



SCRIPTURE UNION INTERNATIONAL CHILDREN'S MINISTRIES

Resource Paper

THEOLOGY OF CHILDHOOD

A theological resource framed to guide the practice of evangelising and nurturing children¹

HISTORICAL PREAMBLE: THE JOURNEY THUS FAR

The following document was forwarded to Scripture Union's International Council in February 2002, and formally presented to that Council's meeting in September of the same year. It was adopted as a Resource Paper by the International Council in September 2003. Naturally it builds on past statements and reports, of which an excellent and detailed summary can be found on pages 66-68 of Wendy Strachan (Ed.), *Children's Ministry: Joining Children on their Spiritual Journey*, which is the Report of the Scripture Union International Children's Ministry Consultation, held at Nottingham, U.K. in 2001. The summary mentions particularly the contribution of the appropriate chapter in the book *Share the Word*, 1979; the Scripture Union International Conference at Harare, Zimbabwe, in 1985; the International Consultation held near Bangkok, Thailand, in 1988; the International Consultation held at the De Bron Centre in Holland, in 1992; and the Consultation held at Northampton, U.K. in 1999.

Of all these, the report within *Share the Word*, entitled : "Scripture Union's Ministry to Children": has special significance, having been 'sent out by the (International) Council as an official statement of the principles on which Scripture Union's ministry to children is based'. (p.11). In that document, it was admitted that 'the statements do not claim to have reconciled or harmonised all the different views to be found in our midst; however, we believe that they provide a positive basis for the active pursuit of our evangelistic work among children, and for further study, to which we have committed ourselves' (pp.14,15).

At a meeting of Regional Secretaries and the International Secretary in 1996, it was decided to set up a second International Commission to concentrate on Children's Ministry, partly to deal with contemporary challenges in the work, but partly to devote time and energy to the 'further study' of the Theology of Childhood, promised in 1979. Dr Bill Andersen, who had chaired the first Commission and edited the Report in *Share the Word*, was asked to chair the second Commission also. In editing the following Report, he has felt free to incorporate a number of passages from *Share the Word*, where they were thought still relevant and challenging.² It is in the theological

¹ Throughout this Statement 'children' refers to the age-group from 0 to the onset of puberty. Definitions on the issue vary greatly, but this one recognises the qualitative difference that announces the transition to adult sexuality.

² The passages are as follows:

1. Section E – last 4 paragraphs are an adaptation of *Share the Word* 2B.II. The spiritual development of the child, pp. 16,17.
2. Section G1 – paras 2, and 3 are an adaptation of *Share the Word* 2B III para 1, p. 17

sections where further material has been supplied and earlier material clarified, and hence alternative approaches compared and contrasted and affirmed or otherwise. In the course of the Commission's work—late 1996 to early 2002—it was confirmed that the International Council was looking towards a definitive statement, analogous in stature to that of 1979.

The Commission, set up at the end of 1996, consisted initially of twelve members drawn from all the Scripture Union Regions, and consisting, for the most part, of those directly involved in ministry with children. In the first 'general discussion' stage of its work, email exchanges flowed steadily on a number of issues, but tended to concentrate on Original Sin and its effects on the lives of children. As time moved on, however, the need arose for a new phase of the Commission's work. Hence, with the approval of the International Council, a drafting stage was initiated which required close face-to-face work, and which was served by four commissioners meeting in Sydney, Australia. The ensuing report has emerged from their meetings, but in close consultation with Wendy Strachan, the International Coordinator for Children's Ministry.

Finally, as time has gone on, the need for policy statements on Children's Ministry has been caught up within the wider Scripture Union International Strategic Review of 2001/2003. No doubt both the more inclusive and the more specific reviews will have ramifications each for the other.

INTRODUCTION

When serious evangelism of children is in view, God's concern covers both our thoughts about them and our actions towards them. Practical decisions *have* to be made, but these demand biblically generated reflection. Belief-options *have* to be chosen, but these affect methodology and policy. It is not possible to be solely practical or solely theoretical. Theology demands both in close partnership.

Starting from practical ministry, here are some questions:

- How clearly must a child understand God: Father, Son and Spirit; sin and judgment, to believe?
- If a child agrees: 'I want to love Jesus' is this true saving faith?
- For a child, is being sorry for some specific sins equivalent to repentance?
- Can some children be 'nurtured into faith' without any observable transition or conversion?

Starting from thought-out belief, are further questions:

- How is the child affected by original sin, as a member of a flawed human race?
- What is the fate of the child who dies without receiving Christ or without ever hearing about him?

Section G2.a, b and c are an adaptation of *Share the Word* 2B.III pp. 17, 18

Section G2.d,e,f,g and h, are an adaptation of *Share the Word* 2C.VI pp. 27, 28

Section G3 adapts para 1 from *Share the Word* 2C. II (a) p.24

Paras 3-4 are an adaptation of *Share the Word* 2B.IV pp.18,19

Section G4 is a direct quotation from *Share the Word*, Section V p.19, except that the original inclusive gender references are corrected

3. Section H.1 is a direct quotation from *Share the Word* 2B.VI, p.20
Section H.2 is an adaptation of *Share the Word* 2B.VII, p.20,21
Section H.3 is substantially a direct quotation from *Share the Word* 2C:IV, p.26
4. Section J is substantially a direct quotation from *Share the Word* 2B : IX, p.22

- Is a child saved by virtue of the parents being saved?
- Does it follow from Jesus' words: '*the kingdom of God belongs to such as these*' (Mark 10:14b) that all children are within the kingdom? What does this mean for the child's eternal destiny?

In what follows we commence by recognising the 'paradox of childhood' and continue by giving attention to *a sample only* of the above questions. We conclude with a fresh challenge to the evangelism of boys and girls, to their nurture in the faith, and to the practical proclamation of liberty for children wherever, in the world, they are oppressed.

THINKING BIBLICALLY ABOUT GOD AND CHILDREN

A. THE BIBLE AND ITS USE OF PARADOX

The Bible, being God-breathed, reveals many things to us in a direct way, and in doing so, confronts us with searching questions about ourselves, our relationships, our lifestyle and our society. As part of our overall response however, we frequently come back to the Bible with questions of our own, seeking answers, not out of mere curiosity, but because we think they would be important in our understanding and ministry.

Thus from the Bible we have Jesus' commission:

Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. (Matthew 28:19,20)

When sizing up the dimensions of this great task however, and noting that the Bible is addressed almost exclusively to adults and about them, we quite reasonably ask: 'What of the children? Are they seen in exactly the same light by God as adults? If there are differences, do these affect God's judgment of children, and do they affect the way we should evangelise them?'

We ask these questions precisely because the Bible has *not* said anything clear and definitive in answer to them. Though some claim that Scripture gets very close to clear answers about children, theologians are in general agreement that definitive answers are just not spelled out. This does not, however, bring the search to a sudden halt! Many questions on other topics are in the same position. The call is for *a detailed combing* of the Bible and *a careful linkage* of relevant biblical insights, with the confidence that clearer guidelines will emerge.

The task of searching, sifting, combing and linking is one that any sincere Bible-believing Christian will want undertaken, knowing that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth, whose concern is to guide us into all truth (John 14-16). While it is true, as remarked above, that the Bible reveals many things in a direct way, it is equally true that even in the deep, foundational issues of the faith, there are *paradoxes* built-in: that is, seeming contradictions.

For example, on the question of God's sovereign power, the author of Lamentations said:

*You, O Lord, reign forever,
Your throne endures from generation to generation.
Why do you always forget us?
Why do you forsake us so long?* (Lamentations 5:19)

What is our response here? Which side of the paradox should we affirm: God's sovereignty exercised continuously on behalf of his people; or his seeming absence from them in their own particular generation? In fact we affirm both! The loss would be great if we denied either side. We acknowledge that there must be a factor, unknown to us, which bridges the perceived gap. As another example, we consider questions of God's choice and responsibility over against the responsibility and choice of opposed human beings. Luke records Peter as declaring, in his Pentecost sermon:

This man (Jesus of Nazareth) was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. (Acts 2:23)

Once again, which alternative do we accept? Was the crucifixion the outcome of God's deliberate planning, or that of human beings who exercised their responsibility deliberately and wickedly? Of course, we affirm both. The crucifixion was God's eternal plan; *and* it was a wickedly irresponsible human act! We ponder an explanation, but reject the possibility that God deliberately planned an enormity of wickedness.

B. GOD'S CREATION OF CHILDREN AND JESUS' LOVE OF CHILDREN: THE BACKDROP TO A PARADOX

We must remind ourselves, at the very beginning of our exploration into the nature of childhood, that

God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him (Genesis 1:27) and also:

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good (Genesis 1:31)

Hence it is abundantly clear that *children* are created by God in his image and are affirmed by him to be very good, as created. Now there has been continuous debate on what 'in his image' means; but without embarking on this in detail, it indicates at least that human beings were formed to be like God, in some respects, and to be such that they could represent him adequately. Sin, of course, invaded the scene with its deforming influence, so that humans ceased to be as they had been created. But though the original 'image' was now marred, it has never been obliterated. We may, then, expect to see in children, glimpses of God's creative artistry.³ They are a special part of God's creative work, and they are also his good gift.

Furthermore, children, like all human beings, may not be murdered⁴ because they have been made in the image of God, nor may they be cursed⁵ for the same reason. Positively children are worthy of honour, respect and ultimate value because they have been created, addressed and loved by God; and this applies to children whatever their origins.

While any biblical approach to children is bound to focus on the New Testament, and the Gospels in particular, it is important also to note the place of children in the Old Testament. There the emphasis is on the corporate aspects, and hence on families, on the people of God and on the covenant God made with Abraham. Within this context, which concentrates on the response of *adults* to God, children are by no means forgotten. They are to be given careful education in the

³ This is a far cry, of course, from the vision of Wordsworth, the romantic English poet regarding children:

'Trailing clouds of glory do they come

From God who is their home.' (*Ode on the Intimations of Immortality*)

⁴ Genesis 9:4-6

⁵ James 3:9

home, involved in religious celebrations, national prayers and corporate repentance or rejoicing. In sum, children are included within the people of God, and such inclusion carries over into the New Testament and the Christian community. At this point there is theological divergence on the *nature* of this inclusion, as indicated in later sections of this Report; but inclusion of some kind has been widely acknowledged whether symbolised by baptism, presentation or dedication. To quote Henri Blocher:

*... there are spiritual effects from the family link as such – and here I am using the word ‘family’ ... in the sense of the bond of generation.*⁶

Though the emphasis on the corporate is strong in the Old Testament, two further points must be noted at this stage, while others, involving accountability, occur later.

First, *individual* responsiveness to God is affirmed of children, particularly in the case of Samuel (1 Samuel 1-3).

Secondly, God has ordained *praise* from the lips of children and infants (Psalm 8:2) prefiguring the extraordinary historical happening of children shouting ‘Hosanna’ in the temple when Jesus made his authoritative visit there (Matthew 21:16).

Reverting however to Psalm 8, the paraphrase in the N.I.V. Study Bible, is striking:

*The mighty God whose glory is displayed across the face of the heavens, appoints (and evokes) the praise of little children to silence the dark powers arrayed against him.*⁷

While there is a contrast here, between those who are little and those who are strong, there is also an implication that something about children enhances and enriches praise. The experience of Scripture Union workers in many parts of the world has affirmed the joy and sense of fulfilment which children can bring, not only to their families, but also to churches, especially in praise and worship. Such positive valuation, along with the creative and innovative approaches to ministry with children that embrace and echo it, is equally at home with both the major theological approaches discussed later in Section D.

Further, in a discussion of God’s creation of children, we take note of the fact that much is currently being written on ‘the spirituality of children’, which has links with what, earlier in this section, we called ‘God’s creative artistry’ in children. Much has been written on this issue, by both Christians and non-Christians, and much has been very vague and confusing. The recent thesis by C. Glenn Cupit however, who has himself been committed for decades past to Scripture Union work with children, is both clarifying and challenging in its understanding of Scripture and its insights into children’s experience. This is an important aspect of the Theology of Childhood, meriting deeper attention from now on.

Finally, and of utmost importance, is Jesus’ love of children. It is clear that *children had a special place in Jesus’ concern*. R.V.G. Tasker put it well when he observed :

*Jesus had an affectionate regard for children which is unique among teachers and writers of the ancient world.*⁸

How then, did Jesus see children, and what issues were involved? The first issue surrounds his welcoming and blessing of children. When people brought children to Jesus to have him touch

⁶ “The Status of the Child Before God and in the Church” – translation, p.7 of “Le statut de l’enfant devant Dieu et dans l’Eglise” – Exposé prononcé à la Journée des anciens des AESR, le 22 mars 1997

⁷ *The N.I.V. Study Bible*; Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 1985, p.793, f.n.8 : 16-2.

⁸ Tasker, R.V.G., *Matthew : An Introduction and Commentary*, London : Tyndale, 1969, p. 175.

them (e.g. Mark 10:13; Luke 18:15: ‘little children’ and ‘babies’ respectively), they showed their faith that he would want to do this, and it was rewarded:

He took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.
(Mark 10:16; Luke 18:16)

At the very least ‘blessing’ involves the bestowing of good, either at the time it was given or at a later stage. So children were not only included in the ministry of Jesus, rather than excluded, as the disciples had assumed, but also treated compassionately.

We now continue the theme of paradox, but against the essential backdrop of God’s creation and Jesus’ love.

C. THE PARADOX OF CHILDHOOD AND THE MOTIVATION FOR THE EVANGELISM OF CHILDREN

Now at least on the surface, there appears to be a paradox surrounding the biblical view of children. We shall here state it in extreme form, not so much to advance a solution – to be attempted in later sections – but to indicate connections with the question of motivation for evangelism. Clearly-held belief in this area precipitates a certain kind of motivation; and in turn motivation activates a certain kind of practical ministry.

One contention is that the child is to be *identified* with the rest of lost humanity. The human race, in which children participate, is in rebellion against God as a result of the Fall. Each child shares that sinful nature which humanity inherits from Adam. Children, like adults, have a heart-orientation away from loving God. This is abhorrent to God and deserves his condemnation.

The other contention, is that the child is to be *distinguished* from the rest of humanity, i.e. adults. Children are in process of development to responsible personhood, and in addition, were given a place in Jesus’ ministry, which seems to be special. Condemnation of them when they are as yet undeveloped in mind and will, and hence not individually accountable, seems not to be warranted.

In Section C, we explore the idea of original sin as it implicates the child; in Section D, the notion of development, and in Section E, what happens when children die. Thus we are continuing to examine the paradox at some length, but for now, we turn to the implication of both sides of the paradox for the motivation of evangelism.

The first position with its motivational implication is as follows:

... every child is viewed as being totally lost and separated from God until he (sic) has made a definite personal decision to forsake sin and accept Jesus Christ as Saviour. Consequently it is of the utmost importance that he be evangelised at the earliest possible age, so that he may be born again and thus made a member of God’s family.⁹

The other position is that, along with the welcome Jesus gave to children, his invitation to them, and his blessing of them, the mercy of God reaches out to them in their helplessness as dependent and not fully accountable, so that his judgement will not be enacted in the event of their death. While still children they are ‘safe’, in terms of condemnation. This view values teaching children,

⁹ Anthony C. Capon, “Towards a Theology of Childhood”: paper given at the Congress on Children and Families, Auckland, January 1978, p. 1. This is not, incidentally, the view that Capon himself adopts.

forming relationships with them, and weighing their stage of development with great seriousness, as an integral part of their nurture in the faith. Consequently the motivation is one which prizes the disciplining of children over time, alongside an urgency which is due to their inevitable emergence as persons who are fully responsible before God. What is to be attempted now in Sections C, D and E draws upon insights from many sources, but chiefly from several interpretations of the scriptural approach to children. For the sake of simplicity and clarity, however, we shall focus our detailed attention on the most recent of Ron Buckland's books on the subject, and also on several publications of Henri Blocher, including his recent book on Original Sin and several articles written in French over a period of years, but now available in English translation.

D. THE CHILD AND ORIGINAL SIN

1. The doctrine

Considerable clarity has been given to the long-standing doctrine of original sin by Henri Blocher's recent publication: *Original Sin: Illuminating the riddle*¹⁰. He suggests:

*One cannot deny a congruity between the 'riddle' of experience and the tenets of our doctrine: sin is of the race, and at the same time it is of each one of us because each of us wills to sin.*¹¹

Another way of referring to the 'riddle' is to add it to our list of paradoxes.

In dealing with the two main interpretations of Romans 5:12 (the passage central to the whole notion of original sin), Blocher discerns that one approach, while not denying that 'sin is of the race', emphasises that 'it is of each one of us'. His summary is as follows:

*All people die because all have sinned (throughout history, in their own individual lives); all have sinned because they were born with a bent¹² towards sin; they were so born because Adam sinned first.*¹³

Blocher and other commentators who themselves find difficulties with this view, nevertheless concede that Romans 5:12 can be read in this light. The other approach,¹⁴ while not denying that sin 'is of each one of us', emphasises that 'it is of the race'. Once again Blocher's summary follows:

*All have sinned in Eden, in Adam's person. Through Adam sin entered the world. How did death, the judicial payment for sin, follow? Since Adam's sin was not only his own 'private' transgression but that of the whole race – since all have sinned in the one disobedience of Genesis 3 – death spread to all.*¹⁵

For the record, Blocher states his dissatisfaction with the way both interpretations have been spelled out, and provides for us a new interpretation of his own, within which there is a somewhat different balance between the solidary or corporate side of the paradox, and the

¹⁰ Leicester : Apollo, 1997

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 95

¹² That is, a bias

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 65

¹⁴ Basically that of Augustine of Hippo

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 71

individual side. It is not our purpose, however, to pursue a theological solution of original sin for its own sake.

The reason for invoking a selection of Blocher's clarifications is to show that several influential viewpoints bearing on the Theology of Childhood tend to reflect the two main interpretations of original sin in general which have been sketched above.

In the case of Ron Buckland whose recent book, *Children and the Gospel*¹⁶ is a succinct and carefully argued example of what we shall call the **Kingdom Belongingness** viewpoint, it is clear that his view accords with the first alternative noted by Blocher. Thus:

The fact that Adam's actions affect all humanity seems plain. We are born into a world characterised by sin and rebellion against God. We are also born with a 'twist' in our human nature, one that left alone will result in our own rebellion against God. But the 'twist' or bias¹⁷ is not automatic. We choose to obey or disobey God. When we choose to disobey God, we line up with Adam's sin.¹⁸

Though Buckland may prefer a phrase other than 'original sin', nevertheless the recognition of a 'twist' witnesses to a factor transmitted through the human race as a whole, by whatever means, and hence the phrase may fit, if broadly construed.

Not only is Henri Blocher the illuminator of the doctrine of original sin, but, as mentioned, he is also a contributor. Suffice it to say that, in spite of certain dissatisfactions with traditional interpretations whether ancient or modern, he aligns himself with those who, while in no sense denying the reality of individuals willing to sin, nevertheless emphasises that sin 'is of the race'. He affirms:

The child, born a sinner in Adam, is considered as such until his personal profession of faith ... 'Born a sinner in Adam'. This is the ancient doctrine of original sin, as it is called. ... It is biblical to say that we are 'by nature', that is to say, from birth, by virtue of our descent, 'children of wrath', that is considered guilty in the judgement of God, deserving of the wrath of God 'like the rest [of mankind]' (Ephesians 2:3).¹⁹

While we must hear a further statement from Blocher to be placed alongside the one above, this is the point, at which this Statement, while not claiming to adjudicate the *differences* already noted, makes its own position clear. The Scripture Union Statement of Belief declares *both* that 'through our sinfulness and guilt we were subject to [God's] wrath and condemnation', this, following Romans 3:25, to include 'sins committed'; and *also* that 'we now are members of a fallen race'.

To return to Blocher, he remarks further:

The thesis which says that the child who is born a sinner in Adam is considered to be such until he professes personal faith does not mean that

¹⁶ West Gosford : Scripture Union, 2001

¹⁷ Or "bent" in Blocher's terms

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p.43

¹⁹ *op.cit.* p.1.

*children who die very young are necessarily lost, that they go to a hell, even the mildest of hells, as Augustine thought.*²⁰

We shall call his view the **Merciful Judgement** position. The specific question of what happens when children die without professing personal faith will be addressed in a later section. Here it is important to note, however, that there is a view which claims precisely what Blocher denies: in other words that children are in exactly the same position as adults, with respect to the judgement of God. We shall call this view the **No Difference** position. These distinctions have been delineated and contrasted because they bear upon views of the spiritual status of children to be filled out subsequently. Not to spell them out would be to leave the theological origins of those views unclear and therefore suspect. To display them, however, will hopefully indicate not only the differences, but also the convergences as affecting ministry among children.

2. The Effects

We contend that the child, though functioning as an individual before God, must also be viewed as a member of the fallen human race, whether this implies a twist in our human nature, or a nature impregnated with sin and expressive of it in attitude and action. Whichever way it is viewed, original sin has always raised important questions, theoretical and practical, about how it is transmitted over time from one generation to another. Augustine claimed an *hereditary or genetic transmission*, but many, including Blocher, consider the postulation of a ‘sin gene’ or a chromosomal aberration as far too crude.²¹ Instead he points to cultural and other factors, such as language and personality, as playing a significant part in the total process of transmission. And we have already noted that Buckland²² agrees that we are born into a world characterised by sin and rebellion against God. It is precisely the impact of cultural factors on the development of the child that has not been given proper recognition in discussing the transmission of original sin, but such factors, deriving from contemporary ideas in social science, can shed much light on the child’s involvement with sin. How does the sinfulness of the race typify the life of children when in process of development? Is it just that the child is oppressed by sin: externally belaboured, as it were? No, but without minimising Satan’s external stratagems, the child is not exclusively a victim. If sin is transmitted, it must be a force *within*.

An answer comes from that stance in psychology which recognises the reality of *internalisation*.²³ Those with whom the child is in close contact become part of his or her developing personality. Even more significantly, *relationships* between child and parent become internalised, as does the relationship between the two parents.

It was George Herbert Mead, an American sociologist who observed an even wider instance of internalisation in family dynamics. The *whole set of relationships* constituting a family is internalised in such a way that boys who have been physically abused by their father, for example, will often tend later, when they become fathers, to repeat the pattern provided there has been no effective influence or intervention to the contrary. Examples abound, but the significant point is that person-models and relationship-models which start off as external, become internal within the child. Theologically such models which are flawed by sin are passed on to children as inexorably as any purported ‘sin-gene’. Not only family relationships but also the culture surrounding the child are passed on by all those significant

²⁰ *ibid* – translation, p. 6

²¹ Blocher : *Original Sin*, *op.cit.*, p.125.

²² And others sharing the **Kingdom Belongingness** view such as C. Glenn Cupit.

²³ The social use of which is called ‘acculturation’.

in a child's life. This is, of course, a subtle process; so invisible that it is like the air we breathe. And all cultures are themselves flawed by sin.²⁴ Cultural influences upon the development of the child's spiritual development are acknowledged by both **Kingdom Belongingness** and **Merciful Judgement** viewpoints. While discussing original sin, we must not forget the experiential counterweight of common grace, which involves not only the common gift of sun and rain both to the righteous and the unrighteous, but the good influences and the wondrous creativity discernible in many human beings, in human relationships, and in aspects of corporate culture. There are unregenerate doctors, town-planners, chefs, engineers, teachers, carpenters and plumbers, who do good, and who though sinful, influence and challenge adults and children well.

In this category, of course, are many parents. They, though evil, know how to give good gifts to their children,²⁵ and one of the greatest gifts is a good parent-child relationship, with the initiating of care, warmth and protection by the parents on the one side and the response of dependence and trust on the other. (See Ephesians 6:1-4 and Colossians 3:20,21). Trust will result from the parent's practical love; mistrust will result from the absence of care, warmth and the sharing of time by the parent.²⁶

E. THE CHILD AS A DEVELOPING PERSON

Scripture is full of incidental references to children as developing people, and to ways of nurturing and training them which carry the same implication. Thus there are frequent references to the need for instruction and discipline, eg. Deuteronomy 31:13:

Their children, who do not know this law, must hear it and learn to fear the Lord.

Similarly in Proverbs 4:1,5:

Listen, my sons, to a father's instruction, pay attention and gain understanding. Get wisdom, get understanding.

Instructive also are the ways in which adult leaders use the language of childhood to illustrate their felt lack of development when viewing their calling. Thus Solomon:

But I am only a little child and [therefore] do not know how to carry out my duties. (1 Kings 3:7b)

and Jeremiah (1:6):

'Ah, Sovereign Lord', I said, 'I do not know how to speak; I am only a child'.²⁷

²⁴ This discussion of internalisation will raise the question why Jesus did not internalise the sin of his human family. What follows does not pretend to solve a great mystery, but it attempts at least to introduce a new factor which may mitigate the perceived difficulty. The human Jesus was not only the son of Mary and a member of Joseph's family, but was also God the Son, living in communion with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, and expressing the interactive life of the Trinity. Thus within his heart was the dynamic of the 'God-family' which was equally as able to deal with temptation from his human family as from the onslaughts of Satan, when later he had left home and was quite alone.

²⁵ Matthew 7:11.

²⁶ This point was originally highlighted by Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York : Norton, 1963) but has been confirmed by many studies since.

²⁷ The above scriptural references are merely a small selection from a much more comprehensive listing in a paper by Dr Neil Chambers entitled "A Theology of Children" written for a conference on this issue.

Thus we have begun to indicate the passages occurring in the Old Testament which affirm the child as in process of development. This beginning will be reinforced as we proceed. In the meantime we note the emphasis in these passages on ‘not knowing’ and ‘not knowing how’, and the desirability of gaining wisdom and understanding.

Having indicated the drift of the above references it will now be appropriate to note the way a systematic theologian puts the elements together. Henri Blocher declares:

*The person develops progressively; this is a long process. In the biblical view, the child is characterized by a still germinal stage of personal life. The key formula is that he does not discern between good and evil. He does not know them, unlike the adult (Deut. 1:39; cf. Isaiah 7:15f) ... But for the adult in the world, we may say that being an adult means knowing good from evil. For one's behaviour it means being relatively independent. What distinguishes the child is that he is not independent.*²⁸

This estimate is consonant with the way, in the New Testament, Paul distinguishes, in 1 Corinthians 13:9-11, between the thinking, the reasoning, the talk and the general characteristics of children, on the one hand, and those of the responsible adult, on the other. Similarly, in Hebrews 5:13,14, the writer contrasts the level of teaching appropriate to an infant (milk) with that appropriate to the mature person (solid food). Behind these references and Blocher's idea of ‘emergence’ lies the notion of a *threshold* where the transition to responsible adulthood occurs. We here have a process whereby the child, as a child, is in process of *coming to know* the difference between good and evil; *coming to act* in view of that moral knowledge, and, presumably, also coming to experience the feelings appropriate to that knowing and acting.

In tracing this distinction between responsible adult and child, we are not claiming that there is a sharply defined or sudden point marking the threshold. As the years pass, children attain, at a time known to God, the kind and level of responsibility which goes with responsible adulthood, in the context of which they exercise their judgment. It may be that some reach maturity and responsibility well before their teens, while others do so only during adolescence or even later, and such differences will be related to family upbringing, personal characteristics, culture and interactions with the outside world, but above all, to the child's encounters with God.

One further clarification needs to be made, however. We have, just above, been looking at a *transition to accountability* of a child in his or her totality, but we now return to the emphasis on the child becoming or developing progressively *while still a child*. Physically, from the moment of conception, there is a continuous development to responsible adulthood. Psychologically, during the same period, the child is growing in awareness of self, in understanding of environment, and in appropriate involvement in relationships. Typically, there will be an uneven but continuous process of human growth, both physical and mental. In the spiritual realm especially when nurtured in the Christian faith, there is a similar pattern. The child becomes increasingly capable of understanding right from wrong, and hopefully this will lead to an increasing awareness of sin. There will be an increasing ability to grasp the saving message of God, and particularly the meaning of God's gift in Jesus Christ. At the same time, the child's capacity for *response* to God's message is developing, and the significance of its acceptance or rejection is becoming clearer. Overall, the child is *becoming* more and more responsible for choices as the years pass, until the fuller level arrives with the threshold to responsible adulthood. (The situation of the child out of touch with the church and Christian teaching will be dealt with later).

²⁸ Henri Blocher, ‘The status of the child before God and in the church’. *Exposé prononcé à la Journée des anciens des AESR, le 22 Mars 1997*. Translated by Geoff Cayzer, Sydney, Australia, Nov. 2000. Above reference : p. 7 of the translation.

Hence, in parenthesis, we reject the errors to be found at two extremes:

- a. that of expecting or requiring of children a level of understanding and response which is proper to the responsible adult – the error of *demanding too much*;
- b. that of putting off any challenge to respond to Christ until the child has attained a level of adult responsibility, whenever that may be – the error of *expecting too little*.

Putting off such a challenge is not an option since Jesus gave a special command that little children be encouraged to come to him. There is a form of repentance which is valid for a child, a form of faith also, and some measure of understanding. Sometimes we think of these as rudimentary, but in the light of Jesus' comments, it is better to see them simply as 'different' from the parallel adult experiences.

We believe, therefore, that children should be presented with the gospel at any age in a way in keeping with their current development; that they are capable, as drawn by the Holy Spirit, of responding validly; and that God will then act savingly in their lives.

F. WHEN CHILDREN DIE, AND WHAT IT MEANS TO BE "LIKE" THEM

1. Biblical research: where children stand before God

These themes prompt us however, to explore, in rather more detail than earlier, whether children who die, while uncommitted to God, are condemned to hell. Most biblical scholars agree that Scripture says nothing directly on this question. However, since the setting up of Scripture Union's First Commission on Children's Ministry in 1967, much thought and biblical research has been devoted in some quarters, directly or indirectly, to the issue. While the scriptures may not *pronounce* on the problem, they can scarcely be said, any longer, to be *silent*. A number of books and journal articles have been written on the issue and at least four theses have now been devoted to a careful and detailed examination. And in 2001, the first comprehensive volume has appeared on the history of Christian thought on the child. The Theology of Childhood may now be said to have 'come of age', with post-graduate courses being given in theological colleges, and with the area rapidly becoming recognised as a significant segment of Biblical Anthropology.

Three positions are now apparent as in our consideration of original sin. The first reiterates the position that children are in exactly the same position as adults: their eternal safety requires of them a conscious faith-commitment. There are no balancing factors here; no paradox; all is perfectly clear. This is the position of **No Difference**.

The second position is that children had a special place in Jesus' concern, and that the mercy of God reaches out to their helplessness, and recognises their lack of knowledge and responsibility. In this way, although God's condemnation may be seen as deserved because it applies to the whole human race, it will not be *enacted* on children in the event of their death. This is the position of **Merciful Judgement**

The third position is that Jesus declared that all children, as such, belong within his Kingdom, but that such belonging may become rebellion. Until such an outcome, however, they are 'safe' as far as God's judgement is concerned. This is the position of **Kingdom Belongingness**

The second and third positions do not agree with each other in all areas, but they have in common, practical emphases which lead broadly in the same direction. However, they both have serious differences with the first position, because they would claim that it does not take into account the full range of the teaching of scriptures relating to children. This is not the only important issue in theology on which biblical Christians have not reached complete agreement. Since Scripture Union is a movement that is both global and interdenominational, people who hold each position may be found amongst its staff and volunteers because of their love for children. However, it is much more likely that those working with Scripture Union will lean towards Positions 2 and 3.

2. Common Ground and Differing Emphases

The second position, which we have called **Merciful Judgment**, has a considerable area shared in common with the third, which we have called **Kingdom Belongingness**. First, both hold a developmental view of children as spelled out broadly in Section D above. Second, both give strong emphasis to the attitude of Jesus to children. The differences here lie mainly in two rival interpretations of passages such as:

Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. (Mark 10:14)

In addition, we have demonstrated (Section C) that the two approaches to Original Sin are clearly different; though this is in an area where biblical theologians entertain many variations.

3. Jesus' attitude towards children : common ground

We noted the major theme, in Section B above, that not only were children seen as the good creation of God, but also that Jesus manifestly loved them and treated them with compassion.

Following on from this, some, particularly of the **Kingdom Belongingness** persuasion, additionally see in the blessing of the children a parallel to the Old Testament blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh, his grandsons, by Jacob (Israel) which promised them a secure place within the Kingdom.²⁹

The second issue is complex, and has been the subject of considerable debate. When Jesus was asked:

Who is the greatest in the kingdom?

And in reply, called a little child to stand among the disciples, his verbal answer was:

Unless you change and become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 18:1-4)

The question, of course, is 'like little children' *in what respect?*

The answers proposed have been extraordinarily varied and imaginative through the Christian centuries. Many have claimed, and others rebutted for example, that 'moral innocence' or 'truthfulness' is being indicated; however there has been a growing consensus that the answer is not to be looked for in some form of subjective responsiveness, but rather in objective

²⁹ See Derrett, J.D.M., "Why Jesus blessed the children", *Novum Testamentum* 25 (1), 1-18, 1983.

helplessness, especially in the social sense of having a complete lack of social status: an important distinction between children and adults. In the context of the gospels, then, responsible adults, often having notions of status in view ('Who is the greatest?') are challenged by Jesus to mirror, *in their personal subjective attitude, the objective lack of status of the child.*

So Jesus welcomed and blessed children, including them in his ministry, and pointed to their helplessness as a spiritual norm for all. He was concerned for them personally and for what they symbolised. But cannot more be said, especially on the spiritual status of children?

4. Does the kingdom of God belong to little children?

Two different answers.

As noted above (sub-section 2), Jesus said:

Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

One group of writers³⁰ has studied the Greek term *toiouton*, translated as 'such as these' or 'those who are like them', and holds the view that it includes not only others who are like children, but also *children themselves*. This is based partly on certain references in the New Testament, where 'such as these' is practically equivalent to 'these', and partly on the logic: Who can be more *like* a child than the child? However, the position we have called **Kingdom Belongingness** draws not only on the application of a term in the Greek of the New Testament, but on a number of theological issues such as the spiritual dependence of children upon parents, and their consequent lack of direct accountability to God.³¹ While this is a very brief description of the position, it has now been carefully and extensively argued from a scriptural basis. Buckland has expressed one of its basic contentions thus:

*A child has a 'belongingness' that may become rebellion. ... The desire to nurture that belonging, and to avoid that rebellion propels us into urgent teaching and evangelism.*³²

There is no assumption that 'belongingness' is the equivalent of personal salvation; but rather the child is held to be 'safe' from God's judgment in the event of death.

Within what Blocher calls the 'riddle' of original sin, this view does not deny a corporate factor:

*We are born into a world characterised by sin and rebellion against God. We are also born with a 'twist' in our human nature, one that left alone will result in our own rebellion against God.*³³

³⁰ Including John Pridmore, *The New Testament Theology of Childhood*, Melbourne : Buckland, 1977. Ron Buckland (most recently) *Children and the Gospel*, W. Gosford, Scripture Union, 2001, C. Glenn Cupit: "Spiritual Development and the Public Educative Care of Children : A Critical Evaluation of Biblical and Dynamic Systems Perspectives": unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Murdoch University, Western Australia, 2001.

³¹ Not all proponents hold each contention in common.

³² Buckland, op. cit., p. 63.

³³ Buckland, *ibid.*, p. 43.

It nevertheless makes an individual emphasis:

*But the 'twist' or bias is not automatic.
We choose to disobey God, we line up with Adam's sin.³⁴*

The emergent question is left open for exploration in later chapters, namely:

The status of a child before the conscious choice can be made.³⁵

The other approach, which we have called **Merciful Judgment**,³⁶ also faces the question what is meant, in e.g. Mark 10:14, by 'such as these' or 'those who are like these', that is, by the Greek *toiouton*. While biblical exegetes have differed in their conclusions on this question, bearing in mind the support given or not by other scriptures, it would seem that expert New Testament linguists claim that *toiouton*, as used in the gospels, refers regularly and clearly to *others* and not to children. As will be shown, the **Merciful Judgment** approach also holds that children who die before professing Christian commitment are not condemned to hell; but for their justification, the contenders have to look elsewhere, particularly to Paul's Letter to the Galatians. For them, the claim of **Kingdom Belongingness** is not thought to be supported by the gospels.

5. Are children judged identically with adults?

The idea of Merciful Judgment

In Galatians 4:1-3, Paul declares that a child, even if the heir to an estate, is no different from a slave in being subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. Or, as Rick Watts puts it:

... we were once minors, no different from slaves, awaiting our maturity and under the discipline of the school master.³⁷

Granted that Paul is arguing in a context of laws of inheritance, nevertheless it is quite clear that the level of responsibility proper to the adult is contrasted with that proper to the child. *The child is not held responsible as is the adult.³⁸*

But lest it be argued that the legal setting nullifies our conclusion, because it applies to categories, rather than persons, we draw in, once again, Paul's observations of adult-child differences in 1 Corinthians 13:9-11. The thinking, the reasoning, the talk and the childish ways which distinguish children from adults are certainly personal; and it is these well recognised human characteristics which give plausibility to the more legal-sounding argument. It is surely safe to assume that God, in his creative wisdom, built in a stage of dependence, learning and development to his plans for human beings on their way to becoming 'finished products'. Indeed, it is quite certain that this is so, because the Son himself, made human, 'learned obedience from what he suffered' (Hebrews 5:8).

³⁴ Buckland, *ibid.* Emphasis has been inserted.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Propounded, in particular by Henri Blocher, "The status of the child before God and in the church", *op. cit.*

³⁷ *Encounter with God*, Wed. 14 Nov., 2001. Bletchley, Milton Keynes : Scripture Union.

³⁸ Paul continues: 'So also when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world (or under the elemental spirits of the universe)' (Galatians 4:3). If the alternative rendering is accepted – and verse 9 would support this – then children are held to be 'in slavery' to the cosmic powers, as divined by astrology in the first century; i.e. in slavery to the current permeating cultural beliefs. This would reinforce our position on the impact of cultural factors on the development of the child. See Section C above.

When we now bring into focus Paul's view³⁹ that the child is not held responsible as is the adult and Jesus' view that children are 'lowly' or are 'helpless' in important ways and when we add the point that it is God who is the designer and architect of human development and functioning, then we may suppose that *his Merciful Judgment will not contradict his merciful design*. Without doubt, he knows the moral and spiritual implications of 'coming to know' and 'coming to act' in any and all cultures, and has demonstrated compassion and a stay of judgment in the light of these and other circumstances.⁴⁰

To quote from Henri Blocher:⁴¹

It seems as if God has chosen to bring his just condemnation upon those who have rejected the light of his revelation, general or special, in a deliberate, conscious way, through the exercise of developed powers of mind and will, ... In principle 'germinal' mind and will are enough for God's righteous judgment ... but scriptural emphases suggest that God applies it only when further development has taken place.

Blocher claims, in fact, a theological consensus on this conclusion, on the part of almost all modern evangelical theologians.⁴² While these considerations do not *prove* the point, God's consignment of children to hell would appear to *contradict* all we know of his attitudes to and about them in Scripture.

6. Implications for children's ministry

As forecast in F (2) and C above, much is shared in common between the **Merciful Judgment** and the **Kingdom Belongingness** approaches to the Theology of Childhood. Both affirm a strongly developmental view of childhood; both acknowledge Jesus' welcoming attitude to children and their inclusion in the scope of Christian ministry, and both conclude that when children die, prior to personal commitment, they are not condemned to hell. Furthermore the suspicion that the **Kingdom Belongingness** approach would weaken the need for the evangelism of children is entirely unfounded, because of the acknowledgment that belongingness may well, and frequently does give way to rebellion.

If this consensus carries weight, then the question of *urgency in the evangelisation of children* will be seen in a particular light: it need not, indeed should not be rushed. Time is required for growing, for learning and for understanding, and the factor of understanding is as vital to the child as to the adult. (Matthew 13:23). And also time is required for building relationships between children and the Christians who serve and befriend them. There is, of course, a general urgency about the evangelism of children which will be indicated in a subsequent section, but it is an urgency compatible with taking the time and building the relationships required for the development of their trust both in the messenger and the Lord.

G. THE CHILD'S RELATIONSHIP WITH PARENTS

1. The Christian family: a biblical setting for growth

³⁹ This view is not restricted to Paul, biblically, but is affirmed in many places throughout Scripture. See Section D above.

⁴⁰ See Jonah 4:11a; Genesis 18:16-32; John 8:3-11.

⁴¹ Private correspondence to W.E. Andersen, August 5, 2000, p. 4.

⁴² Blocher, "The status of the child before God and the Church." 1997, p. 6.

God's command to children, and apparently his only one, is that they honour their parents (Deuteronomy 5:16, although this command is not restricted to children) and obey them (Ephesians 6:1 and Colossians 3:20). Most scholars agree that the effect of this commandment is that personal growth of the child towards loving God and neighbour is *growth achieved predominantly through relationship with parents or caregivers*. It is fascinating in this connection to follow Luke, who, observing the twelve year old Jesus, and highlighting his listening to and questioning of the adult teachers, and also his capacity for understanding and for giving astute answers (which Western culture might herald as autonomy from parents) nevertheless notes that he was obedient to his parents, even though they, along with other adults, had been astonished at his performance. Similarly Samuel, whose relationship with Yahweh was closer and less clouded than Eli's, his foster parent, ministered to the Lord *under Eli*. We should note, however, that neither Jesus' nor Samuel's obedience to parents or guardian excluded a direct relating to God and to other human beings while a child.

While the churches have formulated, in different ways, their beliefs concerning the children of Christian parents, some giving more significance than do others to their spiritual status within 'a covenant family', all agree that the child born into a genuinely Christian home has a distinct advantage over others. The child with a Christian parent is, via the parent's faith, brought into a vital, even if indirect connection with God.

In the Bible parents are urged by both example and by injunction to create a home for their children in which the grace of God is acknowledged and given freedom to work. In homes where parents do pray for, and with their children, teach and live out God's word, encourage responses to Christ and introduce their children to the fellowship and worship of a Christian congregation, children have the best possible setting for growing in the knowledge and love of God. Of course, we recognise that children brought up as members of even an ideal Christian family may later reject Christ, or, in covenantal terms, become 'covenant-breakers'.

One of the most pressing needs, within a world much of which is depersonalised and media-ridden, is for a strong mutual reinforcement of the home and the local church. It would not be biblically inaccurate to see the local church as a 'family of families', and indeed the more it can both support its families in their challenges, and itself be an enlarged family the more will be the spiritual gain of the children.

The existence of a church-and-family partnership emphasises the naturalness and appropriateness of worship in which children participate in active ways. Worship is a direct and corporate response to the Lord, and is integral to the spiritual nurture of children and to their growing in faith.

2. Influences and challenges

- a. **Example.** This is the greatest single means by which children are influenced to identify with, and later own the faith of their parents. By God's grace, a truly Christ-like life on the part of even one parent can have a powerful and lasting effect on the child's character.
- b. **Teaching.** God has placed the primary responsibility for teaching children the Word of God on the shoulders of their own parents. The child is meant to be introduced to God's Word and its application to many life-issues within the context of the family and beyond.

- c. **Discipline.** This is not restricted to ‘punishment’ or even ‘threat of punishment’, but includes every way in which, by guidance and the loving exercise of authority, a parent helps children overcome the wrong within.

A Christian parent’s sense of responsibility ought not to mean a continuous preaching and pestering of the children for decisions. (S)he ought not to exasperate or embitter them. Rather, as applied in the setting of the contemporary world, these methods of influence need to take account of the following challenges:

- the importance of the quality of relationships in the home, but especially those between husband and wife
- the need for consistency between what parents claim they believe and approve, on the one hand; and the way they act, on the other
- the opportunity within the family circle to be able to state clearly what one thinks, and to express doubts without shame
- the presence of love and discipline, and the provision of time in which parents and children interact and deepen their relationship

These factors help to make real and ‘dramatise’ the factors of justice, mercy, forgiveness, reconciliation and fellowship, and hence are potent evangelistic factors. With such emphases we may encourage parents to pastor their children, to counsel them, to help them make fuller responses to Christ as is appropriate to their development, and hence to assist them to grow in their faith.

Unfortunately, many children are put off Christianity by their experience of a so-called Christian home! We must recognise that a Christian family is one in which relationships and atmosphere are Christian, rather than one in which the sole criterion is that one or both parents are Christians.

3. Responses of children from Christian homes

We have explored now some facets of what could be described as the ‘spiritual solidarity’ of a genuinely Christian home. Every home, whether Christian or not, has its own life, atmosphere, and value-focus, and because of its internal relationships children are influenced by these factors. As we have noted, a special influence and spiritual status apply to the child of a Christian home. How, then, would we expect such a child to respond to Christ?

It would come as no surprise that (s)he would open up more and more to God as the years pass, responding to the Christ whom (s)he comes to know through the scriptures, until a mature faith is owned.

However, in many children, the process of growth is marked by static periods and transitional points forming a series of steps or even leaps towards maturity. God may use, for example, a particular lesson in Sunday school, a special family event, a mission or camp, a visit from a children’s evangelist or some personal crisis, to lead the child to himself. In all of this the Spirit of God is sovereign and moves as he wishes. A personal relationship with God involves commitment. We owe each child the right to become committed to Christ in a way determined by the persuasion of the Spirit which will be meaningful to him or her at that stage.

Sometimes a child will identify a particular act of commitment as being definitive and permanent. In other cases the child responds more than once to the same aspect of truth but each time at a higher level of understanding, so that the progress in faith is more like a spiral than a straight line.

This means that while some children, who grow up in Christian homes, develop a true faith in Christ without ever being able to identify a particular act of decision, and without being able to recall a time when they did not love God and trust Jesus, nevertheless specific acts of response usually play an important role even though an individual act of response may not be final or definitive. The one essential is that the child should, either imperceptibly or more dramatically, be able to affirm a personal relationship with Christ by rejecting his or her sinful lifestyle and by exercising faith in Jesus as Saviour and Lord.

4. Basic urgency in evangelising children not touched by church or gospel

Every family is different and has its own qualities as well as its own weaknesses. In this context, the classification of homes simply as 'Christian' or 'non-Christian' is inadequate. Nevertheless it is true that the vast majority of children in the world grow up in homes which offer no sustained witness to Christ and which do not bring the children into meaningful relation to the church. In many cases the influence of the home leads away from Christ and the will of God.

Initially, a child has no control over the attitudes which are being formed in him or her or over the style of life which (s)he is being moved to adopt, and even as (s)he develops greater understanding and independence (s)he will still very likely reflect the values of the family environment to a large extent, especially when (s)he finds the bias of his or her own nature leading him or her in the same direction.

But the childhood years are a formative period, during which the child is often flexible enough to respond positively to new stimuli and insights if they come in a convincing way. At the same time, attitudes may well be hardening into a settled condition of indifference to God. Here are both the opportunity and the imperative for children's evangelism.

On the one hand we are bound to repeat that a child who grows up in alienation from God is in a situation of danger in view of his or her growth in personal responsibility. On the other hand, in coming to Christ a child enters into the benefits of being God's son or daughter. Because (s)he is God's true child (s)he is secure under God's lasting care, (s)he can be certain (s)he has been forgiven, and (s)he has a source of strength for daily life.

In whatever circumstances we minister with children, whether in missions, camps, clubs or in other imaginative ways, the overall atmosphere will be vital. The qualities mentioned as ideally characterising a home where the parents are Christian, should as clearly characterise the Christian team with whom children are living or mingling. The quality of relationships and of individual lives will need to combine with whatever words are spoken to convey love and care which are central to the gospel.

H. Ministry with Children

1. The Gospel for children and families

We believe that it is a mistake to look upon the child as a subject for evangelism without reference to the family of which (s)he is a part. God has set children in families and has established relationships of love, discipline and obedience within the family context. We have no right to ignore these.

For this reason, if for no other, family evangelism, rather than the evangelism of children in isolation, should be our objective. If parents and children together respond to Christ, the whole life of the family is enriched. Whether the conversion process begins with the child or with one or other of the parents, what counts is that ultimately the whole family unit becomes orientated toward Christ and his kingdom. There is mutual support in prayer and learning, worship and service.

If this ideal situation cannot immediately be realised, we believe that God still calls us to evangelise children themselves. In our total approach however, we must always plan actively to provide nurture for those who respond. Our movement aims 'to express God's Good News to children ... and families, not only in words, but also by building caring relationships with them ... we emphasize that faith should always lead to action and to growth in Christian character and service'. ('Aims, Belief and Working Principles of Scripture Union', 1992, p.5).

There are cases where the conversion of a child leads ultimately to the conversion of a whole family. On the other hand, we must remember Christ's warning that his gospel might, on occasion, set children against their parents.

Of course this does not mean that parent-child relationships can be brushed aside in our evangelism. Parents have a right to know that God's Word is being presented to their children, and children have a right to hear the gospel of God's love. Both the rights of the parent and the rights of the child must be respected. If a parent objects to his child's hearing the gospel, these two rights come into conflict and we have to weigh them up carefully. The answer we reach will necessarily vary from one case to another.

2. Challenging Children appropriately

The child, like the adult, is won by love, by prayer, by God's Word, and by the Holy Spirit. Here is no magic formula, no production line, no infallible technique.

We regard three elements in evangelism as theologically essential:

- a. **Teaching.** In contrast to the manipulation of minds through the use of sentimentality or forceful techniques, Scripture Union has always believed that the *teaching* of the gospel is a basic component of all valid evangelism, including the implications of Christian faith for practical life and service. Let us recall that children are developing and progressing in understanding, in feeling, and in the nature of their responses. There are also many facets of the gospel to be illustrated, interrelated and made plain. Hence the challenge, requiring the careful and continuing training of workers, is to meet the ever-expanding understanding of children with the multi-faceted Word of God. We *teach* the good news. We *evangelise* by teaching.

Scripture Union takes seriously the insight of 2 Timothy 3:15.

Ever since you were a child, you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. (Good News Bible)

In an important sense, acquaintance with Scripture through teaching should lead to salvation, whether the passages taught are directly concerned with responses of repentance and faith or not. Indeed to attach the issue of sin and the cross to passages which are focussing on other issues, is to bring confusion rather than understanding.

- b. Response.** God's Word demands a response of repentance and faith from children no less than from adults. The nature of the expression will vary, however, according to the aspect of God's message which has been presented, and the age and stage of development of the particular child. We must not stereotype the varying expressions of this response, but help children to make those expressions of response to which the Spirit is leading them at that time, even if they are not those we ourselves might have expected or planned for. And we must open the way for further expressions in the future.
- c. Community.** While in exceptional cases a child may make spiritual progress in complete isolation from other Christians, it remains true that (s)he will normally only grow as a Christian within a worshipping and teaching community. If his or her family does not provide Christian community, the church must provide some other supportive group – perhaps a Christian home into which the child will be regularly welcomed as a friend in Christ, or a suitable church or school group to which (s)he can belong. In this group (s)he will be nurtured and helped to grow in Christian knowledge and life. Where a child is reached for Christ in a situation outside the context of a local church it is *vital* that provision should be made for a continuing experience of Christian community.

3. Challenging workers appropriately

- a.** The matters discussed above suggest that suitable methods of children's evangelism are most likely to emerge where:
 - i.** plans have been devised and carried out prayerfully and in dependence upon God, the Holy Spirit;
 - ii.** children are approached as active people who should be respected in their need for clarity of understanding;
 - iii.** any invitation to a child to respond should provide for some time for reflection, and personal counselling by a mature worker who is skilled in dealing with children of the appropriate age;
 - iv.** children are approached with knowledge of the attitudes of parents on the part of workers insofar as this is possible, and always with respect for family relationships and parental authority;

- v. the kinds of responses to biblical teaching which are called for are suitable to the child's particular stage of growth.
- b. Methods are considered unsuitable which transgress these principles or merely neglect them. Children are not to be manipulated, or irresponsibly set against their families. Neither are they to be abandoned to a life which is without continuing support from older Christians, if it lies in any way within the power of Christian workers to provide for it.

I. PROCLAIMING LIBERTY FOR OPPRESSED CHILDREN

A call for involvement

We are concerned as the people of God to make the right response to the injustice and poverty in which the world abounds by embodying the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, and involving ourselves in Christ's transforming mission with the poor and powerless. In view of our specific aims, we have a special responsibility for children who are poor, deprived or exploited. The Good News we share is about a God who loves them and is concerned about the situations in which they find themselves as victims. This same God can free them from the power of their own participation in sin.

Throughout the world, children are the most vulnerable group. The media has brought to our consciousness, the physical and social needs of children in impoverished circumstances and in areas of conflict. In addition, we cannot ignore the extent of abuse (physical, emotional and sexual) that children suffer in all societies whether it is apparent or not.)

This may involve Scripture Union in developing partnerships with Christian aid agencies; or in creating an aid agency of its own to do with children; or in commencing or participating in socio-political involvement in the various countries on behalf of children. At the very least our publications should include clear and fearless exposition of the biblical teaching applicable to the moral, social and political issues affecting the welfare of children. Two issues follow for special attention.

1. Liberty for children from poverty-grinding labour and sexual abuse

In many countries child labour forms part of the nation's economic structure. In some cases this may be tolerable, but in others it is inhumane. In other countries children are recruited and trained as soldiers. In many countries child sexual abuse is rife and is seen as the alternative to starvation.

In too many countries thousands of children die of starvation every day. Even when starvation is avoided, malnourishment is such that bodies are stunted and minds permanently damaged.

2. Freedom for children to become literate and to receive basic education

The rate of literacy in the world decreases progressively year by year and the provision of basic education is available to fewer and fewer children. Over the last two centuries evangelism has stressed the reading of the Bible, and hence has also stressed the need for literacy. Of course the gospel is not only for those with education, but education is a powerful means of nurture, especially when provided by Christians.

Here, then, are further urgent challenges of a social kind, as we contemplate a worldwide strategy for the evangelism of children.

J. CONCLUSION

The continuing call

Children are engaged in a process of development and change, hence we must not think of them in static but in dynamic terms. They frequently defy our tidy formulae and refuse to conform to our established models. We must allow them the freedom to be themselves, and we must make room for the Spirit to work in them as he wills.

It is our responsibility to obey the great commission and to present the gospel to all people, including children, bringing them to Christ when God makes this possible, teaching them the fullness of the Christian faith, and introducing them to the fellowship of the church.

For over 130 years we have devoted ourselves to this task. The International Council calls on the movement throughout the world to continue this work with persistence and enthusiasm. In particular, we emphasise two areas of urgent concern:

First, let us dedicate ourselves afresh to the evangelism of children who do not know Christ, seeking the strength and wisdom of God's Spirit to do our work carefully, sensitively and effectively.

Secondly, let us give attention to nurturing in God's Word those children who believe in Jesus and let us do all we can to help them to grow up as wholehearted servants of the Lord.