childhood and childish ways in v. 11 welcomes children as they are—not for their future potential, as they were often valued in antiquity, but for their present reality. This is the attitude that Jesus embodied when he took a child into his arms and said, “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me” (Mk 9:37).

*For This is Right: Ephesians 6:1-4*

In the latter part of his letter to the Ephesian Christians, Paul includes what is commonly known as the “household code.” A portion of this section of Ephesians deals with proper relationships between parents and children—a topic important to this study.

In the first three verses of chapter six, Paul addresses the children in the Ephesian church and exhorts them to obey and honour their father and mother so that “it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth” (Eph. 6:3). When one takes into consideration the fact that Paul is writing to a Greco-Roman community (whose ideals and beliefs about children were relatively low), it is quite remarkable that Paul takes the time to address young people—let alone as “responsible members of the congregations.”<sup>55</sup> This alone demonstrates the welcoming of children as a theme throughout the Christian texts.

The very fact that children are present at the communion and gathering of the Ephesian Christians,<sup>56</sup> while not unusual for the context, is important. In the world of ancient Rome, children were often present in pagan religious ceremonies, not only as spectators but as active participants who engaged in cultic functions.<sup>57</sup> This was because children were seen as

53. Fee, *First Corinthians*, pp. 647-48.

54. Aasgaard, “Paul as a Child,” p. 146.

55. Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 441.

56. O'Brien, *Ephesians*, p. 440.

57. Bakke, *When Children Became People*, p. 49.

“intermediaries between the adults and the gods.”<sup>58</sup> Therefore, it comes as no surprise that young ones were included in Christian gatherings. Yet Paul seems to view these children not as pre-humans or not-yet-humans, but as responsible, rational people who are able to receive and discern instruction.

Another fascinating aspect of this passage is Paul’s use of the words “in the Lord” in v. 1. Children are to obey their parents in the Lord. Therefore, the father and mother are no longer the ultimate authority, for Paul relegates their direction and orders to a position that is subordinate to that of God. He has relegated the authority of the *paterfamilias* to a place underneath the divine authority of God. Thus, Paul allows children to hold fast to God’s commands when conflicts arise in which “Christian children are required to submit to parents who have no Christian commitment and whose moral standards run counter to Christ’s.”<sup>59</sup> It seems as though Paul considers these children to be moral agents who have the ability to reason right from wrong.<sup>60</sup> What is more, this discussion of obedience “in the Lord” reveals that, like her parents, a child’s “relationship to Christ [is] that which fundamentally defines and qualifies her life in all respects.”<sup>61</sup> Therefore, parents and children stand alongside one another in their appropriate places under God. In saying “in the Lord,” Paul demonstrates that adults and children are on the same level—they are both under God. What a powerful and revolutionary message this would have been to people who considered children to be not-yet-humans!

Paul’s next words—those directed to fathers—are also quite extraordinary. After telling the Ephesian children to honour and obey their parents unless parental wishes contradict the ways of the Lord, the apostle writes, “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4).

58. Bakke, *When Children Became People*, p. 48.

59. Arthur G. Patzia, *Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon* (NIBC; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1990), p. 278.

60. Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, *Ephesians* (Believer’s Church Bible Commentary; Waterloo: Herald Press, 2002), p. 269. It is important to remember that in the Greco-Roman world, children were seen as lacking in reason. Paul’s exhortations seem to run counter to this belief.

61. Gundry Volf, “The Least and the Greatest,” p. 56.

At the time, the *paterfamilias*, or father, was responsible for training and instructing his children in many matters, including religion<sup>62</sup>—even if this involved choosing a pedagogue or teacher, or having the mother do much of the training. Instruction was often imparted to children through beatings and harsh treatment, which were common throughout the Roman world.<sup>63</sup> With his words in v. 4, Paul is exhorting fathers to maintain this role of the one responsible for providing his children with religious education. Yet, he encourages them to be gentle in their approaches and avoid excessive violence and abuses of patriarchal power.<sup>64</sup> Today, this would be as shocking as a pastor encouraging his congregants to use violence and harsh corporal punishment as a standard method of instruction and child rearing—it was completely antithetical to society’s accepted ways of doing things.

What Paul is arguing for is a reciprocal relationship between parents and children in which all parties find their humanity, purpose, and identity in the Lord. All family members are to submit to one another in “*mutual subordination*”<sup>65</sup>—children are to obey their parents in the Lord, and fathers are to lovingly and respectfully train their children in the way of Christ. This is a remarkable statement considering the low values and esteem that the surrounding culture gave to children.

What could have caused Paul to exhort this congregation to act in such a counter-cultural manner? Following in the way of Jesus, Paul recognized that “children, while they are expected to obey their parents in the Lord, are persons in their own right who are not to be manipulated, exploited or crushed.”<sup>66</sup> Therefore, parents must take care to nurture the entire being of their children, which is done through Christian discipline and instruction.<sup>67</sup> Although Paul does not seem to elevate children in as obvious or revolutionary ways as Jesus, he *is* elevating them by accepting them as the whole persons that they are—they do not need to grow up or become more rational in order to be seen as fully human. Gundry Volf offers a brief, but compelling summary of Paul’s view of children. She writes that he sees

62. Yoder Neufeld, *Ephesians*, p. 269.

63. Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary*, p. 552.

64. Yoder Neufeld, *Ephesians*, p. 269.

65. Yoder Neufeld, *Ephesians*, p. 271.

66. O’Brien, *Ephesians*, p. 446.

67. Patzia, *Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon*, p. 279.

children as “*members of the community to be shown the compassion and care which each owes the other in imitation of Christ, who welcomed little children and taught all his disciples to do so.*”<sup>68</sup>

Overall, the apostle’s use of child metaphors and his address to literal fathers and children are quite daring. Speaking to Roman pagans, who had a relatively negative esteem for children, Paul’s words elevate children as members of the Christian community who are to be welcomed as they are—not as yet-to-be humans who lack reason, but as young people who are able to think and act for themselves. Paul’s frequent discussions of children (whether literal or metaphorical) demonstrate “an above average interest in the issue”<sup>69</sup> for a single, presumably childless man. This alone can demonstrate that Paul was attempting to elevate the position of children and, following the commands of Jesus, welcome them into the community as those who represent Christ.

### *Welcoming Children: A Practical Application*

After this brief overview of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, the theme of welcoming children becomes quite clear throughout the narrative of God’s redemptive work on earth. The writers of the Hebrew Bible, Jesus, and Paul, all speak of the importance of welcoming children into the community of God for the sake of all members. What implications does this theme carry for Christian living and ministry with children? First, children must be welcomed into the Christian community as active and necessary members. Second, Christians must consciously work to improve the lives of all children who are a part of the global community of humankind.

Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me...for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these” (Mk 10:14). Children are created by God to be active and essential members of God’s kingdom. Therefore, young people must be welcomed into God’s churches. Children are capable of doing great things in the kingdom and they must be given opportunities to use their God-given gifts and talents to further the reign of God. The Lord has blessed children abundantly with gifts, talents, and natural abilities that are

68. Gundry Volf, “The Least and the Greatest,” p. 57. (Italics original).

69. Aasgaard, “Paul as a Child,” p. 154.

unavailable to (or overlooked and unused by) adults. As whole persons created in the image of God, children in the Christian church reveal attributes and characteristics of God that would otherwise remain unseen. Children show us that God is vulnerable, playful, joyous, and messy.<sup>70</sup> For God to be fully welcomed and revealed in churches that claim to follow Christ, children must be present. As May et al. state, “The church is fully the church—the people of God—only when children are present.”<sup>71</sup> It is absolutely essential that children are welcomed into the community of God as whole people made in God’s image—people that are able to possess and demonstrate true faith and discipleship. Jesus said that children are an example from which we can learn—how can we learn from them if they are not fully present in the Christian community?

A second implication of the biblical theme of welcoming children involves social justice and responsibility. When discussing children in the Pauline corpus, I quoted Peter O’Brien, who wrote that Paul believed that “children, while they are expected to obey their parents in the Lord, are persons in their own right who are not to be manipulated, exploited or crushed.”<sup>72</sup> Welcoming children means that Christians are to fight to free them from social injustice. Countless children around the world live in varying degrees of poverty—from the poverty of tenuous connections,<sup>73</sup> to utter starvation that threatens their very existence. When wars, famines,

70. God demonstrated that God is messy through the Incarnation, for through Jesus, God willingly became involved in the messiness of human life. See Cynthia Long Westfall, “Family in the Gospels and Acts,” in Richard S. Hess and M. Daniel Carroll R. (eds.) *Family in the Bible: Exploring Customs, Culture, and Context* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), pp. 125-47 (140).

71. May, *Children Matter*, p. 143.

72. O’Brien, *Ephesians*, p. 446.

73. The poverty of tenuous connections refers to the social isolation of children. When children do not have access to their family’s social resources or government services for child welfare, they suffer from this type of poverty. Although material poverty and the poverty of tenuous connections often exist in relation to one another, middle- and upper-class children can also bear the burden of the latter type of poverty when they are socially disconnected and isolated from social services and relationships that are necessary for holistic flourishing. For an extensive discussion of the poverty of tenuous connections, see Pamela D. Couture, *Seeing Children, Seeing God: A Practical Theology of Children and Poverty* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), pp. 29-35.

natural disasters, and poverty strike, children suffer more than any other group. Around the world, children work as prostitutes and forced labourers, scavenge for food in garbage dumps, and suffer from disease, malnutrition, and hunger. The biblical theme of welcoming children calls for the worldwide Christian community to reach out to these people—no matter what their plight might be—and actively work for their betterment. In *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, Ron Sider says, “regardless of what we do or say at 11:00 a.m. on Sunday morning, rich Christians who neglect the poor are not the people of God.”<sup>74</sup> A holistic, Christ-centred worldview and biblical theology demands that followers of Jesus fight to free children from exploitation, manipulation, abuse, neglect, and poverty. This is the second way in which children must be welcomed into God’s kingdom.

Welcoming children involves inward and outward actions. By welcoming children *into* the Christian community, the people of God can affirm their worth and help them to utilize their gifts and abilities for the furthering of God’s kingdom. In going *out* into the world, followers of Jesus are to tear down unjust powers and social structures and free children from bondage. Because this theme of welcoming children runs throughout the entire narrative of the Christian Bible, one can wonder if the church is really the church if children are not welcomed in these two ways.

74. Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: Moving from Affluence to Generosity* (New York: W Publishing Group, 2005), p. 60.