CHILD THEOLOGY AND ITS THEOLOGICAL METHOD, PAST AND FUTURE

ANVIL: Journal of Theology and Mission
VOL 35, ISSUE 1

DJ Konz
CHILD THEOLOGY
AND ITS THEOLOGICAL METHOD, PAST AND FUTURE

Since its emergence as a nascent field of enquiry in the early twenty-first century, child theology (CT) has largely been pursued by offering theological reflections on the basis of Matthew 18:1–14 (especially vv 1–5).1

The most significant work to emerge from the Child Theology Movement (CTM) to date, Haddon Willmer and Keith White’s excellent 2013 publication Entry Point: Towards Child Theology with Matthew 18,2 offers an extended consideration of the scriptural episode in which Jesus placed a child amid a theological argument about the nature of the kingdom of God.3 While Willmer and White acknowledge that others have connected theology and children in many and various ways, their own endeavours are framed by the question “What difference does it make to theology if the child is placed in the midst?”4, while at the same time continuing to reflect materially on the Matthew 18 text itself. I propose that this approach to CT has regarded Matthew 18 passage not only as materially informative for child theology, but also methodologically formative for the movement to this point in its history. This methodological grounding in Matthew 18 has set, or at least sought to set, CT apart from other ways of relating theology and children.5 For example, while theologies of children tend to focus on understanding children themselves,6 CT pursued on the precedent of Jesus placing a child in the midst of theological discussion can produce, Willmer and White argue, “Theology which, even when it does not mention children, talks of God in a changed way because the child has somehow influenced it.”7 Matthew 18 has thus remained foundational in material and methodological terms to child theology’s particular theological enterprise. Whether continuing to focus reflection or attention on a single passage – albeit it a rich and suggestive one – is sufficient to sustain CT into the future is a question underlying this article. Teasing apart a broader-ranging CT methodology, such that theological reflection can be extended beyond the bounds of Matthew 18, may prove key to the future of CT.

In view of the central role that Matthew 18 has played for the CTM to date, this article asks:8 are there new methodological bases from which CT might be pursued while still exploring how the child might inform our understanding of God and all things in relation to God,9 not just our conversations about children? A corollary of such questions is the lingering issue of the relationship between CT and theologies of children (ToC): should the two continue to be regarded as distinct (if at times overlapping) fields, moving forward, and if so how is this relationship to be parsed such that CT doesn’t dissolve into ToC? Are there other constructive ways of relating the child to theology (C + T)? To help address such questions, the discussion below will begin by describing the methodological juncture at which CT presently appears to be on the road from its past to its future, before noting some potential ways forward for the field. Finally, the article will offer a brief description of a method applied in my own research, which may be one example of how a CT method might be applied to other bodies of theological material beyond Matthew 18 itself.10

---

4 Willmer and White, Entry Point, 14. Here, Willmer and White are speaking somewhat metaphorically; that is, they do not suggest placing an actual child physically into spaces where theological discourse takes place, but rather bringing the child into view when undertaking theological reflection.
7 Willmer and White, Entry Point, 14.
8 A version of this paper, entitled “Whither Child Theology? Some observations and questions on method,” was originally presented at the Child Theology Futures consultation in Melbourne, Australia, 10 November 2016.
CHILD THEOLOGY’S METHODOLOGICAL JOURNEY

The term CT is first known to have been used at and after a conference on children and holistic mission, in Penang, Malaysia, in 2001. Although the original context of the concept was broad, encompassing reflexive practice in the diverse and often challenging arena of global mission and ministry with children, as well as those working in more academic environments, the term came to refer to a particular “process” of relating the child and theology together; which centred around the key text of Matthew 18:1ff. Central to this process was taking Jesus’ act of placing a child amid the disciples to challenge their misunderstanding of the kingdom of God, as a basis for reflection. The key proponents of this approach, Haddon Willmer and Keith White, have long acknowledged that drawing on Matthew 18 in this manner was merely “one way of doing child theology”, but the approach become methodologically dominant for at least two reasons: firstly, the key energy in the nascent field was provided by White and Willmer; secondly, the Matthean text brought with it not only what I suggest here is a method for doing child theology, but also significant material themes on which to explore in a number of fruitful ways. As expounded in Entry Point, such themes include kingdom of God, humility, reception, temptation, discipleship, Jesus as a doer of theology with his disciples, and so forth. I would argue that this combination of method and substantive material proposals has offered a rich vein of helpful reflection, accordingly.

While others may yet discover more treasures by drilling deeper down this particular scriptural minestraft, it may be that what has been a great strength to date may prove a limitation moving forward. Willmer, for one, has indicated that he feels that this particular trajectory of thought has extended about as far as he, at least, can take it. CT appears, therefore, to stand at a critical material and methodological point in its history. At this juncture, several possibilities seem available to CT:

1. Proponents continue to reflect on Matthew 18 (and parallels), looking for new insights, and developing further those already proposed;
2. Proponents try to generalise the Matthew 18 method by treating the pericope, and more specifically the “child placed by Jesus in the midst”, as a wider hermeneutic, applying the idea to broader biblical or theological discourse. In this regard, the child might be conceived as informing our consideration of other scriptural passages or biblical themes;
3. Various theological loci; indeed, the CTM has attempted this in a number of its global consultations.

One of the various risks of this second option – to adopt the “child placed by Jesus” as a general hermeneutical principle – is the creation of a canon within a canon, which, unless it can be otherwise defended, may represent a tenuous prioritisation of one passage over other parts of Scripture. A third option is, of course:

3. To abandon any distinctive approach or methodology on the part of CT, and allow the term “child theology” to become an umbrella term for everything that materially and/or methodologically brings child + theology (C + T) together. To a large degree this option is happening in practice already, in part because the ambiguity of the term CT has mitigated against a lucid and cogent consensus on what CT is. Among the risks attending this option are the following:

- that CT dissolves into ToC, and subsequently that a concern for how the child informs our theology of God and all

12 Ibid., 7.
13 Collier, ed., Toddlng to the Kingdom.
15 See, particularly, Willmer and White, Entry Point, for the exploration of these themes.
16 In papers presented and discussions at the Child Theology Futures consultations in High Leigh, England, and Melbourne, Australia in July and November 2016.
things in relation to God is reduced into theological discussion around children, or even into mere activism for children;19 to paraphrase Stephen Neill on mission, “If everything is child theology, nothing is child theology.”20 The danger here is that something valuable might be lost or at least diluted, like precious perfume diffused into the ocean.

A further option, which is somewhat obvious at this point, may nevertheless be needed to maintain a viable future for CT: that is, that those interested in the unique contribution child theology can make to theology should continue to explore new methods, or starting points, for doing CT. This means finding new and yet rigorous ways of holding child + theology together.

Posed as a question, this proposal might be framed as:

What are new methodological possibilities for CT as an endeavour that is recognisably distinct from other lines of enquiry (such as ToC), which allow the child to provide valuable and constructive insights in relation to God and all things that would not otherwise arise in theological discourse?

ASSOCIATED QUESTIONS
Finding new methodological approaches to the task of CT raises, in my mind, at least two associated questions:

- is there a core, or “nub”, of child theology, consonant with but not necessarily identical to the approach, process or methodology derived from Matthew 18, that distinguishes CT from other theological enterprises concerned with children?
- how might new forms of CT remain related to that core even while moving along different methodological pathways?

I do not intend to spend much time in this article on the first question, although I do think it important for the future of CT that such questions of definition and diversity continue to be asked. One way of answering the question might be to reiterate the idea that CT is distinct from theologies of childhood in that CT orders its theological objects differently to ToC. Whereas theologies of children and childhood may well tend to place the child at the “centre” of its theological enquiries, asking, primarily, what can be said theologically concerning the child, CT by contrast i) fundamentally seeks to say something about God; and then ii) secondarily and derivatively seeks to say something about all other things as related to God, informed by the presence of the child.

Here, CT and ToC may necessarily intersect, for, as Karl Barth argued in The Humanity of God, if God was in Jesus Christ, and Christ was fully human, you cannot say something of God without saying something also of humanity (and vice versa).21 Properly and specifically, the humanity that is spoken of when speaking of God is the humanity of Jesus Christ. But the humanity of Jesus Christ is determinative for all humanity; that is, Jesus Christ is human for us, as the True Human, and so others of us participate in his humanity,22 and accordingly, when we speak of God in Jesus Christ, though Jesus is also distinct from us,23 we speak of other human beings (including, of course, children).

Willmer and White provide an example of this in their work Entry Point. This book is not a theology of the child, but it nevertheless offers some highly astute theological observations about children and childhood.24 However, it achieves these insights precisely because it does not prematurely centre itself around the child, as its key theological object, but rather because it begins with wanting to say something of God and God’s kingdom, and in light of what is seen in this domain, is then able to say something about the child that is a sign of God’s kingdom, as well as other things beyond the child itself.

A “CHILD-ATTENTIVE” METHODOLOGICAL PROPOSAL
As noted above, extending the field of CT in the future may require further methodological developments or proposals. What I offer below is an outline of one such proposal, applied in my own doctoral research, in which I came to the theology of Karl Barth with child + (Barth’s) theology in view. I describe it here with the hope that it might provoke other, perhaps better, methodological ideas, as well as further thought, comment and critique.

---

19 Cf. Willmer and White, Entry Point, 36–38.
23 Ibid., 47–54.
24 See Willmer and White, Entry Point, 24–30, and elsewhere in the book.
In the research I pursue what I refer to as a “child-attentive” reading of the theology of Karl Barth. As I engaged Barth’s theology, I meant bearing the child in mind as a silent interlocutor as I engaged Barth’s corpus. Paying attention to the child alerted me to what resources Barth might offer to theological understandings of children, but also how such a child-attentive reading might critique the richness and adequacy of Barth’s, and my own, understanding of God in Jesus Christ. In more concrete terms, this method meant:

- an extensive examination of Barth’s theology for what he had to say directly about children;
- reading Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* in particular with the child in mind, drawing inferences for theological understandings of the child even where Barth is not speaking directly of children. Or in other words, the approach meant considering the extent to which Barth’s wider theology adequately and richly accounts for or accommodates the child;
- being alert to those facets of Barth’s theology, or theology more broadly, that may not be seen as clearly without paying attention to the child. To pose this aspect as a question, the methodology asks: what fresh insights into God, God’s creatures and God’s work in the economy are discovered in Barth’s theology by approaching his writing with the child in mind?

The latter aspect of the approach is potentially that which came closest to CT per se, while the former elements were more likely something akin to ToC; in this sense my project was probably a blend of both, or maybe something else entirely. However, the child-attentive approach led me to discover the following:

- looking through Barth’s corpus, including his unpublished and untranslated materials, with the child in mind, led me to discover and expound a series of previously untranslated sermons on Matthew 18 in which Barth considers the child as a “parable” of entering the kingdom of God. These sermons, along with an implicit revisitation of similar ideas late in his career, have considerable resonances with the CTM’s work almost a century later. Reading these sermons with the child in mind also threw new light on how Barth appears to have understood parables to function, at least early in his academic career (about the time of the publication of *Der Romberbrief*.) Examining Barth’s work in a child-attentive manner thus led me to look closely at this material in a way it appears others have not, at least not in the same manner of detail. Expounding Barth’s own material on Matthew 18 is also probably where I come closest, materially, to CT as it has been pursued to date.

- reading Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* in a child-attentive manner enabled me to offer a doctrinally extensive and generally coherent treatment of the child, which I believe extends theological understandings of children in relation to God in a more systematic manner than has otherwise been attempted.

- reading Barth’s work with the child in mind also showed up gaps and weaknesses in Barth’s theology, particularly in his doctrines of revelation, faith and knowledge of God. As our concern here is largely methodology, I will not detail those here. However, the enterprise also brought a new perspective on some of Barth’s strengths: for example, the Christological objectivism with which Barth conceives the doctrines of election, creation

---

26 I prefer “child-attentive” to some of the methodological adjectives used in biblical studies (including “childist”, “child-centred and child centric” readings of Scripture) because the term does not centre the child in the same way, and in doing so risk displacing God as the primary object of theology.
27 Something of this same approach was taken in Marcia J. Bunge’s edited volume, *The Child in Christian Thought*. In particular, in relation to Barth, see William Werpehowski’s helpful essay, “Reading Karl Barth on Children,” in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 386–405. My approach went further by considering inferences from Barth’s theology even where the child was not in view.
(especially his theological anthropology) and reconciliation mean that the child, too, can be regarded as included objectively (and to an extent subjectively, through the subjectivity of Jesus Christ) in the election, humanity and reconciliation of Jesus Christ, regardless of the child’s own cognitive development or subjective capacities. While, in my research, I related these aspects of Barth’s theology to the child, it might be argued that a child-attentive reading has “tested” Barth’s theological ideas from a new angle, finding some wanting for reasons not seen as clearly before, but others helpful, rich and inclusive in their scope and Christological emphases.30

CHILD-ATTENTIVE METHODOLOGY IN (SLIGHTLY MORE) DETAIL

The brief description of my “child-attentive” reading given above may give the impression that I was working with an abstract and universal “child”. In practice, however, my “child-attentive theological reading” of Barth’s theology meant continually asking, “How well does this part of Barth’s theology work for children?” Specifically, the children I kept in mind while reading Barth were my own two daughters, Bethany (now 11 years old), who lives with a form of cerebral palsy and a significant cognitive impairment, and also my younger daughter, Emelyn (now seven years old, but who was a young toddler when I commenced the research). Having these two children in mind would cause me to ask questions such as, “Does Barth’s theological anthropology adequately and richly account for the diversity of human life? Can it be inclusive of children like Bethany or Emmy, even if implicitly, in its claims?” Or, alternatively, “Does Barth’s doctrine of revelation hold together when considered in relation to a child like Bethany, or an infant like Emmy?” In summary, this methodological approach led me to discover:

- interesting material in Barth’s corpus concerning the child;
- a wider series of theological claims that could be inferred as applying to the child;
- strengths and shortcomings in Barth’s theology, bringing new light and perhaps clearer, deeper discussion of aspects of both;
- some confirmations of and potential correctives to Barth’s theology, so that our talk of, with and to God may correspond more closely to who God is.

POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS

Several observations can be made about this “child-attentive” method and its possibilities and limitations for CT. Firstly, the extent to which this approach is legitimately CT is open to further discussion. Secondly, while the approach did enable something properly theological to be said – that is, something about God and all things in relation to God – it is not clear how much of this might have been achieved by another good theological method, not necessarily by applying child theological method.31 My suspicion is, however, that another methodological starting point may not alone have turned up precisely the same material, observations or conclusions.

In terms of wider possibilities, something akin to the approach I applied to Barth’s theology could potentially be applied to the theology of others, if the method is deemed to have merit. Interesting things might be brought to light in the theologies of other historical or contemporary figures with a substantial body of dogmatic or constructive theological material.32

Some of the limitations of the approach I took, however, are:

- it may foster eisegetical readings of others’ theology, and the holding of theologians to account for something they themselves did not set out to achieve (i.e. a detailed consideration of the child);
- the approach seems more suited for expounding the work of others than as a method for truly constructive CT per se. Perhaps more constructively, however, the approach might

---


31 See, again, Webster, “What Makes Theology Theological?,” 17–28. Cf. John Webster, “Theological Theology,” in Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II, 2nd ed. (London: T&T Clark, 2016), 11–32. For Webster, theological theology gives account of its primary object – God – first and foremost, and derivatively all other things in relation to God; it does so according to its unique cognitive ground, which is God’s own knowledge communicated to regenerate human beings in the church, for the purpose of proper knowledge, contemplation and practical life before God.

32 Haddon Willmer’s reflections on Arthur’s Call by the eminent historical theologian Frances Young might constitute something like this. Frances Young, Arthur’s Call: A Journey of Faith in the Face of Severe Learning Disability (London: SPCK, 2014). Reading Frances’s excellent personal reflections on her journey of faith and darkness with her severely cognitively impaired son Arthur with CT in mind arguably enabled Haddon to see the work as a piece of child theology, with truths to be learned about God, theodicy, vocation, personhood and more.
be applied to various doctrines rather than the dogmaticians themselves;

in this approach the boundaries between CT and ToC may remain blurred. More consideration of the interplay between these two ways of holding child + theology together, so that CT is not dissolved into ToC, may be needed. If there is a fruitful dance between child + theology to be explored, as Keith White has suggested,33 perhaps there is also a dance between CT + ToC; I saw something of this dance, albeit it with likely missteps, in my own doctoral project.

CONCLUSION

Whither child theology? This particular article has merely sketched, through a glass darkly, some contours of the methodological juncture at which CT appears to sit. Moving an endeavour that is still very much in its infancy forward does not necessarily mean leaving the “childhood” of CT behind; rather, to borrow from Karl Rahner, proponents will do well to carry that childhood forward into the future.34 Hence reflecting on Matthew 18, and the learnings and lessons that have come from it, might remain fruitfully alive as part of recent heritage of child theology. However, new approaches may be needed. This paper has outlined one such approach: the child-attentive methodology applied in my own research. Others interested in pursuing CT may also propose new ways for child + theology to dance together, such that neither child nor theology is dominated by the other. The answer to the question of the future of CT may thus depend, to some extent, on our willingness to explore the dance not only at the material level, but also by following methodological intuitions into the future, watching with wonder as to what this young endeavour called CT might grow.35

---

33 White characterised the relation between child and theology as a “dance” on day 1 of the Child Theology Futures consultation in Melbourne, 8–10 November 2016.

DJ Konz is associate dean and head of theology at Alphacrucis College, Australia. Previously, DJ worked for over 10 years in the Christian international development sector, most recently as executive director of child advocacy for Compassion Australia. DJ was on the board of trustees of the Child Theology Movement from 2013 to 2018, and was a co-editor of Theology, Mission and Child: Global Perspectives (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2014). His doctoral research at the University of Aberdeen focused on the child in relation to God, with reference to the theology of Karl Barth. He continues to research in areas of child theology, missional theology and the interplay of those fields with the work of Barth and other major theologians.