

It's Time to Take Children and Youth Seriously

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Children are all around us. Every human is or was once a child. Children are the most numerous needy and most people on the planet. Never in history have we had so many children among us and never have so many of them been at great risk. Children aged 15 and under comprise one-third of our world's six-billion people. In developing countries children make up nearly half the population. Another one billion children may be born in the next decade, very many of those into families living in extreme poverty.

The Church today may not be looking for the children, but they wouldn't have to look far to find them. Children are no remote or obscure people group. They are found

- In all countries, in all socio-economic categories and among people of all cultures.
- In all communities: in its families, its schools, its markets, its playgrounds....
- In marginalized subcultures: children with special needs, in prisons...
- In 'at risk' situations where circumstances increase the likelihood that they will not have the opportunity to hear the gospel.
- In areas not easily accessible to the gospel.
- In resistant circumstances: children who have been harmed or neglected by those representing the Christian faith.

Climate Change

While the church has always done an 'OK' job of Christian Education, understanding children in the context of global evangelism and mission is relatively new. Understanding children and youth as perhaps *the* key strategy for church growth, for missions and for furthering the kingdom, is a very new idea.

The reality of the '4/14 Window' may be the fuel that provides new 'wind in the sails' for the church ministry and mission in the 21st century. An emphasis on children and youth could be a re-energizing focus comparable to the 10/40 Window. Wess Stafford reminds us that

"Every major movement in history has grasped the need to target the next generation in

order to advance its agenda and secure its legacy into the future. Political movements (like Nazism and Communism) trained legions of children with the goal of carrying their agenda beyond the lifetimes of their founders. World religions have done the same with the systematic indoctrination of their young—even the Taliban places great emphasis on recruiting children. ... It seems that, historically, the Christian evangelical movement is one of the few that has allowed children to remain a second-rate mandate—the Great Omission in the Great Commission.”

It is happening. The last decade has witnessed a ‘climate change’ in attitudes and openness to children and their role in the church and in mission. There is only a slight breeze in some quarters, but everywhere the winds are gaining strength. Open the 4/14 Window, to feel the climate change upon us – a climate change we can all believe in.

It’s time.

It’s Time to Read Scripture with ‘the Child in the Midst’

One thing that will bring about that climate change is a rediscovery of children in Scripture. Some Christian leaders think the Bible says very little about children. However, as they begin to read Scriptures with “the child in the midst,” they see that children are not just *present* but *prominent* in Scripture. Indeed, there are more than 1500 references to children and childhood (and parenting and training, the orphan, etc.). Very often, children and youth are found playing crucial roles in the outworking of God’s plans.

Whatever the realities of a child’s life, God regards them as precious. To Him, they are:

- **A sign.** Children are God’s blessing (Psalm 127:3) and are missed when not part of the covenant community.
- **A symbol.** Children are illustrations of the relationship God wants with adults (Hosea 11:1, Matthew 18:2-3).
- **In need of teaching.** They are to be treasured and taught both in the community and home (Deuteronomy 6, 11).
- **Worthy of protection.** God is on the side of the vulnerable (Psalm 68:5; James 1:27). When children are neglected, abused, victimised, God grieves. Jesus strongly advocates for their protection (Matthew 18:5-6, 10).
- **Worshippers.** Children are designed to praise God (Psalm 8:2). Praise is not something they will learn to bring when they are older – it is their role now. Children give praise to Jesus even when adults reject him (Matthew 21:15).
- **Agents of God’s mission** Children are not only the ones who follow, but the ones whom God sends to lead (Isaiah 11:6). God chooses children as key figures in the biblical narrative: Isaac, Moses, Samuel, David, Naaman’s wife’s maid. God chooses to enter this world not as a king, rabbi or high priest but as a baby.
- **Examples.** Jesus uses children as examples of the humility and dependence that the Kingdom of God requires of adults (Matthew 18:4).

- **Unconditionally loved.** Jesus has a blessing for children brought to Him: no demands, no challenges, not even a story (Matthew 19:13-15)!
- **A focus in His ministry.** Jesus heals children (Luke 7, 8) and welcomes them (Mark 10); He uses children as examples of humility (Luke 18:17); He warns of judgement for those who harm children (Matthew 18:5-6, 10); He values them: (Matthew 18:12-14).

For years Christian leaders have read Scriptures and never noticed the children. One can get very lofty degrees in theological institutions and not *see* much less *reflect on* the wealth of biblical material focusing on children. And yet some of the most significant acts and revelations of God came through them. Their faith and obedience was often central in the outworking of God's purposes.

There are vast new vistas of understanding and wisdom awaiting church and missions leaders who re-read Scripture *with the child in the midst!*

It's Time for Meaningful Theological Reflection on Children

A rediscovery of children in Scripture will inevitably lead to more theological reflection on children and childhood. Just as Liberation Theology, and African, Asian and Feminist theologies have changed our paradigms, so *Child theology* has the potential to cause a fundamental ground shift in the way our generation -- and perhaps future generations -- understand the Bible. As they begin to interpret Scripture differently, seeing the children, Child Theology may open new territory for the church and the seminaries and theological institutions that teach it.

We must tread carefully, of course. Many who are aware of the significance of children are activists. We see their pressing needs and the potential of children and youth, and we urge aggressive, purpose driven action on their behalf. We are usually not given to patient, rigorous theological reflection.

But Christian action and interventions on behalf of children should be well grounded in theological soundness. Theological reflection can serve a necessary and constructively critical function within the growing movement. If we value activism because it gets things done, and devalue theological reflection because it is time consuming and difficult, neither our practice nor our theological foundations will be secure. The foundations of our practice will be suspect and ultimately vulnerable in the rough and tumble of critical scrutiny.

Dr Keith White, founder of the Child Theology Movement, and many other are now engaging in theological discussions on children. In March, 2011, more than 100 theologians, seminarians, mission leaders and others met in Nairobi to explore what the Bible says about children, and what new insights may be gained by looking at Church, Mission, Seminary Curricula and other

disciplines through the lens of the child. An upcoming compendium will share the papers and responses from that conference.

It's Time To Think Strategically about Children and Mission

Most people who will ever make a decision to follow Christ will do so as a child or a young person. This is the basic premise of the "4/14 Window." It is no longer just a catchy phrase, but an established fact, and one which is now being understood and deployed in mission circles around the world.

Viewing missions as an adult orientated pursuit, and underestimating the importance and the contribution of children in the Mission of God, we are ignoring the most fruitful mission field. The reality of the 4/14 window means that any serious mission strategies will include careful, appropriate efforts to reach these groups.

However, just because children and young people are remarkably receptive to the gospel, doesn't mean that we our missiology and our approaches can be shoddy or careless, juvenile or childish. Just as any of us view our children as belonging to our own faith, so we must respect the fact that children and youth in all cultures and religions are part of caring families and religions and cultural traditions. If anything, we must be even more creative, caring, and cautious, and more sensitive and thoughtful as we seek to make the 4/14 Window a more intentional part of our mission strategizing.

One indicator of the missiological significance of children may be inferred in the prophetic warning in the last verse of the O.T. *"He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, or else, I'll strike the land with a curse"* (Malachi 4:6). When walking the slums of any major city, it takes neither imagination nor deep theologizing to see that the land is stricken with a curse. We also intuitively observe both theologically and practically that removal of the curse is bound up in the restoration of the damaged relationships between fathers and children.

While global development efforts may alleviate some of the suffering, we know that food and medicines will not remove a curse. Blankets and clothing will not remove a curse. Nor even will education and employment will remove a curse. For a curse is a *spiritual* thing and its removal demands a *spiritual* intervention. It is turning the hearts of the fathers to the children – holistic mission -- and the consequent turning of the hearts of the children to their fathers, which will turn this curse into a blessing.

One other point. Let us not leave the impression that our missiological interest in children is only because they are the most receptive of 'people groups.' They are also very effective *instruments* and *agents for* mission. How important it is for mission leaders to grasp the reality and significance

of the agency of children in their strategies and plans for effective mission!

It's Time for High Level Reflection on Children in Seminaries

Equipping Christian workers to care for needy children may be the single greatest challenge and opportunity for seminaries and Bible schools in the coming decade. Many seminaries are approaching this not as a new fad or diversion from other worthwhile training, but as the best way to achieve what they have already set out to do – equip the whole church to take the whole gospel to the whole world.

Beyond just responding to the Scriptural mandate, real-world relevance demands that seminaries equip students with a mindset to understand and care for children. Christian theological institutions are the “production line” for developing the leaders for the next generation. Equipping Christians with that mindset through seminaries and Bible colleges is key to developing the caregivers as well as advocates, teachers and leaders on behalf of children.

Today more than 50 seminaries have begun or are planning courses or programs which will ensure that their institutions produce leaders who understand the significance of the Church's holistic ministry to children, and who can influence others at all levels on behalf of those children.

There are many vital reasons for Christian theological institutions to consider programs to equip leaders and practitioners for Children at Risk (CAR) ministry. We have seen that children feature prominently in Scripture, always with a consistent message to protect and nurture them to become what God intends. Moreover, it is clear that relevance in the “real world” demands that seminaries equip students to care for CAR. Including programs on holistic ministry to children will ensure that these institutions produce leaders who understand the significance of the Church's ministry to children in poverty, and who can influence others at all levels in their countries on behalf of those children.

Experience shows that providing programs on holistic ministry to children can have a revolutionary effect on students and on the institutions themselves. Dr. Sunny Tan, the Academic Dean of MBTS says:

“Not only has this program transformed the lives of many students, but the seminary itself has changed. The key leaders in the seminary have a new vision for the strategic significance of children in their own equipping and mission strategies.”

It's Time to Harness the 'Clean Energy' of Children and Youth

Children and young people thrive on challenges. But much of what passes for children's ministry in churches today is geared to entertaining rather than equipping or challenging them. We must ask,

what are our children not doing and not learning while they are being entertained?

Dr. William Damon notes that “contrary to what some adults think, they really do not need to come home after their six-hour day and ‘cool out’ in front of the TV. They do need to have their energies fully and joyfully engaged in worthwhile pursuits. ... Activities that children gain satisfaction from, and accomplishments that children are proud of, relieve rather than induce stress. Activities that provide genuine services to others are ideal in this regard.”

“By systematically underestimating the child’s capabilities, we are limiting the child’s potential for growth. In withholding from children the expectation to serve others . . . we are preventing them from acquiring a sense of social and personal responsibility. We are leaving the child to dwell on nothing more noble than gratifying the self’s moment-by-moment inclinations. In the end, this orientation is a particularly unsatisfying form of self-centeredness, because it creates a focus on a personal self that has no special skills or valued services to offer anyone else. Paradoxically, by giving the child purposes that go beyond the self, an orientation to service results in a more secure belief in oneself.

Dr. Bambang Budijanto notes, children and youth represent an enormous untapped pool of influencers with sensitivity to the voice of God and willingness to do His bidding. God can and does use children and young people—their prayers, their insights, their hands, and their feet—in changing the hearts of humankind. They represent ‘clean energy’ to transform the world.

Global leaders of the Church and Mission need to tap into this new, ‘clean energy.’ They need to elevate their thinking about the potential and possibilities of children and youth, and to challenge, encourage and equip them to use their gifts and energy as agents in transforming the world.

Could there be a more exciting and life-changing challenge than learning about the world, sharing God’s love for its peoples, and yes, transforming a generation?

It’s time!

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