

A Theology of the Child

It would seem there is little common ground between those who baptize infants and those who baptize only adult believers. Both groups however need to account for the place of children in the life of the church and the wider culture. Both have to answer the question of whether and how God's grace is applied to the offspring of believers and, for that matter, unbelievers. Both groups, whether or not they recognize it, have a theology of the child.

This paper is an attempt to sketch out such a theology and suggest some of that common ground. It assumes that God does call on the Christian community to welcome and care for children. It also assumes that the Christian approach to children and the community is counter-cultural and part of our witness to the power of the gospel. What is the place of children in contemporary North American culture? How does the Bible challenge that place?

Ethicist Stanley Hauerwas in an article entitled "The Moral Value of the Family" (in Community of Character) recalls a marriage and family class he taught at Notre Dame. He would ask the class "What reason would you give why one should be willing to have children?" The students would respond, "children are fun" or "an expression of a couple's love" or "because it is just the thing to do." Such answers suggest to Hauerwas, "we lack a moral account of why we commit ourselves to having children." The students in his classes were thoroughgoing individualists. The only reasons they could give for having children were personal ones, rooted in their own enjoyment of the children or the children's usefulness to them. Lacking a clear moral account of the reasons for bearing children, Hauerwas argues, we as a society eventually lack a clear moral account for the family. The family unit becomes, as with children, a matter of convenience and usefulness. In contemporary society we only need the family because we need intimacy, closeness, a place to retreat to from the violent and ugly world. Hauerwas contends this is not nearly enough. He argues, "the family is morally crucial for our existence as the only means we have to bind time. Without the family, and the intergenerational ties involved, we have no way to know what it means to be historic beings. As a result we become determined by, rather than determining, our histories. Set out in the world with no family, without story of and for the self, we will simply be captured by the reigning ideologies of the day" (165).

It is the family, in other words, that tells us who we are, that gives us an identity, a story. To have a child is to say I believe in more than myself, in more than my own narrow experience, my own limited existence. I have a child because I have something useful to pass on, whether I am talking about genetic material for future generations or belief in the God who came to us in Jesus Christ. When I bear a child, I add to the story I am telling, the story I am a part of. With Hauerwas, "The refusal to have children can be an act of ultimate despair that masks the deepest kind of self-hate and disgust. Fear and rejection of parenthood, the tendency to view the family as nothing more than companionable marriage, and the understanding of marriage as one of a series of non-binding commitments, are but indications that our society has a growing distrust of our ability to deal with the future" (165,166).

In the Old Testament it was a great tragedy to be childless. Children were seen as part of God's great bounty, a gift from God himself (Genesis 1:28, Psalm 127:3). The Jewish laws went to great lengths to make sure that a "name was raised up" for a man who had died childless, even to the point of requiring a dead man's brother to attempt to impregnate his widow. Many of the early prayers of the Bible have to do with a longing for children, for God to open a barren womb. It was clear that children were for the future, they were to carry the name and the memory of their parents into the next generations. Through children the parents shared in God's plan for the human race, finding a kind of immortality in their posterity. Abraham and Sarah are a clear example of this. How would Abraham become, as God promised, a great nation, give his name to future generations if he had no children of his own? Isaac was clearly their hope for the future, their only hope. He would carry their name and the mark of their commitment to their God in the form of circumcision into the next generation. He was born not as a freestanding individual able to make his own choices and go his own way in the

world. He was born as part of a family chosen by God to be a people. He was to be taught, molded, developed within this community to follow its ways and love its God. His identity came not from his isolated convictions and peculiar vision of the world, but from being part of a people called and chosen by God. He could reject his heritage, but he could hardly avoid having it!

In our individualistic age, lacking a moral reason for the family, lacking hope for the future, we are as likely to expect and want our children to make their own way in the world, without our input. It is not unusual to hear some upright and fair-minded parent insist they are not trying to impose their religious ideas on their children so they can “make up their own mind.” Hauerwas argues “that the refusal to ask our children to believe as we believe, to live as we live, to act as we act is a betrayal that derives from moral cowardice. For to ask this of our children requires that we have the courage to ask ourselves to live truthfully” (166). To bear and rear children for any other reason than to pass on your wisdom, your love of God, your hope for the future, your compassion for the world, is to miss the central moral element of the community, the church, the family, the self.

What does all this have to do with a theology of the child? With baptism, infant or otherwise? How we as a church welcome and receive children is critically important. It can be, indeed must be, counter-cultural. The church says to the Christian parents bringing their child for baptism or dedication, “Your child does not belong just to you. It belongs first of all to God. It also belongs to the whole community. It belongs not just to the community in this location or even in this time. It belongs to the community of God’s people that has been in the mind of God from all eternity. We welcome it in the name of Christ and stake his claim on this child. We will do more than help you raise this child. We will insist that it be formed by the word of God, shaped by the Gospel, instructed from its earliest days as to what it means to be a follower of Jesus.” The ancient Jews were instructed in Deuteronomy, were commanded to take great care in passing on the story, the commandments to their children (Deuteronomy 6:4-9). Can the Christian church do any less? Paul expressly commands regarding children, “bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4).

Circumcision marked the Israelite male as belonging to the community and to God. That mark could clearly be repudiated when a child became an adult. According to Ezekiel 18:1-18 corporate solidarity only goes so far. Ultimately every person is responsible for his or her own response to God. John the Baptist warned against presuming on one’s connection to God (Luke 3:8). But until such time as that child consciously chose to go his own way, he belonged to the community of God. Leaving aside the issue of baptism, what does this say to and about the Christian community? Can we say that our children, baptized or not, belong to the community and to God? Both believer baptists and paedobaptists must address the same question. Before our children make a decision for or against Christ, where do they stand with God? In an article, “The Theology of the Child” in the *American Baptist Quarterly*, G.R. Beasley-Murray argues that all human beings, children or adult stand under the condemnation brought about by Adam. At the same time, all human beings, children or adult stand under the redemption procured by Christ. ““The child is a member of the race which is created by God in his image and fallen into corruption, yet not abandoned by God, for the Son of God has wrought salvation for all mankind” (199). God’s remedy for sin far surpasses the consequences of sin (Romans 5:12-21). It seems reasonable to conclude that God has in some way not explicitly revealed to us provided for the salvation of infants, small children and others who lack the capacity to hear or respond in faith to the message of Jesus. Beasley-Murray argues that if society does not hold children “culpable for their actions, it is difficult to believe that God who is just and loving hold them culpable.” He continues, “children are in solidarity with Christ until they repudiate him...” (200). The children’s solidarity with Christ is suggested by his reception of them and his declaration that the kingdom of God belongs to such as them (Mark 10:13-16). The kingdom is received as a gift of God and not as an achievement. It must be simply accepted. It can never be deserved. Who better to illustrate that simple, undeserved, gracious reception than children? Their dependence, their neediness, their inability to care for, to save, themselves models how we are to receive the kingdom. In Mark, the receptiveness of the children is contrasted with the young man who came to Jesus but went away. He

was unwilling to become dependent, to become like a child.

The Baptist must ask himself or herself, is a child who dies damned because they were unable at their young age to respond to Jesus in intelligent faith? The paedo-baptist must ask himself or herself, is a child who dies damned because they were unfortunate enough not to be born into a family which baptized their children? Both faith and baptism are crucial. The New Testament commands and requires both. But this limits neither the love nor the power of God. Even Duane Priebe, a Lutheran, while holding it is important for infants to be baptized, is clear that “God can make Jesus’ death and resurrection effective for people by other means” (209). In a very difficult passage in 1Corinthians 7, Paul insists that the children of a “mixed” marriage (Christian to non-Christian) are “holy.” Whatever else this may mean, it recalls the community of Israel of the Old Testament over against their pagan neighbors. Being chosen by God for a special purpose in his world, his community, being set apart by God for something special by baptism or dedication that made Israel, made its priesthood, holy. Our children are set aside for a special purpose. They are set aside to be like Jesus. Both family and church are called to raise them, to instruct them, to model for them so they can truly follow Jesus. The purpose of the family and the church is to bring these children to mature faith in Christ.

Children who grow up in a home where the parents and extended family are believers, where the church is the primary sphere of relationship and support are indeed blessed. There is a clear advantage analogous to Paul’s insistence that in spite of the fact that both Jew and Gentile are now offered salvation, there is still an advantage to being a circumcised Jew: “first of all they have been entrusted with the very words of God” (Romans 3:1-2). Being exposed to the power of God’s Holy Spirit through the scriptures, through worship, through service, through fellowship does not guarantee salvation, but offers the children of believers privileges unavailable to those of unbelievers. In spite of this, the fact that God is no “respector of persons” suggests he cares as much for the children of ungodly parents as for those of believers. He is “not willing that any should perish.” He longs for the salvation of those children and grieves over their unhappy situation.

For both paedo-baptist and baptist, baptism is part of a journey to new life in Christ through new birth, conversion, spiritual maturity and Christlikeness. For paedo-baptist it is the beginning of a journey. For baptist it is a crucial step along the way. But for both, our children are a precious heritage to be shaped by the Gospel to ensure the heritage of the community is carried with passion into the next generation. Concluding with Hauerwas, “Christians were not called to have children assured that their children were going to be lovely people, nice folks to be with...Rather, these people were called to marriage and to having children as their obligation. For their children were their pledge to be a community formed by the conviction that, in spite of evidence to the contrary, God rules this world” (“Why Abortion is a Religious Issue,” pg. 210).

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June 17, 1997