

**“Let the Little Children Come to Me”  
Examining the Place of Children from a Theological, Historical, and  
Developmental Perspective: Implications for Missions with Children**

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The significance of Jesus’ message to the disciples who were hindering children from coming to Him cannot be taken lightly. In his words, Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these” (Luke 18:16b NIV). The invitation of children to come to Jesus has implications for ministry among children in different contexts. It is notable that in Jesus’s welcome for children, he was clear on two things. First, children should be allowed to come to him, and secondly, no one should hinder children’s access to Him. This implies that parents and other caregivers have a mandate to bring children to Jesus without any roadblocks. Therefore, it is important to discuss why children should gain access to Jesus and the implications of this command. To this end, this paper discusses the importance of theological reflection on children, taking into consideration Biblical, developmental, historical, and sociological perspectives about children. Finally, the paper will outline the implications of these perspectives for ministry among children in the home, church, and specialized ministries.

**Biblical Perspectives about Children**

The Bible covers different themes concerning children, and these perspectives are critical in aiding one’s understanding of the place of children in God’s eyes. Marian Carter notes, “The picture of children in the Hebrew scriptures is multifaceted. There is no systematic thinking, yet there are a number of references to children: to the emotions of joy at their birth or sadness at infertility; to weaning, nurturing, socialization, and educating; to the care of the fatherless; to children as innocent and as sinful” (2007, 76–77). These views, though centered in the Old Testament, have an implication to the way Christians should and must view children. Some of the themes evidenced in the Bible concerning children are discussed in this section.

### **Children as God's Gift and Blessings**

In Ps 127:3, the Bible records that “Children are a gift from the Lord; they are a reward from him” (NLT). In Gen 17:6, 28:3, 49:25, and Ps 128:3–4, the Bible alludes to the fact that children are a blessing from the Lord. Not only are children viewed as gifts, but Prov 17:6 also reveals that “grandchildren are the crowning glory of the aged” (NLT). Therefore, referring to grandchildren as a crowning glory, they are also seen as a blessing. Douglas McConnell notes that children are given to us by God as gifts to welcome and nurture (2007, 5). As precious gifts are given to human beings, children must be nurtured and provided with a safe and enabling environment where they will thrive and grow.

### **Children Created in the Image of God**

Children, just like adults, are created in the image of God. This view is worth appreciating and embracing since it has implications for the way human beings value and handle children. Genesis 1:26–27 says,

Then God said, “Let us make people in our image, to be like ourselves. They will be masters over all life—the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the livestock, wild animals, and small animals.” So God created people in his own image; God patterned them after himself; male and female he created them. (NLT)

Creation in the image of God denotes value and dignity to the creature. Children (male and female), made in the image of God, are born with inherent dignity and value. Inarguably, dignity is not credited to children by human beings; it is innately credited to them by God. Truly, as McConnell says, “God creates every unique person as a child with dignity” (2007, 5). Since they are made in God’s image, they are endowed with dignity and value that comes from God alone (Brewster 2011,19).

According to Jennifer Orona, children are created in the image of God and bestowed with intrinsic value in and of themselves (2007, 102). Brewster expounded on this idea and stated that “all children regardless of tribe, language, nationality, age, gender, ability, behavior, caste or any other human characteristic” have God-given dignity (2011, 19–20). For this reason, “Every child born of human parents carries the image of God, independent of any decision of the will or privilege of birth” (McConnell 2007, 5). Born

and made in the image of God, children are spiritual and have the natural desire to connect with God. Catherine Stonehouse points out that “many children sense God’s presence, love Jesus and are captured by Bible stories” (1998, 22). It is, therefore, important to help children connect with God and enhance their spiritual development. Spirituality is fundamental to children, and they need exposure to spiritual matters. Rebecca Nye argues that spirituality is essential for children in three ways: (1) essential to their faith, (2) essential to childhood and not an optional extra of adulthood or something opted into by minority, and (3) essential to being whole at any stage in life (2009,18–9).

The value of children is not only reflected in the book of Genesis. In Ps 139:13–16, the Psalmist echoes,

You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body and knitted me together in my mother’s womb. Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex! Your workmanship is marvelous—and how well I know it. You watched me as I was being formed in utter seclusion, as I was woven together in the dark of the womb. You saw me before I was born. Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed. (NLT)

This Psalm reveals that human value and dignity do not emanate from what children or adults do, where they come from or how they look. However, every person—and in this sense, every child—is fearfully and wonderfully made from conception. This intrinsic value of children should be respected by adults. As a result, no child should be wounded, hurt, oppressed, or denied their rights (Jeyaraj 2009, 5).

### **Children as the Hope of Salvation**

Children represent the hope of salvation, as noted by Jesudason B. Jeyaraj, who points out that the Savior of the world was the incarnated baby (2009, 12). God did not choose to redeem the world through an adult; however, he chose to be born a child so as to live among human beings and bring salvation to the world. The fulfillment of the prophecy by Isaiah regarding the birth of a child by the virgin was evidenced in Matt 1:23. The birth of Emmanuel, God with us, was the peak of incarnation as God himself chose to live among people. He demonstrated the value of children by coming

into the world as a baby. According to Jeyaraj,

The presence of the incarnated child in the midst of people gave them the hope of salvation. Jesus also proclaimed himself as the Messiah in various ways in the later period of his life, namely, through his teachings (Luke 4:16–21), dialogue with people (John 1:35–42; 4:16–26), and actions of healing the sick, feeding the hungry, delivering the people from evil spirit and reconciling communities (John 4). (2009, 12–3)

According to McConnell, “children are a promise of hope for every generation” and “although in Christ alone is our hope for Salvation (1 Pet 1:19–21), there is also a deep sense of hope and fulfillment that is born in each new generation” (2007, 5). This signifies that a ray of hope is always presented in every generation that arises. Each generation has a responsibility to fulfill while on earth.

### **Children as Agents and Participants in God’s Mission**

The Bible has several examples of children who were called and used by God to achieve his purposes on earth. The children mentioned in the Bible include Miriam, Samuel, David, a slave girl, Jeremiah, and Jesus. These children made a contribution to the Kingdom of God. First, at a very tender age, Miriam watched over Moses to see what would happen to him and offered solutions to the princess who came to rescue baby Moses (Ex 2:4–10). Secondly, the prophet Samuel was called by God when he was young and was given a tough message to deliver to Eli, and he accomplished this task (1 Sam 3:1–21). Thirdly, as a young boy, David killed the giant Goliath and brought an end to the Philistine oppression of the Israelites, as recorded in 1 Sam 17.

Fourthly, the slave girl in Naaman’s house became part of the solution to Naaman’s illness by directing him to the prophet Elisha in Samaria (2 Kgs 5). Naaman was healed completely from leprosy that was a danger to his life. Fifthly, the prophet Jeremiah expressed his incapacity to prophesy by saying he was young and not able to speak (Jer 1:6). However, in spite of his fears, God used Jeremiah to give the message of doom to the people of Judah, and he faithfully fulfilled his prophetic mandate. Finally, it is evident in the Bible that Jesus did not come to the world as an adult but as an

infant. At the age of 12 years, Jesus argued with the religious leaders and demonstrated wisdom and intelligence (Luke 2). He brought transformation and salvation to the world as a young person.

### Developmental Perspectives about Children

The development of children is an important aspect in guiding one's theological reflection on children. Different theorists have come up with stages within which children manifest specific characteristics in their growth process. In understanding child development, some of the theorists conceptualize development as a continuous process, while others describe development as a discontinuous process (Copsey 2003, 5). In the former, the argument is that development occurs gradually over a long period of time, while in the latter, children are believed to develop ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving that are qualitatively different as children grow older.

It is believed that changes within each stage affect the way children understand the world and what is expected of them. According to Duncum, these changes are psychobiological processes of maturation that mark the transition from childhood to adulthood. He also notes that since children are moving towards adulthood, childhood should be viewed as fundamentally different from adulthood (Duncum 2002, 100). The physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual development of children will thus be explored.

### **Physical Development**

Physical development entails changes in the body, including growth patterns and changes in weight, height, health, and safety. This domain includes the child's ability to see, hear, speak, read, and write (Karia et al. 2016, 11). Physical changes in a child are very critical and many times are outward manifestations, hence observable. A child's physical development begins from conception but is heightened in the early years and later during adolescence, when growth spurts take place. According to Kathryn Copsey, most of a baby's characteristics are fixed from the time of conception. These fixed characteristics include gender, eye color, and hair color. Nevertheless, she claims that some characteristics, like height and weight, are influenced by diet and physical environment (Copsey 2003, 5).

## **Social Development**

Socially, the child forms relationships from very early years without a language. This domain focuses on the development of relationships and attachments (Karia et al. 2016, 18). The environment within which a child grows and develops affects how a child forms his or her attachments and also abilities to negotiate challenges encountered. Research indicates that the most important thing to the child at the very early stage of development is to have one or two consistent caregivers with whom she can build bonds of security and trust. Additionally, it is important that the “primary caregiver must be available and responsive to the child and provide a secure and consistent environment” (Copsey 2003, 5).

The early years of a child are important, and Carter exposes that during this stage, the child invites adults to participate in non-verbal communication (2007, 39). The child tends to explore his or her world through toys and learns how to socialize with people around him or her. Nonetheless, it is noted that “if social signals for help and attention are ignored, a child will become frustrated and detached, and relate poorly to people” (Carter 2007, 39). The preschool years provide the child with opportunities to make relationships with the outside world. Members within the church nursery or daycare center become new friends in the child’s relationships. The child tends to imitate what the others are doing in order to be accepted and fit in the group. Notable is the fact that young children socialize for only part of the day since they need personal space to feel nurtured and loved (Carter 2007, 39).

Children’s social development depends on their receiving unconditional love for healthy personal growth. Adults in the child’s life make an impact on the appropriate development of the child. As the child begins to trust the teacher more and question the authority of parents, the child starts to realize that adults are fallible and needs an assurance that there is someone or something greater (Carter 2007, 40). Children should be given opportunities to make decisions, be helped to be obedient to parents, and be shaped into socially acceptable human beings. The middle years and adolescent stage characterize children focusing on peer relationships as opposed to family members. The development of identity and self-image is critical at this stage as a child receives acceptance or rejection from others.

### **Emotional Development**

Emotionally, a child's feelings of identity grow as the child seeks to fit into society. Alice Karia, Beatrice Kathungu, Carolyne Chakua, N. Grace Maina, Hannah W. Maingi, and M. Teresia Matheka claim that a child's emotional wellness is largely dependent on a healthy caregiver-child relationship and a healthy relationship between child and peers (Karia et al. 2016, 15). These interactions are very important in enhancing the child's wellness. Conversely, if these needs are not well addressed, it leads to childhood psychological disorders, which include "fear, anxiety, inability to socialize with others, resentment, aggression, nervousness, worry, and feelings of rejection" (Karia et al., 2016, 15).

Children's emotional reactions are linked to their cognitive abilities. Older children have the capacity to make the distinction between what emotion they display in response to what other people say and what they are actually feeling (Copsey 2003, 8). Children observe and imitate adult behavior and emotional response to issues. Play is critical in helping children rehearse their own behavior and reaction to issues. Carter opines, "In play, children rehearse the future and reflect on the past, organize their own learning and problem-solving, come to explore and control their bodies (coordination, motor skills, balance, spatial awareness) and emotions (exploration and control), and develop social skills (co-operating with others)" (Carter 2007, 42).

### **Cognitive Development**

Cognitive development has to do with the child's ability to reason, remember and learn. According to Laura Taylor, "Cognitive development refers to the way in which our thinking changes with age" (Taylor 2004, 4). These changes are affected by an individual's biological conditions and the environment within which the individual lives. While developing, children acquire skills that enable them to think, learn, read, remember, pay attention, and solve problems. The child's ability to navigate all these changes and process any information is affected by the ability according to his/her age. Jean Piaget (as cited in Carter 2007, 46) believed that cognitive development is a continuous process of assimilation and accommodation. The balance between accommodation and assimilation helps the child to organize past

experiences into concepts. This is an active process that made Piaget perceive children as active learners (Carter 2007, 46; Copsey 2003, 6).

Taylor believed that “cognitive development involves the constant reorganization of knowledge so that new incoming information is consistent with what the learner already knows. This has the knock-on effect of enabling the learner to develop new and more effective ways of dealing with and explaining the world” (Taylor 2004, 5). Children navigate this process of thinking and problem-solving in order to make meaning in life. Piaget proposed four stages of cognitive development: sensorimotor, pre-operational, concrete operational, and formal operations. In the first stage, the child makes meaning through senses, whereas the last stage involves more abstract thinking and very few adults attain this stage (Carter 2007, 49).

### **Spiritual Development**

Children are born with an innate connection to a spiritual being. They need the support of adults to nurture them towards a spiritual connection. Spirituality in the life of a child is very important and a springboard to a child’s building of faith. According to John H. Westerhoff, faith is not taught, but it is caught (Westerhoff 2000, 19). Therefore, children’s spiritual growth is predicated upon adults’ Christian lifestyle, which children need to catch. This does not mean that God is out of the picture. In every moment, adults play their role, but God works in the life of the child to bring salvation.

Westerhoff compared the development of faith to a tree trunk and proposed that faith develops like the rings of a tree. The rings of faith growth occur as a result of life experiences and of interacting with others and with God. Westerhoff proposed four stages of faith development: experienced faith, affiliative faith, searching faith, and owned faith. At the experiential level, the child gets to know about this faith through participating in many Christian rituals done in the home, church, or other places of worship. At the searching faith stage, children begin to question the faith they have believed all along. Nothing holds unless it is well answered and clarified. At the final stage, the child makes a commitment to own the faith, hence conversion (Westerhoff 2000).

In their project on children’s spirituality, David Hay and Rebecca Nye found out that children’s spiritual awareness is mostly artificially blocked



out by secularized society (as cited in Copsey 2003, 9). As a result, children's spirituality is damaged by "a squashing of the sense of awareness; the crushing of mystery; the rise of individualism and the breakdown of the family; a pushing out of the consciousness of the fundamental questions of meaning such as 'Who am I?'" (as cited in Copsey 2003, 9). Unfortunately for children, when the image of God is scratched, they inherit a negative image of God and self.

### Historical and Sociological Perspectives about Children

The history of the world has witnessed children being understood and treated differently. There are varied themes that emerge from these perspectives, and it is important to explore them in helping formulate a properly theological reflection on children. Philippe Aries pointed out that in the middle ages, children were mixed with adults once they were capable of doing without their mothers or nannies, basically about the age of seven (Aries 1965, 411). In this regard, children participated in all activities with adults, whether it was work or stories. The concept of childhood did not exist, and therefore there was no preferential treatment for children. Nonetheless, Aries revealed that,

This is not to suggest that children were neglected, forsaken, or despised. The idea of childhood is not to be confused with affection for children: it corresponds to an awareness of the particular nature of childhood, that particular nature which distinguishes the child from the adult, even the young adult. In medieval society, this awareness was lacking.... The infant who was too fragile as yet to take part in the life of adults simply "did not count." (Aries 1965, 128)

The sixteenth and eighteenth centuries witnessed changing views about children, from a stage of no childhood to a state where children were recognized in their own right and later regarded as vulnerable needing care and protection. Key themes within this period include children as weak, sinful, mini-adults, and innocent.

### **Children as Weak, Poor, and Needy**

Children have been viewed as weak, poor, needy, and subordinate members of the community (Moss and Petrie 2005, 55–6; Orona 2007, 101; Georgieva

2013, 3). It is true that physically children are weaker than adults, and in many ways, they are needy and seek help from adults. Many thinkers in history “have viewed children weaker than their adult counterparts, lesser beings in every way and lower in status than their more logical and experienced elders” (Orona 2007, 101). This paints a negative picture of the capacity of children and has led to maltreatment of children or lack of utilizing their full potential.

Some scriptural passages seem to point to the aspect of children being dependent and weak. As a result of their weakness, they need discipline and direction from adults. Reflecting on Prov 22:15, Prov 29:15, and Rom 3:23, Miriam J. Hall argues that these passages picture children as dependent, trusting, foolish, in need of firm discipline, and sometimes wayward. She further notes that like everyone else, children are sinners who, if left to their own devices, pursue a pathway of wrongdoing (1980, 23).

The perspective of children as weaker and with lesser capacity also appears in the writings of theologians such as Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas believed that children were “immature and simpleminded,” subordinate members of the community (Aquinas as cited in Orona 2007, 101–2). This led to children being seen as human becomings and not human beings (Orona 2007, 102). These views undermine the whole value and dignity of children. In the Jewish context, “children were to be subservient to parents, respectful and obedient” (Hall 1980, 23). Whereas respect and obedience from children are important, their being treated as subservient is negative and unbiblical. Duncum points out that though this was a historical perception of children, it is still practiced in modern society. He says that while childhood is cherished for its innocence, it often represents a lower, inferior state of being (Duncum 2002, 101).

The reformation period of the seventeenth century promoted the importance of the parental role in nurturing children and the value of education. Aries reveals that parents were taught that they were spiritual guardians and responsible before God for the souls and bodies of their children. Additionally, parents were helped to know that “a child was not ready for life, and that [a child] had to be subjected to special treatment, a sort of quarantine, before [a child] was allowed to join the adults” (Aries 1965, 412).

John Wesley is known for actively promoting the welfare of children

through the establishment of schools where children from both the lower and upper socioeconomic status could attend. He provided education for boys and girls, and he mixed children from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Wesley also established many institutions to take care of the sick and poor (Bunge 2001, 26). Paradoxically, though these schools were intended to improve the welfare of children, education was provided so as to push children towards adulthood. This is because children were viewed as lesser members of the community and had several deficiencies (Orona 2007, 102).

The preceding discussion reveals that some theologians had a negative view of children's capacity and their place in society. As a result, most of the programs that were implemented for children pushed them towards maturity, which would eventually provide them a status. Such views held about children demeaned them, and there is a possibility that children were subjected to pain, fear, and anxiety. In opposing this negative attitude towards children, Orona contends that although children need guidance and support from adults, this does not qualify them as less human or unable to contribute to the welfare of the community (Orona 2007, 102).

### **Children as Mini-Adults**

Before the sixteenth century, children "were simply considered smaller, less intelligent and weaker versions of adults" (Aries 1962, as cited in Hook and Duncan 2009, 564). Aries further notes,

Indeed it appears that size was the most salient difference in medieval depictions of adults and children, with the latter typically viewed, treated, and even dressed the same way as their adult counterparts. An examination of the 12th-century European art will reveal that children during that period were invariably portrayed as miniature, complete with adult-like facial features and postures. (Cited in Hook and Duncan 2009, 564)

Viewing children in this manner had implications for their lives. Such views allowed "children to relate freely with adults in work, play, and worship, but it also meant that children were required to take on adult responsibilities at a very early age" (Orona 2007, 102). Likewise, Mark Poster argued that children were not significantly different from adults since they worked for long hours and enjoyed many pleasures as adults (1988, cited in Hook

and Duncan 2009, 565). Consequently, children were frequently included in adult conversations, jokes, and entertainment. Noticeably, children did not enjoy childhood but assumed adult roles, which could hinder their normal growth and development.

### **Children as Sinners**

Based on some Biblical passages, it is believed that every human being is born a sinner (Ps 51:5), and all human beings inherit sin from Adam (Rom 5:12–20). As a result, from very tender ages, children are seen as sinners demonstrating continuous willful disobedience (Carter 2007, 18–9). This theological view was strongly propagated by Augustine, who believed that children were “non-innocent” and therefore prone to eternal doom at whatever stage of life. As a way to respond to this problem, he advocated for infant baptism so as to cleanse children of their sin (Orona 2007, 103). Augustine further argued that “if children inherited sin, they needed to be kept safe ‘for their own good,’ taught or trained how to behave morally” (as cited in Carter 2007, 10). This perspective made people in Christian history handle children with strictness and firmness to turn their hearts from sin.

Carter documents that the Puritans compared children to “an unbroken horse [which] turns out to be stubborn” (Carter 2007, 20). Due to this attitude, parental authority was required to help children change. Furthermore, Carter says, “Children bore the marks of original sin, evident in pride, self-centeredness and above all willfulness. Parents were to suppress and control what was understood as natural depravity through weekly catechism, daily prayer and Scripture reading, warnings and, if necessary physical punishment” (Carter 2007, 20). The firmness in Christian teachings and Christian homes was to ensure that children were brought up morally right and their hearts attuned to the heart of God.

John Wesley also propagated strict punishment for children. He is believed to have held the view that children were fallen and in need of conversion. He, therefore, advised parents “to break the will of your child, to bring [your child’s] will into subjection to yours that it may be afterward subject to the will of God” (as cited in Carter 2007, 20). However, it is notable that although Wesley advocated for physical punishment, it was to be used as a last result after trying other options of discipline. Bunge notes

that though some theologians perceived children negatively as sinners, they did not recommend physical punishment since the Bible recommends love for neighbor. However, for others, the fact that children inherit sin goes hand in hand with the physical discipline of children (Bunge 2001, 13).

### **Children as Innocent**

Historically, children were believed to be innocent, that is, not corrupted by any sin or evil. According to Carter, “Innocence related to naivety, simplicity, vulnerability, and lack of adult knowledge of sexuality and suffering” (2007, 21). This perception of children as innocent became prevalent in the eighteenth century and thrived in the later years. According to Chris Jenks, “Children were regarded as possessing a unitary state. They were innocents. Any other conception, such as object of erotic desire, abused victim, or violent criminal, were seen as aberrations or deviations from the norm of innocence” (1996, as cited in Duncum 2002, 98). This period strongly contrasted earlier perceptions of children, where they were perceived as sinners and inherently evil.

The idea of childhood innocence was popularized by Jean Jacques Rousseau, who believed that children were innocent and that they had inner goodness that could only be tarnished by the evil in society (Carter 2007, 21). Rousseau stated that “Everything is good as it comes from the hands of the Creator; everything degenerates in the hands of [humans]” (Rousseau 1964, 55). Childhood was perceived as a time of happy innocence and openness to learning (Jenks 1996, as cited in Duncum 2002, 99). With innate goodness, children were to be educated and socialized in the natural world. Children were to be allowed to be children before they could become adults; otherwise, the natural order would be perverted. Childhood was to be appreciated in itself and not as a developmental stage (Carter 2007, 22).

In Rousseau’s view, children were not to be introduced to education very early since this would corrupt their minds. Children were filled with inner morality and therefore needed to keep their souls as fallow as possible. Children would only do wrong things because they were taught by adults to do so. He, therefore, argued, “The child is only naughty because [the child] is weak; make [the child] strong and [the child] will be good; if we could do everything we should never do wrong” (Rousseau 2013, 39).

### Implications for Missions with Children

Perspectives held about children are broad-ranging, from Biblical to socio-logical contexts. These views have both negative and positive impacts on children. The example of Jesus's interaction with children should impact the way ministry is done among children. Whereas society has differing perspectives about children, Jesus had a high place for them. He was keen to meet children's needs. He interacted with them and also said special things about children (Hall 1980, 23). His ministry was not only limited to adults but extended to children. Notably, Jesus was willing to interrupt or stop his plans for the sake of children (Hall 1980, 23). Sanne states,

Jesus was very concerned about children's situation. He embraced them (Mark 9:36), blessed them, became indignant when his disciples rejected them and held them up as examples of faith (Mark 10:13–16). To welcome a child means to welcome Jesus and the Father (Mark 9:37). He strongly warned against causing children to sin (Matt 18:6) and to look down on them (Matt 18:10). (2007, 24)

Mission with children is important so as to enhance holistic restoration of children who are affected by the fall. According to J. Andrew Kirk, missions is "the purposes and activities of God in and for the whole universe" (as cited in Brewster 2011, 150). These purposes do not exclude anyone, and they are holistic. Brewster argues that God's purpose has been to redeem humankind and re-establish his kingdom on earth (2011, 150). Within God's purposes of redeeming mankind, his intention is to restore *all* people (children included) to what he created them to be and fulfill.

Missions to and with children is critical in the church due to the implications of the fall. The fall, as recorded in Gen 3, affected people in all dimensions: physically, socially, spiritually, intellectually, and emotionally. Thus, restoration must be on all these levels for one to enjoy the relationship with God. The church should not only focus on the spiritual wellbeing of children but on their holistic wellbeing. Brewster points out that "*whole* children have bodies, minds, and emotions; they exist in spheres such as family, school, work, society, and other structures" (2011, 150). Holistic growth and restoration can only take place in children if there is a ministry that focuses on the provision of needs in all the spheres of life. Children

should receive their basic needs such as food, shelter, health services, water, security, education, participation in a spiritual community, love, and warmth.

### **Ministry with Children at the Local Church**

The local church has a responsibility to nurture children towards holistic growth. Robert J. Keeley points out that children must be nurtured in their faith by the whole community of faith, not just their parents (2008, 21). The church community has a Biblical mandate to nurture children's faith and help them grow in the ways of the Lord. Teaching the Word of God to children and inviting them to a personal relationship with Jesus is the greatest requirement of the local church.

Nevertheless, the church must offer holistic ministry to children. In this sense, the church needs to be an authoritative community for children. According to the Commission for Children at Risk, an authoritative community is one that is a social institution that includes children and youth, treats children as ends in themselves, is warm and nurturing, has the core of its work performed largely by non-specialists, enables children to benefit from being around people in all stages of the life cycle by being multi-generational, has a long-term focus, reflects and transmits a shared understanding of what it means to be a good person, encourages spiritual and religious development, and is philosophically oriented to the equal dignity of all persons and the principle of love of neighbor (Commission for Children at Risk, as cited by Keeley 2008, 26).

Children in a local church should be offered love, care, and nurture. They should be allowed moments of meaningful participation. Westerhoff argues that children learn through experience and not necessarily through understanding Biblical concepts. They learn through imaging, hearing stories, and using their imagination to process the stories and their experiences (Westerhoff 2000, 61). Children must be supported to become responsible participants in the life of the church, or the church will fail to incarnate Christ and to truly see the Kingdom of God (May et al. 2005, 143). According to Larry Richards, the Old Testament context allowed children to "participate with adults in the worship, symbolism, and events that teach about God and faith relationship with Him" (1983, 25). Meaningful participation

for children will help them unleash their full potential and make a contribution to God's Kingdom.

Holistic ministry with children in the church context requires the establishment of child-friendly churches. The church should ensure that children feel safe, welcome, and fully protected. A child-friendly church is one that creates a world where a child can love and be loved and where programs, facilities, and staff are child-friendly (Brewster 2011, 121–134). Friendly facilities are characterized by having child-level seats and tables, ramps (especially where there is a multi-story building), and bright colors in the rooms. Programs such as Vacation Bible School (VBS) and camps have a greater potential of attracting and retaining children in the congregation. These programs should be effective in teaching children the foundations of the Christian faith and directing them toward growth and maturity in Jesus. The staff need to be screened and ratified as those who can work with children. A background check, references from those who have worked with such people, and recommendation letters are essential before hiring staff to work with children. Staff should have a heart and calling to work with children.

### **Ministry with Children in the Family**

The family is the basic societal unit, as evidenced in Gen 2:24; 5:21–6:4. A family that nurtures children is characterized by faithfulness, responsibility and obedience, and mutual submission. These are critical virtues within a family. When they are lacking, the family fails to meet its responsibility effectively. The effect of sin culminating in the breakdown of the family, characterized by separation, divorce, mobility, self-centeredness, consumerism, and materialism, has wounded and destabilized the child (“Children at Risk: Statement of an International Consultation at Oxford, January 1997,” 2). These circumstances challenge the lives of children and put them at risk. Despite these sin issues, God intends children to grow and thrive in families with loving parents who attend to their needs, give appropriate information at opportune times, and explain the wonders of God on a daily basis (Choun and Lawson 2002, 17).

Parents have a great responsibility toward children to guide them to walk



in godly ways. According to Bunge, parents are to provide for their children's basic needs; respect, enjoy, and be grateful to God for their children; nurture their children's faith; help them use their gifts to serve God and others; and finally listen to children and learn from them (Bunge 2007, 55–6). In doing this, parents provide their children with a safe haven and help them to unleash their potential as God desires. Families need to provide a place for ministry to children. This may include (1) studying the Bible together, (2) serving the church and community together, (3) caring for the environment, (4) identifying mentors for their children, (5) performing worship rituals together, (6) educating children, (7) fostering life-giving attitudes toward the body, sexuality, and marriage, and finally (8) taking up a Christ-centered approach to discipline, authority, and obedience (Bunge 2007, 59–62). Children should not be a liability but a blessing and source of joy (Ps 127:5) to the family.

### **Special Ministries with Children at Risk**

Children are at risk from various challenges. The breakdown in families, deaths, accidents, natural disasters, recruitment in the army, disabilities, wars, and more place children at risk. Children “suffer from hunger and homelessness, work in harmful conditions, high infant mortality, and deficient health care and limited opportunities for basic education.” (Swaroop 2009, 88). Such children need to receive care and nurture from adults and especially the church. Children at risk are deprived of the dignity that is due to them, and this kills their sense of worth and esteem. There is a need to provide these children with a safe environment and to protect them against abuse (May et al. 2005, 138). It is not enough to simply rescue those at risk; they must also be offered the fullness and wholeness of life in the Kingdom.

Ministry with children at risk demands that they be protected from all forms of abuse. Jeyaraj outlines the contexts within which children are to be protected: protection from slavery (Ex 21:7–11), physical injuries (Ex 21:20–21), rape (Ex 22:16; Deut 22:23), prostitution (Lev 19:29), divorce (Deut 22:13–19), sacrifice and sorcery (Lev 18:21), and discrimination (Gal 3: 26–29) (2009, 21–8). The Bible is clear about God's concern for children. Deuteronomy 10:18; 24:17 and Ps 68:5 present God as the defender of the fatherless and the widow, as loving the foreigner and giving them food and

clothing. Evidently, God not only provides for their physical needs (food and clothing), but he also provides for their emotional (love) needs. In Matt 18:6 and Mark 9:42, Jesus said it would be better for whoever causes the little ones to stumble for a large millstone to be hung around their neck and be thrown into the sea.

God's heart for children at risk implies that Christians should be at the forefront to protect and care for children. His compassion should move all believers to act on behalf of children at risk. There is sufficient justification for providing special preventive and protective guardianship of children at risk ("Children at Risk: Statement of an International Consultation at Oxford, January 1997," 5). The response to such children should be to provide them an environment for holistic growth. Those without food need food, those without love need love, those without shelter need shelter, and those without family need a family. Care and protection for children at risk affirm the fact that they are created in the image of God and possess intrinsic worth. This response is significant for it affirms Biblical teaching for providing compassion to those in need as shown in Matt 24:35–36, where Jesus declares, "For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me" (NIV).

### Conclusion

Children are a blessing from the Lord and bear God's image. They need to be received by adults and nurtured within caring and loving environments. On the one hand, children have been neglected, yet, on the other hand, they have been accepted and allowed to interact with adults. History reveals that children have been viewed as mini-adults, sinners, innocent, and weak. Modern society perceives children as commodities, consumers, and dependents requiring a lot of attention. The historical, sociological, and Biblical views of children must be held in tension. Yet overall, the Biblical perspective must supersede all. The care, nurture, and understanding of children must take into consideration their social, emotional, physical, cognitive, and spiritual developmental needs. With the proper information about children, all child caregivers must give children the right place, that is, created in God's image and

worthy of care and nurture. The church must have space for all children to grow and flourish for the glory of God. Indeed, all people must heed Jesus's call: "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them" (Matt 19:14).

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