HEARING THE SHEPHERD'S VOICE (JOHN 10:27)

by

Carmen E. Kinniburgh, BRE

A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of McMaster Divinity College
in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Theological Studies

McMaster Divinity College
Hamilton, Ontario
2024

MASTER OF THEOLOGICAL STUDIES
(Church and Culture)

McMaster Divinity College
Hamilton Ontario

TITLE: Hearing the Shepherd's Voice (John 10:27)

AUTHOR: Carmen E. Kinniburgh

SUPERVISOR: Dr. Michael P. Knowles

NUMBER OF PAGES: viii + 121

ABSTRACT

"Hearing the Shepherd's Voice (John 10:27)"

Carmen E. Kinniburgh
McMaster Divinity College
Hamilton, Ontario
Master of Theological Studies, 2024

Children in the twenty-first century have an array of voices exerting influence on their identity and spirituality. Children need a friend who knows, accepts, and is always present with them. Jesus identifies with the humble status of children through his physical childhood, interactions with children, and Sonship to the Father. He invites children to hear, know, and follow God's voice (John 10:27). Listening in prayer engages the childlike wonder, imagination, and curiosity that are intrinsic to childhood while shaping children's faith and identity into the likeness of Jesus. Research from a variety of sources in biblical, theological, pastoral, and psychological writing is measured through the methodology of practical theology. Personal ministry experience and other researcher's experience of guiding children in practices of listening prayer have contributed to the formulation of practices for listening in prayer with children that can be applied in group settings in the church and at home.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The topic of this thesis has been one that I have reflected on for many years as a mother, children's pastor, and through my graduate studies. To recognize and follow the voice of the Shepherd has been the desire of my heart, and listening in prayer has provided me with the richest of learnings in the past 15 years of my life. I have been the recipient of the tender ministry of Jesus through those who have prioritised attuning their hearts to his voice. Similarly, I have had the joy and privilege of journeying with children, adults, and ministry leaders to grow in their awareness of God's presence and discernment of his voice. I am grateful to the children, families, and volunteers I served with in Vernon, BC; yours are the faces I have envisioned as I considered who could benefit from this thesis. I am also grateful for the network of children's ministry leaders and women in ministry who are my colleagues and friends in the Alliance Canada. The experiences and conversations we have shared have deeply shaped my research and writing.

To the friends, fellow students, and family who have supported my family and me through the writing of this thesis with your prayers, messages, and encouragements: I thank God for you and your partnership in our lives and in the gospel (Phil 1:3–6).

What began as an idea, has grown and developed beyond what I could have dreamed through the intentional encouragement, questions, and prayers of my supervisor, Michael Knowles. Your friendship and belief in this project and me have contributed significantly to my academic learning and my spiritual formation. Thank you for your authenticity and care.

I dedicate this work to my husband, Jeremy Kinniburgh, without whom this thesis would never have been written. You embody God's love through your servant-heartedness and are sensitive to his voice. Thank you for always encouraging and

challenging me to pursue and rest in the words that I have heard God speak over me, our marriage, and our family. I love you.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: CHILDREN AT PRAYER IN A NOISY WORLD

Children in the twenty-first century are inundated with a cacophony of messages and voices attempting to influence and direct the formation of their identity and spirituality. Less than a hundred years ago, the key influences on a child's self-understanding were limited to family and their community. Significant contributors from the community may have included their extended family, friends, neighbours, teachers, and faith community. Moreover, the contributors of greatest influence would have been primarily located within the same community and region as the child. Through access to the ever-expanding digital community of the internet, television, and social media, as well as an education system that is increasingly interested in influencing children's foundational beliefs in identity and spirituality, the current generation of children—known as Gen Alpha—are exposed to ideas and images that are beyond their maturity and capacity to understand.[1] Children need the intentional nurture and guidance of a caring faith community and trusted adults to support them in their spiritual and personal formation. Furthermore, in such a loud and persistent culture, how do we aid children in tuning

[1] An example of an educationally based program intended to influence identity (and indirectly, spirituality) is SOGI 123 (sexual orientation and gender identity). SOGI is a non-curricular program that supports inclusivity in British Columbia and Alberta K-12 classrooms through policies and procedures, inclusive environments, and the provision of teaching resources that can be incorporated to support curricular outcomes. Many of these policies and suggested lesson integrations go beyond being inclusive to influence who children perceive themselves to be, which includes their core identity and spirituality (see https://www.sogieducation.org). It is left to the individual teachers to determine to what degree they will integrate SOGI 123 into their classrooms and teaching.

their hearts and minds to recognize the voice of God, in order that they may hear what he has to say regarding who they are?

Who are Generation Alpha?

The current generation of children, born between 2010–2024, are known as "Generation Alpha."[2] Social analysts have begun to provide observations about the collective identity of Gen Alpha based on cultural factors such as their exposure to technology, education, social environment, and key relationships. Identifying key factors that influence the collective identity of this generation can provide a framework for the challenges and influences that affect these children's self-understanding, spiritual formation, and recognition of God. The first key factor is the accessibility and dependence on technology that is present in every aspect of their lives and education. The McCrindle research group has identified that for Gen Alpha, "The omnipresence of technology in [their] formative years leads to increased digital literacy and gamification of learning but also shorter attention spans and impaired social formation."[3] Second, children within this generation are experiencing unprecedented diversity in their homes, schools, neighbourhoods, and the online platforms that they access.[4] The composition of the nuclear family is shifting as family living arrangements "that do not include both of their biological parents is higher than any generation observed in the previous century."[5] Similarly, there are more children in the US with "foreign-born parents or children who are foreign-born representing more countries around the world than previous

[2] McCrindle, "Understanding Generation Alpha," [n.d.].
[3] McCrindle, "Understanding Generation Alpha," [n.d.].
[4] Elwood Carlson, quoted in Bologna, "What's the Deal," September 25, 2021.
[5] Elwood Carlson, quoted in Bologna, "What's the Deal," September 25, 2021.

generations."[6] Mark McCrindle suggests that "This generation of children will be shaped in households that move more frequently, change careers more often and increasingly live in urban, not just suburban, environments."[7] These observations provide generalized characteristics of Gen Alpha that provide a contextual understanding of the cultural and social factors that are shaping this particular group of children at this particular time.

The challenges of discipling children in Gen Alpha to hear the voice of God and follow him are complicated by their aforementioned exposure to technology and shortened attention spans. However, children are children, no matter what generation they are a part of. Each generation will always be shaped by impactful technologies, world events, and cultural factors. With so much change happening from generation to generation, including their own experience of change within their childhood years, children need an unchanging foundation to be the place from which they understand their identity and worth. Only Jesus is unchanging (Heb 13:8), and the promises that he has fulfilled through his life, death, and resurrection are certain and secure (Heb 6:17–20). As children encounter Jesus as their unchanging, attentive, and loving Saviour and shepherd, they can learn to recognize his voice amidst the distractions of their generation.

Children as Disciples of Jesus

In Mark 9:33–37 and 10:13–16, Jesus embodies God's posture towards children as one of invitation and accessibility. Jesus welcomes and embraces children just as they are, extending to them inclusion in the kingdom of God as equal recipients of the fullness of

[6] Elwood Carlson, quoted in Bologna, "What's the Deal," September 25, 2021.
[7] Mark McCrindle, quoted in Bologna, "What's the Deal," September 25, 2021.

God's affection and mercy. Additionally, Jesus presents children and childhood as paradigmatic of "greatness" in the kingdom of God. Exegesis of Jesus' words, actions, and disposition towards children reveals a countercultural identification with children and the inclusion of children by Jesus. This thesis will explore a Christocentric theology of childhood to create a foundation for understanding children's spirituality and discipleship. The key question within a theology of childhood is: What are the qualities of childhood and childlikeness that Jesus celebrates as being congruent with discipleship and the kingdom of God? Additionally, this thesis seeks to identify how the qualities of childhood and the qualities of childlikeness cohesively contribute to children's ability to recognize the voice of God.

In his reflections on understanding a theology of childhood, Karl Rahner observes, "Childhood is openness. Human childhood is infinite openness."[8] In openness to Jesus, children can discover someone who identifies with them, having been a child himself. As a friend and shepherd Jesus is trustworthy and wholly available to them. Children's openness, dependence, and relational consciousness[9] make childhood an ideal time in a person's spiritual formation to nurture an understanding of identity as being rooted in Christ, and that a relationship with God is one of intimately knowing and hearing the voice of God. In John 10:27, Jesus says, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me" (NIV).[10] He does not specify an age, or maturity that his followers must have to hear his voice, or to be his disciple. The only qualification is

[8] Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology," 48.
[9] Nye, *Children's Spirituality*, 6.
[10] Unless otherwise stated, this thesis uses the NIV throughout.

that *he* knows them, and they have responded to his calling them by name, so that *they* may know him (John 10:3).

Rebecca Nye defines children's spirituality as "an initially natural capacity for awareness of the sacred quality to life experiences. This awareness can be conscious or unconscious, and sometimes fluctuates between both, but in both cases can affect actions, feelings and thoughts."[11] A child's openness to and awareness of a relationship with God is often perceived by adults as immature and childish, rather than being enjoyed and celebrated for being what it is: childlike. Jesus pointed to the beauty of a child's way of being in the world—their childlikeness—as a paradigm for entrance into the kingdom of God (Mark 10:15). Children are often segregated into separate spaces and can be disregarded and considered as less important than adults, both today and in first-century Palestine. Jesus acknowledges this marginalization and their lowly position in society and yet elevates them as an example of those who are great in the kingdom of God (Matt 18:4). Nye observes that "Jesus' approach to children seems to support the notion that spirituality refers to a basic, day-to-day state of being. While spiritual life for adult followers of Jesus required radical change, children were treated differently. All children were welcomed and blessed."[12] Children offer to adults an example of curiosity, imagination, and wonder in God which leads them to respond to the work of Christ by hearing his voice and responding to his invitation to follow him.

The qualities of childhood (dependence, openness, and relational consciousness) and the qualities of childlikeness (wonder, imagination, and curiosity) foster the enjoyment and development of each other within a child's life. As a child experiences

[11] Nye, *Children's Spirituality*, 6.
[12] Nye, *Children's Spirituality*, 10.

safe environments to be dependent, open, and connected relationally to themselves, God, and others they can express their wonder, engage with their imaginations, and explore through their curiosity. Children recognize that they need others to provide for their well-being and to guide and teach them in their formational growth and discovery. Thus, humility of status is not something they have to consciously choose; it is an essential part of their being and doing. By placing a child in the midst of the conversations about greatness and the kingdom of God, Jesus invites his disciples to reconsider their evaluation of what and who is important, and how one becomes "great."

Although children are loved and celebrated in North America, the church can convey confusing messages about its acceptance of their spiritual value and contributions to the local church. A significant question for churches to consider is: How do they communicate the inclusion of children in church and nurture the development of children's faith and identity?[13] The spiritual formation of children can be reduced to information transfer rather than being a formational process: "The informing process has a place in all ministries, but it is inadequate if it is the primary focus of the ministry. The ministry is more forming when it seeks to involve the whole child not just his or her intellect, in the journey until Christ is formed in him or her (Gal 4:19)."[14] Children ages 7–10 are at a tender age at which they can thrive in their capacity for spiritual growth and intimacy with God when connected with a caring adult who intentionally welcomes them into the presence of God through spiritual companionship and modelling of spiritual disciplines.[15] Rather than primarily focusing on the provision of correct

[13] This is the question that will be addressed in Chapter 3.

[14] May et al., *Children Matter*, 23.

[15] For the purposes of this thesis, contemplative prayer disciplines that encourage listening in prayer, such as contemplation, meditation, and waiting in silence on God will be emphasized as pathways for growing in awareness of the voice of God.

theology and biblical literacy, parents and churches must find ways to encourage "the rich natural spiritual capacity of childhood—spirituality as something 'already there,' to be cherished rather than something to be added on."[16]

Prayer is a foundational practice in the Christian faith that is essential for spiritual development. Prayer at its core, is a conversation between God and people that involves listening, speaking, and responding. God invites humanity to call upon his name in prayer, for he hears and responds (Pss 66:17–20; 116:1–2). Likewise, God speaks to us in prayer to reveal his character and provision; again, we must also listen for his voice and respond (Isa 30:19–21). Children may perceive through the ways that prayer is presented in the church that certain people pray on behalf of everyone and that certain formulas, phrases, or language need to be used to legitimize prayer. These unconscious communications about prayer inform how both children and adults perceive their ability to speak to and hear from God. Similarly, prayer in the home that is only offered at mealtime and bedtime as memorized verses, or a review of the day's activities, can communicate subtle messages of utility and convenience that differ from the conversations with God that characterize true spiritual intimacy. Building a healthy understanding of the theology and practice of prayer in childhood creates a foundational and intimate connection with God that will be a venue wherein the Holy Spirit builds confidence, identity, and renewal throughout a person's life.[17]

---

[16] Nye, *Children's Spirituality*, xi.

[17] The bias of this thesis is evangelical pietism which proposes that a relationship with God is characterized by a combined emphasis on biblical doctrine and personal holiness. A person's spiritual development, or faith formation is experienced through willing surrender to the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. Discipleship is relational and is based upon two-way communication. It is my experience that an intimate relationship with God involves conversational prayer (speaking, listening, and responding), which may be considered as mysticism. This is the type of personal and corporate communion that God invites humankind to experience with him and will be explored throughout this paper.

There are many misconceptions about prayer that children either perceive from the adults who are modelling prayer practices with them or that they formulate on their own based on a lack of exposure to prayer practices that never mature beyond what Richard Foster refers to as "simple prayer."[18] Simple prayers are generally focused on self: the concerns, desires, and petitions that we perceive as necessary and most important. Foster also acknowledges the paradox of simple prayer being "the prayer of children, and yet we will return to it again and again." Much of the time, children pray without even realizing that they are praying. The family and church community can encourage the prayerful inclinations of children towards recognizing that it is to God that they express their gratitude, delight, fears, and desires. Prayer is seeking God and growing in a love relationship with him.[19] The foundations of prayer that are built in childhood are "a form of relating—of intentionally seeking a closer relationship with God—so the patterns we set for relating when we are with children are bound to affect their approach to prayer."[20] Childhood is an ideal time not just to express simple prayers, but to begin to explore contemplative prayer practices that maximize the sense of wonder and trust that children innately possess.[21] In exploring and enjoying contemplative prayer children will enter into "important periods of waiting, silence and stillness where you don't know what might happen next."[22] It is in these spaces of

[18] Foster, *Prayer*, 9. In my experience, the most common misconception of prayer that children have relates to feelings of inadequacy or a lack of confidence that their words are good enough. Adults always seem to know what to pray, and children can struggle to express their feelings, anxieties, and requests with words. Children may also perceive that prayer is about telling God what they have done in their day or thanking him for food. Adults can help children to know that God hears their prayers even if they do not use words, and that in prayer we recognize that God is present with us.

[19] Foster, *Prayer*, 13.

[20] Nye, *Children's Spirituality*, 62.

[21] Chapter 4 suggests practices of silence, solitude, meditation, and contemplation that are adapted to account for the shortened attention spans of children. Chapter 5 develops the employment of these practices into specific activities of Lectio Divina, the Examen, and asking God questions.

[22] Nye, *Children's Spirituality*, 60.

waiting, silence, stillness, and listening that children can trust God to meet them, to speak to them, and to lead them as their Good Shepherd (John 10:27).

Research Methodology

The methodological approach to this thesis will be through the synthesis of research from secondary literature sources in the areas of children's spirituality, the spiritual discipline of prayer, and practical theology. By reviewing these sources in response to the thesis question, the goal is to provide "a praxis-centred theology [that is intended] to be put to work in the lives, communities, and situations of people," particularly children.[23] Likewise, the purpose of these practices is to highlight God's care for children and identify the practical outworking of God's friendship with them in their everyday lives. Richard Osmer suggests that a framework for the interpretive work of practical theology is comprised of four core tasks: descriptive-empirical, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic. These four tasks align with four questions that can be asked of any situation that arises in ministry: "What is going on? Why is this going on? What ought to be going on? [And], how might we respond?"[24] Osmer's framework will also provide a progression of structure for this thesis. Chapter 2 will address the normative task of providing a Christocentric theology as a foundational understanding of childhood through Jesus' interactions with children in Mark 9:35–37 and 10:13–16. Chapters 3 and 4 will identify the descriptive-empirical task as it applies to both children's spirituality and prayer and then will proceed to engage with the interpretive task by reflecting on some presenting challenges and opportunities for children in the discipline of prayer.

---

[23] Mercer and Miller-McLemore, *Welcoming Children*, 12.
[24] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 4.

Chapter 5 will identify options for response by trusted adults within families and the church for guiding children into practices that will help them to grow in their recognition and discernment of the voice of Jesus.

First, the descriptive-empirical task begins by asking: what is going on, and why ought we pay attention to this dynamic within the lives of children? The core questions that this thesis seeks to understand provide the starting point for this task: How can children grow in their recognition of the voice of the Good Shepherd? How can discerning God speaking to a child help them to grow in understanding and confidence in their identity? In what ways can a child's faith community and trusted adults support and accompany children in hearing the Good Shepherd, and responding by following him? Determining the answers to these questions will be the descriptive-empirical task that "[gathers] information that helps us discern patterns and dynamics."[25] The patterns and dynamics will begin to reveal where there may be a gap between children's Christian educational experience and the intention that children would grow in their relationship with Jesus. Chapters 3 and 4 will explore the disconnect that is commonly observed in children's spiritual formation when Christian education focuses more on information transfer than helping children to be transformed by knowing Jesus and being known by him. John Westerhoff presents a helpful differentiation between intellectual/ informational and intuitional modes of consciousness that emphasizes the importance of developing and integrating both for wholistic spirituality.[26]

[25] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 4.
[26] Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith*, 70–71.

The second core task that Osmer suggests is the interpretive task that examines relevant theories from the arts and sciences.[27] Chapter 3 will examine James Fowler's stage theory of faith development which has had wide-spread influence in Christian education for children. Stage theory is based on the psychological research of human cognitive, behavioural, and moral development theories by Lawrence Kohlberg, Erik Ericsson, and Jean Piaget. The critique that arises from ministry based on stage theory is that it focuses too rigidly on faith progressing from stage to stage. This perspective makes assumptions that the higher stages of development and maturity have greater value than the earlier stages, which conflicts with a Christocentric theology of childhood (Chapter 2). The adherence of many to the stage theory development of faith reveals why children's Christian education has been more dependent on communicating biblical and theological information than nurturing environments for spiritual transformation. Information, facts, and the measurement of children's development correlate with the rational and scientific perspectives that have been influenced by modern and Enlightenment philosophies. While biblical literacy and theological understanding are important, they can detract from the primary purpose of Christian education which is to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing 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" (Matt 28:19–20).

The third task is the normative task which draws upon "theological concepts to interpret particular episodes, situations, or contexts [to construct] ethical norms to guide our responses, and [learn] from 'good practice.'"[28] This is the content of Chapter 4

[27] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 4.
[28] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 4.

which examines the practices of listening in prayer to nurture the intuitional and relational experiences of children with God. Helping children to hear the voice of God for themselves will allow them to grow in their knowing of God which will affect their understanding of their identity as being found in him. As children grow in their practices of listening in prayer, they will mature from praying simple prayers,[29] to pausing to listen for what God says to them about himself, themselves, and about his will for their participation in his kingdom work. The practice of conversational-receptive prayer understands that spiritual life and relationships are a pilgrimage, rather than a growth-based theory, upon which children journey with, through, and towards God, along with others.

The fourth and final task is the pragmatic task which suggests potential options for prayer praxis developed from the normative task. Now that we have determined what is going on, why, and what ought to be going on, the final question is: what strategies and practices can be implemented to "influence situations in ways that are desirable?"[30] Part of praxis is implementing reflective elements to evaluate the effectiveness of the praxis. There can be a danger within this to lapse back into scientific methodology, which has contributed to the patterns and dynamics discerned as disruptive in the descriptive-empirical task. Chapter 5 will address the praxis of accompanying and supporting children in the practices of listening prayer. The greatest determinant of the fruitfulness of these practices will be the inward experience of the child as they sense a deeper connection with the Father, in the Son, through the Holy Spirit.[31] Externally,

---

[29] Foster, *Prayer*, 9.

[30] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 4.

[31] The tension is not simply to evaluate the praxis based on effectiveness and benefits, but to consider the whole child, and the fruitfulness that emerges in their life as they follow the Good Shepherd and experience his transformational presence in their lives.

children will experience fruitfulness in their relationships, decision-making, and character as they live in step with the Spirit of God (Gal 5:22–25).

The outcome of this thesis is not to provide a new model for children's ministry or a how-to manual for teaching children about prayer. The aim is to develop practices of listening prayer with children ages 7–10 for hearing the voice of God as essential to their growing in lifelong discipleship, identity formation, and an intimate relationship with Christ. The engagement of children with contemplative prayer practices that are formational rather than informationally based will create a strong foundation of wholistic spirituality from which they can receive the ministry of Christ for themselves and participate in his ministry to others. Furthermore, the goal is to equip ministers and parents with a Christocentric perspective on children, a biblical understanding of the spirituality of children, a theological approach to the listening aspect of prayer, and provide a pathway for nurturing children's identities and spirituality through the engagement of listening prayer as they sit at home, walk along the road, lie down, and get up (Deut 6:7).

CHAPTER 2: A CHRISTOCENTRIC THEOLOGY OF CHILDHOOD

Introduction

When we hear the word "children" certain images or ideas immediately come to mind. Some of these ideas may be about children in general, and some may be specific and personal about the children in our lives or our own experiences of being a child. Other influences such as culture, location, education, economy, and religion also inform our view of children. Cultural depictions of children can lead to stereotyping and broadly inclusive themes that may result in prejudice towards children. For example, babies and young children are often portrayed as innocent, pure, and adored by all, while teenagers are unpredictable, moody, and intimidating.[1] Each of these experiences and biases can be both helpful and harmful in shaping our perceptions of the value of children, the qualities of childhood, and the participation of children in the Christian community. Similarly, overly simplistic religious concepts of children's innocence, purity, selfishness, and their need for instruction or discipline may also influence adult attitudes toward children. Subsequently, these experiences and religious assumptions then influence the approach to Christian pedagogy and nurture that both parents and the church provide for children. Theological reflection on the lives of children informed by Scripture is necessary to provide a balanced and less biased hermeneutic in understanding the humanity of children and the nature of childhood.

[1] Bunge, "Child, Religion, and the Academy," 552.

Significant effort has been made by contemporary theologians and ministry professionals to contextually reflect on Scripture, theology, and ministry to address not just ministry with children, but the ministry and mission of the whole church.[2] How does theological engagement change when the faith of a child—not just the faith of adults—is a focusing perspective?[3] This type of contextual theology considers how the faith, doctrine, and practice of Christianity considers children and is viewed by children, who have been largely marginalized in society on account of not being adults. In particular, the child theology movement[4] has been inspired by the approaches of liberation theology, feminist theology, and other contextual theologies to consider "how this child placed in the midst by Jesus relates to theology, and vice-versa."[5] Marcia Bunge anticipates that "by using the lens of the child, or by 'foregrounding' the child, child theologies will be able to offer new insights into central themes of Christian faith and practice, such as God, creation, Christology, theological anthropology, sin, salvation, faith, the Word, worship, prayer, sacraments, missiology, and eschatology."[6] The value of a child's spirituality and faith is not inherently based on their potential to mature into faithful adults.[7] The presence of children within the community of faith, and their childlikeness are essential components of the body, both as participants and paradigmatically for the receiving and revealing of the kingdom of God. The church

[2] Nash, "Editorial," 3.

[3] Ingersoll, "Making Room," 172. Ingersoll suggests that the Child Theology Movement "remains [committed] to a balanced perspective that considers the rights of the child without idealizing childhood and is faithful to God's leading." It is not that they seek to elevate the faith of children above anything else, but rather to pay attention to the child, to consider their perspective and needs as valuable to God and the church.

[4] "Child Theology Movement," [n.d.].

[5] White, "Child Theology," 15.

[6] Bunge, "Child, Religion, and the Academy," 569.

[7] This will be explored further in Chapter 3.

needs and benefits from the perspective and participation of children. Keith White, a leader in the child theology movement, differentiates between two ways of welcoming children within theological reflection: first, through a biblically based theological consideration of who children are, what it means to be a child, and their place within the church (a theology of the child or childhood). Secondly, adults and church leadership can engage in reflection that listens to the faith and relational experiences of children with God and the church.[8] As we attempt to answer the question of "how can children grow in their recognition of God's voice?" we will be incorporating the first of these two approaches to consider the biblical perspective of children, and particularly how Jesus interacts and identifies with children.[9] Subsequently, we will consider Paul's use of a similar metaphorical application of childhood to the Corinthian church, both as a caution and a paradigm for discipleship (1 Cor 3:1–3).

Children in the Biblical Context

There is a danger in misunderstanding Scripture's perspective on children as a purely metaphorical relationship between God and his children, or by selectively reading individual passages about children out of context without the balanced perspective that other Scriptures provide. These types of exegetical fallacies can further marginalize children, as well as diminish the importance of familial relationships and roles that people within the church embody.[10] Bunge identifies six key scriptural perspectives that when read in tension with one another provide a wholistic picture of children as:

[8] White, "Child Theology," 15.
[9] The second methodology that White proposes is outside the scope of this thesis.
[10] Thatcher, "Theology," 195.

- Gifts of God and sources of joy (Gen 30:11, 20, 22; Ps 127:3; John 16:20–21);
- Sinful creatures and moral agents (Gen 8:21; Prov 22:15; Pss 51:5; 58:3; Rom 5:12; 3:9–10);
- Developing beings who need instruction and guidance (Gen 18:19; Deut 6:6–7 [cf. 11:18–19]; 31:12–13; Ps 78:4b; Prov 22:6; Isa 38:19; Eph 6:4);
- Fully human and made in the image of God (Gen 1:27; Ps 139:13);
- Models of faith and sources of revelation (Matt 18:2–5; 11:25; 21:16);
- Orphans, neighbours, and strangers in need of justice and compassion (Exod 22:22–24; Deut 10:17–18).[11]

Held together with appropriate theological weight and tension, these six perspectives can create a robust understanding of children, and of our calling as followers of Jesus to serve "the least of these" (Matt 25:40).[12] Furthermore, when considering the faith and humanity of children in relation to themes of God's blessing, family, sin, moral agency, the *imago Dei*, creation, faith, revelation, worship, prophecy, justice, and care for the marginalized, the mission and mandate of the church is expanded not just to provide care for children, but for their inclusion and participation in the life and ministry of the church. By keeping children outside of these reflections, or reducing their significance to one of metaphorical value, we continue to marginalize children, whether intentionally or unintentionally, through our indifference or ambivalence towards them.[13]

[11] Bunge, "Child, Religion, and the Academy," 563–68.
[12] Bunge, "Child, Religion, and the Academy," 562.
[13] Carroll, "Children in the Bible," 121.

The spectrum of perspectives on children is not only present in the biblical records but in historical and cultural attitudes towards children as well. First, the Old Testament reflects the Jewish understanding of children as blessings from God and indicative of his favour (Gen 1:27–28; 30:1–22; 1 Sam 1; Pss 127:3–5; 128:3–6), while not romanticizing their lack of maturity and need for guidance and discipline, as mentioned above (Prov 22:15). One essential element that distinguishes the Jewish view of children from that of other cultures is a high regard for the lives of children. The God of Israel detested the sacrifices of children that were common in neighbouring cultic worship practices (Lev 18:21; 2 Kgs 17:31; 2 Chr 28:3; Ezek 20:31). Later, in first-century Palestine, the Jewish people continued to differentiate themselves from the pervasive Hellenistic culture that practiced abortion and the exposure of unwanted newborns.[14]

Second, there are similarities between the hierarchical structures of family and society within several ancient patriarchal cultures. Women and children in the Jewish context were viewed as "largely auxiliary members of society whose connection to the social mainstream depended on men (either as fathers or husbands)."[15] Comparably, in the Greco-Roman context: "like women and slaves, children were the property of the *paterfamilias* and could be sold or abandoned, as girls often were. . . . The Greek roots for 'child' and 'slave' share a common root."[16] Overall, children in the first-century Roman empire held little to no power or influence, and though usually enjoyed by their families, they were appreciated for their future potential, family security, and the

[14] Gundry-Volf, "Least and the Greatest," 35–36.
[15] Edwards, *Mark*, 176.
[16] Moltmann, "Metaphors of Hope," 598.

provision they would bring to their parents.[17] Children were seen as not measuring up to the ideal of the free adult male Roman citizen or the adult male law-observant Hebrew due to their immaturity and lack of development.[18] In Judaism, it was not until the age of puberty—around twelve years old—that children began to enter into their socio-cultural potential.[19] At this age, boys received instruction in the Torah, and girls became more involved domestically in preparation for marriage. Edwards observes that "childhood was typically regarded as an unavoidable interim between birth and adulthood, which a boy reached at age 13. One will search Jewish and early Christian literature in vain for sympathy toward the young comparable to that shown by Jesus."[20] Jesus not only treats children with compassion, but through the Incarnation he willingly enters the world at this point in history as a child, experiencing completely the cultural reality of childhood.

Jesus and Children

Hebrews 4:15–16 announces the principle that Jesus has chosen to identify with the weak and completely understands the human condition, having experienced it fully himself through the Incarnation: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." Craig Koester suggests that here is an invitation to humankind to "identify with the high priest who has identified with them."[21] This invitation extends to all people, including

[17] Gundry-Volf, "Least and the Greatest," 31, 34.
[18] Gundry-Volf, "Least and the Greatest," 32, 35.
[19] Bock, *Luke*, 1:70.
[20] Edwards, *Mark*, 186.
[21] Koester, *Hebrews*, 293.

children. Jesus identifies with children through his Incarnation, progressing through each stage of development that is normative to childhood. Having been a child himself, Jesus understands and has embraced completely the nature of childhood: the dependence, weakness, joys, and challenges.

This chapter proposes three ways that Jesus identifies with children and elevates the culturally held understanding of childhood: first, Jesus becomes "one of us" in childhood, experiencing infancy through to adolescence. Through his Incarnation he identifies with children in their lowliness and dependence. Second, Jesus interacts with children, including them as beneficiaries of the kingdom, and celebrating childlikeness as characteristic of discipleship. And finally, children respond to Jesus in ways that are appropriate and revelatory. Jesus' Incarnation, childhood, and treatment of children create a foundational understanding for the relational capacity of children with God, resulting in their inclusion as sheep in the care of the Good Shepherd who can hear his voice, be known by him, and follow him as recipients of the kingdom of God.

Incarnation = Identification

It is not just empathy that Jesus offers towards children; he offers his whole being. Through the Incarnation he humbles himself (Luke 1:31–35; Phil 2:6–7) to experience the same genesis that is common to every human being: conception, fetal development, birth, infancy, childhood, and adolescence. He understands what it is to be a child, and in particular a child within first-century Palestine when children were considered among the least valuable members of society. The Incarnation is good news for all people,

because Jesus not only becomes human, but demonstrates for humankind how to be fully human; living in a right relationship with God, himself, others, and creation.[22]

Infancy

Like every child conceived, Jesus experienced being physically formed and knit together in the womb of his mother (Ps 139:13). He was present with Mary for nine months—resident within her womb—dependent upon her to meet all his needs for healthy fetal growth and development. He could hear her voice in utero and sense her emotions; she could feel his stirring within her. Mary was a young, unmarried Jewish woman of humble birth; someone who would be considered among the lowliest in status and influence in Jewish society. And yet, God chose to be subject to the limitations of humanity so that his glory could be revealed in her weakness. God chose to be confined not only by the womb, but in the weakest and most helpless of human forms: as a newborn baby. Jesus, who is fully God, became God in the flesh; God with us. As announced by the angels in Luke 2:10, this is "good news that will cause great joy for *all* the people."[23] "All people" is inclusive of every person at every stage in their life throughout history, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, age, or social status.

Jesus welcomes Mary into his grand narrative, identifies with her in her humanity and humility, embraces her as his mother, for she is chosen by God and highly favoured (Luke 1:28, 30, 48–49). Likewise, Jesus identifies with all people by entering

[22] Chapter 3 will discuss Nye's suggestion that one of the primary spiritual qualities of children is their "relational consciousness," which is their awareness that there are different relational aspects available: relating to self, others, God, and creation (*Children's Spirituality*, 6).

[23] Emphasis added.

the world as each infant does, growing through each phase of life, but doing so with the grace of God upon him (Luke 2:40).

Childhood to Adolescence

The gospel of Luke offers the only account of Jesus' childhood years, culminating with Jesus—on the cusp of adulthood—at the Jerusalem Temple in Luke 2:41–52. Several factors emerge within this account that reveal the significance of Jesus' identity and his self-understanding. For a twelve-year-old boy this would be a pilgrimage of learning, as young men were not required to make vows at Passover until the age of thirteen.[24] This anticipated learning takes on a different meaning when Jesus' parents locate their lost son in the temple, and he is uniquely "portrayed as a boy with a thirst to understand and discuss spiritual questions."[25] The teachers are amazed by his insight and wisdom (vv. 46–47). When confronted by his parents, Jesus speaks for the first time in Luke's gospel to reveal his understanding of his earthly task and introduce himself in filial connection to God (v. 49). Jesus' reference in v. 49 to the Temple as his Father's house, which can also be translated as being "about [his] Father's business," reveals the unique and intimate nature of Jesus' relationship to God, and that "Jesus recognizes himself as sent by the Father to reveal his will."[26] There is a tension that emerges after this account as Jesus, who has just identified himself with his heavenly Father, willingly submits to his earthly parents in his obedience to them (v. 51). Jesus demonstrates through his childhood relationships with his parents, the Father, and others, appropriate dependence

[24] Bock, *Luke*, 1:ccxvii.
[25] Bock, *Luke*, 1:ccxix.
[26] Bock, *Luke*, 1:ccxxiii.

and response. Within this scenario Jesus chooses to occupy a posture of humility in deference to the teachers in the Temple, the concern of his parents, and the will of his Father, while still maintaining an understanding of his identity and childlikeness.

Jesus' childhood is summarized in Luke 2:52 (cf. 2:40) and provides a succinct model for childhood growth: "Jesus matured in wisdom and years, and in favour with God and with people" (CEB). This statement also provides a clear example for spiritual development beginning in childhood through growth in wisdom, physicality, faith, and relationships with others.[27] Each of these areas of childhood growth contributed to Jesus' self-understanding of his identity as a child of Mary and Joseph, and in his filial relationship to the Father (Luke 2:49). Every child can mature along this same formulation of spiritual development: in a relationship with God who defines their identity and self-understanding, godly wisdom, and relationships with others.[28] Jesus provides both the model and the means by which children can know God and be known by him as they share in his filial piety.

---

[27] Stronger emphasis is placed on nurturing children's spiritual development in wisdom, faith, and relationships since children will naturally mature in their physicality. Tolbert and Brownlee ("African American Church," 324–27) divide these three areas of growth into relationship with God (wisdom), relationship with self (stature), and relationship with others (favour). Similarly, "252 Basics," a curriculum by *Think Orange*, has structured its curricular materials around what they identify as the "3 Basic Truths" of Luke 2:52: wisdom, faith, and friendship. They have three statements that help children to grow in these truths: "I need to make the wise choice, I can trust God no matter what, and I should treat others the way I want to be treated" (Joiner, *Think Orange*, 154). Perhaps both approaches ought to be combined to distinguish between growing in wisdom (knowing how to live kingdom lives), faith (relationship with God), friendship (relationship with others), and identity/stature (Christ-informed self-understanding). Identity and self-understanding are an important contemporary issue of concern for the next generation. Many cultural voices are influencing how children and youth view and express themselves. They must know their worth and live into their identity in Christ to experience spiritual wholeness. This will be addressed in the following chapters.

[28] The spiritual capacity of children, the development of their faith, and how it relates to the understanding of their identity will be explored further in Chapters 3 and 4.

Filial Relationship to the Father

Based upon Jesus' own experience of a physical childhood, he understands and identifies with children. Yet, it is through his self-understanding and identity as the Son of God, that Jesus demonstrates what it means to be a child and invites humankind into a relationship with the Father as children of God. All four gospels are consistent in their accounting of the filial relationship of Jesus with the Father, their unity, and the mutuality of their affection for one another. The baptism of Jesus exemplifies the quality of their relationship by the Father's own testimony: "And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased'" (Mark 1:11 [cf. Matt 3:16—4:1; Luke 3:22; 4:1]). From this pivotal moment of affirmation of love and authority by the Father, and of Jesus' identity as his son, Jesus is propelled forward into his calling and ministry, empowered by the presence of the Holy Spirit. Jesus models perfect sonship in a childlike manner of humility and dependence, as one who comprehends his identity as being located within his relationship to the Father. It is into this relational identity that Jesus welcomes and embraces all who follow him, modelling for them what it means to be a child of God.

Jesus explains three ways that a child of God lives in relationship with the Father. First, Jesus speaks of the Father's love for him being extended to and inclusive of those whom Jesus loves, and who love Jesus. Throughout the gospel of John, Jesus continuously emphasizes the inclusivity of God's love: "The Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God" (John 16:27 [cf. John 3:35; 5:20]). Experiencing the love of the Father by loving Jesus and receiving his love will always result in obedience and keeping the Father's commands, just as Jesus does (John 10:17; 14:21, 23; 15:9–10). Jesus knows that as the children of God are

included in the love of the Father and Son, they will be a living testimony because of their unity with God: “I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:23). Unity in God is the result of believing in Jesus and receiving the Father’s love.

Second, Jesus attributes his identity, revelation, words, and work as all originating in his unity with the Father (John 1:18; 6:46; 8:16–19; 10:15, 30; 14:7, 20). In Matt 11:27, Jesus clearly states, “All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (cf. Luke 10:22). Jesus not only reveals the Father, but Jesus also welcomes his followers to share in his identity as sons and daughters of God. As God’s children, they also receive from the Father revelation, inheritance, and unity with the Father through Jesus (Luke 22:29; John 6:44).

Third, Jesus fully submits to the will of the Father, and receives from him the empowerment to do what pleases him (John 5:17, 19–37; 8:28; 16:32). Jesus demonstrates his willingness to do whatever is the Father’s will in his prayer of submission at Gethsemane: “‘*Abba*, Father,’ he said, ‘everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will’” (Mark 14:36 [cf. Matt 26:39, 42]). Jesus promises his followers that they too will receive the empowerment of God to do what pleases the Father as they understand their identity as being found in their relationship with Jesus and the Father as children of God: “Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God” (John 1:12–13). In John 14:11–14 Jesus promises his followers that

they will be empowered by the Father to do even greater works than he has done and to ask anything of him because the Father wants to glorify the Son through them.

Through the Incarnation Jesus experiences childhood and the essentials of being human in such a way that he can sympathize with the human condition (Heb 4:15–16). Jesus understands the limitations, relationships, and beauty of childhood because he willingly submitted to the nuances of being a first-century Jewish child. He also invites children to understand their relationships with God, themselves, and others resulting from his inclusion of them in his filial relationship to the Father. In Christ, people can know the true Father who is the source and model of all other relationships. Next, we will consider how Jesus' treatment of children creates a foundational understanding of the relational capacity of children with God, resulting in their inclusion as sheep in the care of the Good Shepherd who are able to hear his voice, be known by him, and follow him as recipients of the kingdom of God (John 10:27).

Interaction with Children

Each of the synoptic gospels records two key interactions between Jesus and children (Matt 18:1–5, 19:13–14; Mark 9:35–37, 10:13–16; Luke 9:47–48, 18:15–16). In both episodes, the actions and attitudes of the disciples towards the children are the exact opposite of Jesus' own, as he welcomes, includes, and embraces the children. This type of unflattering record of the disciples' desire for greatness in the kingdom of God and attitude towards children supports the historical plausibility of these interactions.[29] Each of the synoptic gospel accounts frame the children's encounters with Jesus within a

[29] Stanton, *Gospels and Jesus*, 175.

related, but unique context. Similarly, Jesus' reaction to the disciples, his subsequent teaching, and how he models his identification with the children is consistent across the three gospels. Mark will provide a baseline for the three accounts, allowing the emphases within each gospel to reveal the ways in which Jesus identifies with children, and celebrates the childlike qualities that are innate to this stage of their development. Jesus is not projecting who they will become in the future, what their potential is, or even what value they bring to the kingdom of God. He addresses who they are in that moment as being precious to the Father.

Mark

The first of the two interactions that the synoptic gospels record between children and Jesus is framed by Mark around the topic of greatness and servanthood:

> They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all." He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me" (Mark 9:33–37).

According to Mark and Luke (9:46–48) the disciples were arguing about which of them was, or would be, the greatest among them. Mark seems to acknowledge that the disciples felt silly about their foolish debate, while in Luke, Jesus perceives their thoughts and brings the debate, and their wrong thinking forward. Matthew presents Jesus as posing the question about greatness, and then he brings a child into their midst to illustrate his point (18:1–5). There is a strong sense of irony in Jesus' response to their childish argument about greatness by bringing a child into their midst. Both Mark and

Luke focus primarily on Jesus' corrective instruction that welcoming a child is the same as welcoming him. The privilege of status and prestige are not what matters most in the kingdom of God. The disciples have been enjoying the current privileges of apprenticeship to Jesus and anticipating the future benefits. Through Jesus' predictions of the passion preceding this argument, "Jesus speaks of the necessity of his rejection, suffering, and death; and following all three the disciples voice their ambitions for status and prestige. Jesus speaks of surrendering his life; the disciples speak of fulfilling theirs. He counts the cost of discipleship; they count its assets."[30] The disciples believe that they have counted the cost of being his disciple and are great enough to receive appropriate elevation in the kingdom of God. They misunderstand, for greatness in the kingdom of God requires them to willingly lay down their lives for others (John 15:13) as Jesus models metaphorically through his ministry and foreshadows will happen physically through his coming death.

Jesus demonstrates through action and example, not just words, how to receive and embody the kingdom of heaven. By inviting a child to stand among the disciples Jesus illustrates the type of "greatness" that the kingdom of heaven requires: to change and become like a child. The disciples' perception of greatness is not in keeping with God's scale of value.[31] The teaching on forgiveness and divorce that follows Jesus' welcome of the child in Matthew and Mark contains instructions for leaders that prioritise humility,[32] not the first-century focus on honour, position, and status of leaders.[33] The child brought into their midst provides a theological counterpoint to

[30] Edwards, *Mark*, 175.
[31] France, *Mark*, 398.
[32] Carroll, "Children in the Bible," 130.
[33] Longman and Garland, eds., *Matthew–Mark*, 848.

reorient the disciples away from the pursuit of prestige towards being leaders who serve and elevate others. It is the humble status of one's heart, not the external recognition of worldly status, that characterizes the recipients of the kingdom of God. Furthermore, children are perceived as having nothing of greatness to offer or to emulate. However, the recognition of one's spiritual poverty and need for help is also characteristic of the kingdom of God.

Jesus builds upon his teaching from the first interaction in his reception of the children in the second event (Matt 19:13–14; Mark 10:13–16; Luke 18:15–16). Here, Jesus models kingdom inclusion of the least:

> People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them (Mark 10:13–16).

Mark uniquely highlights Jesus' indignation with and rebuke of the authoritarian disciples as they deny the children access to Jesus.[34] There are two separate commands in Jesus' rebuke: first, he says to let the children come, which indicates that they are already in the process of moving toward him.[35] Second, Jesus commands the disciples not to hinder the children's journey towards him. This is an important question for any follower of Christ to consider for themselves: Am I hindering others from coming to Jesus who may already be in the process of moving towards him, and what is motivating me to do so? An even more pointed question that relates to this thesis: Are the methods that we use to disciple children hindering them from encountering God personally and

[34] Matthew and Luke only note that the disciples rebuked the people bringing the children.
[35] The significance of this as it relates to children's spirituality will be addressed in Chapter 3.

discerning his invitation to come and follow Jesus? To answer these questions, adult followers of Jesus need to evaluate their attitudes and biases towards children, just as the disciples were led by Jesus to do. Again, Jesus reiterates that the kingdom of God belongs to those who are like children, and who receive it like a child:

> In this story, children are not blessed for their virtues but for what they lack: they come only as they are—small, powerless, without sophistication, as the overlooked and dispossessed of society. To receive the kingdom of God as a child is to receive it as one who has no credits, no clout, no claims. A little child has absolutely nothing to bring, and whatever a child receives, he or she receives by grace on the basis of sheer neediness rather than by any merit inherent in him- or herself. Little children are paradigmatic disciples, for only empty hands can be filled.[36]

As paradigmatic disciples with nothing to offer to Jesus, what is it that they receive from Jesus through his blessing of them? The discussion will now shift from the context of these interactions to the implications of Jesus' embodiment and modelling of welcome, invitation, and embrace of children in both encounters.[37]

Welcome

Several factors precede and set the stage for the welcome that Jesus extends to the children who are brought to him. First, those bringing the children to Jesus recognize in him a spiritual authority to bless and care for their children. With hope, they bring their children to Jesus and find that he has predetermined that they are welcome. Jesus has already initiated this encounter through the incarnational act of being present; he invites them to come near to him as he has already come near to them. Second, welcome is the consequence of identification. Someone who knocks upon a door is not welcomed into a

---

[36] Edwards, *Mark*, 187.

[37] Moltmann points out that "Jesus proclaims what he embodies, that the kingdom of God is already theirs," but it is important to notice that Jesus first embodies what he proclaims through his identification with children ("Metaphors of Hope," 599).

home if they are not identified by the host. Jesus identifies *with* children in their humanity and need for the Father's love, identity, and empowerment.[38] He understands and empathizes with their need (Heb 4:15).

Jesus reveals the hospitality of God through how he speaks of welcome and how he models the receiving of children. All are welcome in the kingdom, but few will enter in. He models what he teaches by being a servant to all (Mark 9:35)—including children—in whatever ways necessary, as demonstrated through the cross. Jesus is exhibiting to his disciples that the kingdom of God is not about being great in a social hierarchy; it is a particular way of being and doing that pleases God. Furthermore, the best way to know how to *be* and *do* is to look to Jesus: "to welcome the lowly is to adopt the mind-set of Jesus and of the Father, and so to demonstrate the eternal values of the kingdom of God."[39] Joel Green addresses how countercultural it would be to offer hospitality to those of differing social status in the Jewish culture:

> "To welcome" people would be to extend to them the honor of hospitality, to regard them as guests (cf. 7:44–46), but one would only welcome a social equal or one whose honor was above one's own. Children, whose place of social residence was defined at the bottom of the ladder of esteem, might be called upon to perform acts of hospitality (e.g., washing the feet of a guest), but normally they would not themselves be the recipients of honourable behaviour. Jesus thus turns the social pyramid upside down, undermining the very conventions that led the disciples to deliberate over relative greatness within the company of disciples and, indeed, that had led the disciples away from any proper understanding of Jesus' status.[40]

The character of God's kingdom is built on sacrificial love and servanthood that deconstructs the social power systems and culture of the world within which the disciples' biases are embedded. The performance orientation that seeks affirmation for

[38] As discussed earlier in the section on Childhood to Adolescence.
[39] Longman and Garland, *Matthew–Mark*, 849.
[40] Green, *Luke*, 357–58.

doing without the character of *being* misses the mark of what Jesus is modelling to his disciples. Those who welcome the child from a place of *being* recognize the worth of the person standing before them regardless of their age, gender, or social status. Thus, to welcome a child in Jesus' name is "to perceive Christ in that child and act accordingly."[41] Being welcomed in Jesus' name is akin to welcoming Jesus himself; the child represents Jesus and the one who sent him (Mark 9:37; Luke 9:48). Similarly, the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matt 25:40, 35–36 illustrates that whatever is done for the hungry, imprisoned, and needy is also done for the Son of Man, and this is attributed as righteousness. By responding to Christ's invitation to follow and do as he does, the faithful receive Christ as they receive and welcome others.

Jesus not only welcomes children but identifies them, and all those without status, as belonging to the kingdom of God (Mark 10:14). Jesus' inclusion of children in the kingdom demonstrates their value to the Father and how the values of the kingdom of God are counterintuitive to the values of the world. This inclusion in the kingdom does not mean that children are recipients due to their age or childlike nature (their orientation to wonder, imagination, and curiosity). Instead, they are included in the gospel's universal invitation to respond to Christ's offer of grace and to receive the kingdom of God. It is only through recognizing one's need and responding with humility that entrance into the kingdom of God is received.

[41] Allison and Davies, *Matthew*, 296.

Reception/Embrace

Mark is notable for including descriptive language to characterize both the kind of welcome Jesus has for the children and his reaction to the disciples, which the other synoptic gospels do not include (Mark 9:36; 10:16).[42] Mark creates a vivid picture of Jesus not only welcoming the children to be with him, but also embracing the children, taking them into his arms in an action of tenderness and familiarity.[43] All three synoptic accounts use the word παιδίον for children, which generally indicates a child who has not yet reached the age of puberty.[44] Only Luke uses the word βρέφος ("baby," "infant") in 18:15, but then switches to παιδίον in verse 16: "People were also bringing *babies* to Jesus… But Jesus called the *children* to him and said, 'Let the little *children* come to me.'" The image of God in Christ, holding and embracing children and infants is a significant embodiment of God's lovingkindness and inclusion of children in his kingdom. He not only proclaims their inclusion but also demonstrates it physically in a way that is reminiscent of the image of the sovereign Lord in Isa 40:11 tending "his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart." In both accounts, Jesus and the shepherd embrace and tenderly care for the needs of their little lambs.

[42] Carroll, "Children in the Bible," 130. Mark also makes note of Jesus' indignant anger toward the disciples which the other two gospels do not mention. According to Marshall, the gospel of Luke avoids "attributing human emotions to Jesus" (Marshall, *Luke*, 396).

[43] Louw and Nida, *Greek–English Lexicon*, 1:455. The verb ἐναγκαλίζομαι is defined as "to put one's arms around someone as an expression of affection and concern — 'to embrace, to hug, to put one's arms around.'" Both the NIV and the NRSV translate the verb as "taking the child in his arms" in the Markan accounts, while the CEB translates the verb as "embraced" in Mark 9:36, and "hugged" in Mark 10:16.

[44] Louw and Nida, *Greek–English Lexicon*, 1:110. The word παιδίον is used to describe Jairus's daughter, who is noted for being 12 years old in Mark 5:39–42.

Rahner suggests that the faith connection that children have with Jesus is significant in and of itself, at this present moment in their lives. The fruit of a relationship with Jesus is to be enjoyed now, not just for what it will become in the future as it is not just for the "pledge of the grace of adulthood…. The fact that it contributes to the later stages of life is not the sole criterion of its own intrinsic rightness. It must be the case that childhood is valuable in itself, that it is to be discovered anew in the ineffable future which is coming to meet us."[45] Childhood is a unique and precious stage in which Christ welcomes and embraces the child, showing them that they belong with him in his kingdom.

Modelling

Jesus provides an example of greatness by welcoming a child into the midst of the disciples as an enacted parable (Mark 9:36).[46] Jesus also challenges their entitlement of future greatness by saying the kingdom is received by becoming like a child (Mark 10:15). What is Jesus referring to when he indicates that childhood and childlikeness are congruent with the kingdom of God? Jesus uses the child as a model to reveal something that he embodies. How are a child and childhood like Jesus? Earlier in this chapter we explored the childlike qualities of sonship in which Jesus understood his identity and activity—his being and doing—as located within the Father. Children also understand their identity and belonging in relation to their family. They depend upon their family to provide for their basic needs of food, shelter, and loving relationships. Children are aware of their inability to be or do certain things and their need for help or intervention.

[45] Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology," 37.
[46] Allison and Davies, *Matthew 8–18*, 756.

Like Jesus' obedience to his parents in Luke 2:51, children recognize authority and choose to willingly submit to those whom they trust.[47] This relational orientation is indicative of what it means to become like a child. Joachim Jeremias proposes that becoming like a child is recognizing our relational orientation to the Father by "learning to say Abba again…. putting one's whole trust in the heavenly Father."[48] Childlike greatness is experienced not through what the world considers great, but in receiving and knowing the Father through Jesus.[49]

By trying to identify themselves with God's greatness and power, the disciples miss the point that God in Christ has humbled himself to join them in *their* lowliness and weakness. There is nothing that the disciples can do or become to earn the prestige of greatness. Instead, they are invited to admit they come with nothing, thus changing to become like children in their need and dependence on him as Abba. This requires them to "[accept] for oneself a position in the social scale which is like that of children, that is as the lowest in the hierarchy of authority and decision-making, those subject to and dependent on adults."[50] Childhood as a paradigm of discipleship is the acceptance of one's identity in Christ right where they are. There is no need to earn it or prepare in any way to be worthy of it; for the welcome, inclusion, and embrace of the Father is grace incarnated in Jesus. It is the gift of mercy from a loving Father (Matt 7:11). The greatness of Jesus is amplified by his relinquishment of equality with God, and

[47] It must be noted that children may also submit to those whom they do not trust when they recognize an unjust power differential. This is more of a forced or enforced submission that is not willingly done and is generally not in the best interest of the child. This type of submission is not mutually beneficial and is indicative of the broken and sinful power structures that take advantage of the weakness of children.

[48] Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, 156.

[49] Things that the world may consider great include wisdom, knowledge, strength, wealth, influence, possessions, charisma, status, skills, and power.

[50] France, *Matthew*, 657.

consequently by humbling himself through the Incarnation, to human betrayal, and his submission to the cross (Phil 2:6–11). Children are capable of following Jesus in choosing humility and responding to his invitation to receive the kingdom of God.

Response (Matthew 21:15–16)

Jesus does not welcome the children merely as an object lesson for the benefit of the disciples' learning. He welcomes the children to bless them through his compassion and care. In Matt 21:15–16 the response of children who perceive Jesus' identity as King illustrates the capability of children to hear God's voice and to follow him in their own decisions:

> But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the Temple courts, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they were indignant.
> "Do you hear what these children are saying?" they asked him.
> "Yes," replied Jesus, "have you never read,
> '"From the lips of children and infants
> you, Lord, have called forth your praise'?"

In this instance, the contrast between Jesus' attitude of identification and inclusion of children is with the priests and teachers, not the disciples. Jesus emphasizes the appropriate response of the children, in contrast to the indignant anger of the priests and teachers. God is at work in the lives of children to call forth recognition of Jesus' praiseworthiness. It is not due to the children's keen skills of observation that they recognize Jesus as the Son of David. The children are responding to God's self-revelation in Christ. Jesus quotes Ps 8:2 in his response to the priests and teachers: "From the mouths of nursing babies you have laid a strong foundation because of your foes, in order to stop vengeful enemies" (CEB). There is none as weak or dependent as a

nursing baby, and yet God uses the foolish, weak, and lowly things of this world to reveal the glory of the Son (1 Cor 1:27–31).

Through God's divine initiative, the children perceive God in Jesus, and are drawn to him; they recognize him and listen to him. Jesus welcomes, embraces, and affirms them for their humble status, lowliness, and weakness; however,

> Children are not mere ignoramuses in terms of spiritual insight in the Gospel tradition. They know Jesus' true identity. They praise him as the Son of David. They have this knowledge from God and not from themselves, and because they do, they are living manifestos to the source of all true knowledge about Christ as from God. Jesus' affirmation of the children's praise of him in this pericope (Matt 21:14–16) is thus an affirmation that children who "know nothing" can also "know divine secrets" and believe in him.[51]

It is the person who trusts in God through faith in Christ and lives out their faith through the welcome and embrace of the least that is recognized as great in his kingdom. Jesus demonstrates through his encounters with children in the Gospels that there is no age limit on God's invitation to be known, nor on a person's ability to hear and respond to the voice of God.

Paul (1 Corinthians 3:1–3)

In 1 Cor 3:1–3, Paul builds upon Jesus' inclusion and paradigmatic use of children as those to whom the kingdom of God belongs:

> Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans?

[51] Gundry-Volf, "Jesus and Children," 479.

At first glance, it may appear as though Paul is criticizing the Corinthians for being childish, worldly, and living without the Spirit, thus equating childhood or infancy with worldliness. However, this goes against Jesus' welcome of children in the synoptic gospels. Gordon Fee notes that this interpretation also contradicts Paul's regular use of "the imagery of 'children' in a positive sense to reflect his own apostolic relationship with his converts."[52] Instead, Paul is using the phrase "mere infants" to stun the Corinthians with the difference between how they perceive themselves as mature and godly, and his perception of their level of maturity.[53] This is reminiscent of Jesus' interaction in Mark 9 with the disciples who were arguing over who was the greatest. Jesus also stunned his disciples by bringing a child of lowly status into their midst as a demonstration of greatness. Paul uses the phrase "mere infant" as a contrast to the Corinthians' "thinking or behaviour that is not fitting for a 'grown up.'"[54] He criticizes them for acting and thinking in worldly ways—not as Spirit-filled people—who consider themselves more highly than they ought (Rom 12:2–3).

Paul takes the analogy one step farther to address the type of spiritual nourishment that they are consuming. As infants Paul gave them milk, not solid food. His criticism is that, "They have abandoned the gospel for something that may look like 'solid food' but is altogether without nutritional value."[55] The Corinthians have become fascinated with *sophia,* an artificial version of the gospel.[56] And, if the Corinthians prefer the "exquisite charms of clever oratory to tickle their ears, which made the

[52] Fee, *First Epistle*, 135.
[53] Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 103.
[54] Fee, *First Epistle*, 135.
[55] Fee, *First Epistle*, 136.
[56] Fee, *First Epistle*, 136.

simplicity of the word of the cross seem bland and elementary,"[57] then they are hungering after the wrong type of nourishment, thus revealing their lack of maturity. This demonstrates their need to continue to be nourished by milk. They think they are mature, but they are not.[58]

Both milk and meat are the same gospel, and both spiritually nourish the followers of Jesus. There is no greater truth than the salvation that comes through Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. However, we would think it strange if a weaned child returned to their mother for breastmilk, or an infant was fed meat before they had the teeth to chew. The gospel sufficiently nourishes Christ's followers, regardless of their age, at every point in their spiritual journey. Nevertheless, it is important to be fed in keeping with where one is at in their healthy spiritual development and to trust in the Holy Spirit's guidance as he leads us into spiritual maturation (Heb 5:12—6:2). The invitation of God is to grow deeper in intimacy with him and to humbly receive from him the nourishment that he determines is best for us, rather than what we suppose is our greatest need. Therefore, we join Jesus in praying, "Give us today our daily bread" (Matt 6:11) and trust him to provide for us.

Adults can be childish in their willfulness to resist God in their thinking, and children can be mature in their responsiveness and trust of him. Intimacy with God is determined by one's inner orientation towards God and attunement to his voice. God chooses to reveal himself in unexpected ways so that he can be clearly seen by those who have ears to hear, eyes to see, and a desire to follow God. As Jesus himself

---

[57] Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 105.
[58] Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 102.

declares, “You have hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to little children” (Matt 11:25).

Conclusion

Children know how to *be* in the present. That is why they feel big feelings without the reservations and social expectations that come with maturity. When they laugh, cry, express anger, or get excited it engages their whole being, and in many ways is contagious and inclusive as others join in their joy or sorrow. This ability to be present also contributes to their potential to hear, recognize, and respond to the voice of the Good Shepherd. Childlikeness and childhood experiences of God create a foundation early in life that both forms and reforms a person’s identity in Christ throughout their lives. This chapter has demonstrated through the analysis of the biblical view of children and in particular Jesus’ encounters with children that “the Gospels teach the reign of God as a children’s world, where children are the measure, rather than don’t measure up to adults, where the small are great and the great must become small.”[59] Children may be considered among the least, but they are people. They are not mini-people, or developing people, but people whom Jesus welcomes and embraces as recipients of his kingdom. Furthermore, childhood offers unique experiences of God that have eternal significance in people’s lives and spiritual journeys.

[59] Gundry-Volf, “Jesus and Children,” 480.

CHAPTER 3: THE SPIRITUALITY OF CHILDREN

Introduction

The Synoptic Gospels each record an occasion when children were being brought to Jesus, and as he welcomed them, the disciples were instructed not to hinder the children or deny them access to him (Matt 19:14; Mark 10:14; Luke 18:16). Jesus' rebuke of the disciples for stopping the children can imply that the children were already moving toward Jesus. There is no need to stop what is not already happening. We can observe throughout the gospel narratives that children were present in the crowds of people who followed Jesus and were drawn to him. The guardians of these children chose to include their children in following Jesus, listening to his teaching, and bringing them to Jesus with intentionality. The children and their parents had an interest in meeting Jesus to receive a blessing from him. Where did these children come from, and how did they feel about meeting Jesus, the rabbi who told stories and made sick people well? What sort of questions and wonderings did these children want to ask Jesus? Children love to ask questions, and depending upon their developmental stage, children ask particular kinds of questions. How do those questions contribute to the child's spiritual understanding, and deepen their attunement to Jesus so that, like the sheep in John 10:27, they may hear, know, and follow the Good Shepherd? The previous chapter articulated Jesus' tenderness in welcoming, including and embracing children in each of the synoptic gospels, and his notable inclusion of them in the kingdom of God. This chapter will

explore the spirituality of children and their response to Jesus' invitation to come to him; to know God and be known by him. Three important contributors to the contemporary understanding and spiritual formation of children will create the structure for this chapter. First, we will examine the models and metaphors of children's spiritual and faith formation with particular attention to the development of children in the elementary years (ages 7–10 years) to identify some of the helpful and harmful ways these theories contribute to our understanding of children's spirituality. Secondly, the application of this understanding is expressed in three popular models of ministry that have been developed to assist adults in the church to instruct and guide children in their faith. Thirdly, through the priorities and usage of these models, certain tensions emerge in facilitating environments for children to both experience and know God.

Defining Christian Spirituality

The spiritual nature of human beings is one aspect of that which makes up the whole person. It is also this one part that affects and is lived out in the whole life of the person. Robert Mulholland Jr. identifies spirituality as part of "the very essence of our being. We are spiritual beings whose emotions, psychology, body and mind are the incarnation of our spiritual life in the world."[1] Spirituality is the expression of the spiritual nature, but it can be as difficult to describe and define as the transcendence of a spiritual experience. Philip Sheldrake attempts to define spirituality "in broad terms, [as the] lifestyles and practices that embody a vision of human existence and of how the human spirit is to achieve its full potential…. [It] embraces an aspirational approach, whether

[1] Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey*, 17.

religious or secular, to the meaning and conduct of human life."[2] In many ways spirituality epitomizes the worldview and values of a person or community. However, worldviews and values also embody an understanding of spirituality and experience with transcendence. The third component that Sheldrake mentions in his definition is how spirituality and vision (worldview) is lived out in lifestyle and practices. Consequently, our understanding of and attitude toward spirituality defines our worldview and values. These are observed in how we choose to live our lives. As individuals with similar understandings of spirituality gather together, they express and nurture within the traditions and religious practices of that community their worldview and values. Religion and spirituality are not the same thing, but they do share some commonalities in relating to "the ultimate meanings in life and the quest for transcendence."[3]

Christian spirituality can be incorporated into this broad understanding of spirituality. However, "through the corrective lens of biblical revelation, the transcendent reality of generic spirituality comes into focus as the living, personal triune God."[4] Christian spirituality is a God-initiated relationship between himself and humankind, rather than a nonreciprocal, personally perceived experience of transcendence. Evan Howard presents five foundations of Christian spirituality that are distinctive to Christian faith: the revelation of God (in Jesus, Scriptures, and the Spirit through the church), the reality of the living God who is Spirit, the human experience of God, a relationship with God, and love, which characterizes this relationship.[5] It is through Jesus that we can not only encounter God, but are invited into a relationship

[2] Sheldrake, *Spirituality*, 1.
[3] May, "Identifying Children's Spirituality," 16.
[4] Scorgie, "Overview," 27.
[5] Howard, *Brazos*, 28–30.

with him, to know him and be known by him, and to be identified in Christ. Furthermore, it is through the transformational presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers that individuals and communities are made new (2 Cor 5:17–19). Glen Scorgie defines Christian spirituality as "being attentive to the Holy Spirit's voice, open to his transforming impulses, and empowered by his indwelling presence."[6] These five qualifications set Christian spirituality apart from other expressions of spirituality as a love relationship that is God-initiated, interactive, and not performance-based. Spiritual connection with God is not something that we spend our whole life searching for. Instead, it is God who comes near to us, searches for us, and restores a relationship with us through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ (1 Chron 28:9; 1 Cor 2:10). Likewise, it is God who exemplifies what love is, invites us to know him, and adopts us into the fullness of a relationship with him, in Christ, through the Holy Spirit. In these essentials of Christian spirituality, we observe the pattern of the relationship set in John 10:27: a God-initiated relationship in Christ that is experienced through discerning his voice by the Holy Spirit who speaks of identity, belonging, and love, inviting his sheep to follow him.

Spiritual Formation

The shaping and development of spirituality is much like a plant that will either thrive or languish due to its environment, regular nourishment, and intentional care. Mulholland notes that "everyone is in a process of spiritual formation" as this is a "primal reality of human existence."[7] The various expressions of human spirituality define what humanity

[6] Scorgie, "Overview," 27.
[7] Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey*, 27–28.

is shaped by and into according to their worldview and values, which, in turn, reflect the spiritual understandings of an individual or community. The shaping that the person or community engages in or yields themselves to is spiritual formation. Christian spirituality understands spiritual formation to be the shaping work of God within people to transform them into the likeness of Christ (2 Cor 3:18).[8] However, it requires the awareness and desire of the individual to participate in that transformational work. Through confession and repentance, the places of brokenness and sin are brought into submission to Jesus. It is through the "disciplined, attentive dependence on the impulses of the indwelling Holy Spirit that believers are privileged to participate in the renewing work of God within them" in their journey of spiritual formation.[9] Separated from a relationship with God, this formational work can become a checklist of self-improvement disciplines to be completed. In contrast, by submitting oneself to the discipline and direction of the Holy Spirit, renewal is experienced internally, and the fruit of formation is then observable externally (Luke 6:45; Gal 5:22–26). This requires the believer to respond with consistent obedience and trust to the perceived voice of God, whether in Scripture, through other members of the church, or by the personal agency of the Holy Spirit.

Another important aspect of Christian spirituality is that it encompasses all of life, therefore affecting the whole person, not just the "spiritual" aspect of that person's being. When asked an existential spiritual question about inheriting eternal life, Jesus leads the questioner to reflect on the *Shema*, Israel's vision statement from the Law (Deut 6:5), to "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and

[8] Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey*, 16.
[9] Scorgie, "Overview," 28.

with all your strength and with all your mind'; and 'Love your neighbour as yourself'" (Luke 10:27). A relationship with God is understood to incorporate every aspect of a person's being—their heart, soul, strength, mind, and relationships with others. The distortion of holistic spirituality is to only desire the esoteric experience of God, whereas authentic spirituality is reflected in a life fully surrendered to God with every aspect of life lived before God.[10] This does not minimize or discredit the esoteric experiences but insists that they are a supplement to authentic spiritual formation.

Spirituality and Children

Understanding spirituality to be an inherent part of being human, not something that emerges through maturity or is awakened at a particular age, means recognizing that children are also spiritual and capable of entering a relationship with God. However, throughout history there have been differing opinions concerning, and in general, a lack of attention given to the spirituality of children. Moreover, the formation of children's spirituality is similar but distinct from the formation of adults. To ignore or minimize the spirituality of children and their interest in spiritual development is to deny an essential part of what makes them whole people. Children have an openness[11] and "ability to be present in the moment"[12] in their spirituality that can be nurtured within their relational and environmental contexts. Yet it also remains a personal and unique journey of discovery and wonder. Tobin Hart emphasizes that spiritual moments for people "are direct, personal, and often have the effect, if only for a moment, of waking us up and

[10] Scorgie, "Overview," 27–28.
[11] Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology", 48.
[12] Bunge, "Childlikeness, Spirituality of," 351.

expanding our understanding of who we are and what our place is in the universe."[13] Hart and Nelson surveyed 450 young adults to determine the significance and range of childhood spiritual experiences with questions around a variety of spiritual experiences including "moments of wonder and awe, unitive experiences, and receiving spiritual guidance from a nonphysical source," and discovered that between 60–90 percent of respondents indicated that their first notable spiritual experiences occurred in childhood.[14] Additionally, Nye insists that research has shown that childhood experience of spirituality "often provides the most crucial spiritual impressions of all, the ones that could shape (or distort) all the experience of later life."[15] As something that is a natural part of who children are, and given its ability to be shaped or distorted in the tenderness of childhood, the development and understanding of spirituality in children is both necessary and significant.

Rebecca Nye, a psychologist specializing in children's spirituality, provides three definitions for children's spirituality. The first is: "God's ways of being with children and children's ways of being with God."[16] The initiative for a relationship with the divine always begins with God and children respond to his invitation to both know and be known by him. This definition acknowledges that childhood provides "ways of being" with God that are particular to children. God engages with children in ways that appeal to them, and they in turn respond to him in ways that honour him.

Secondly, children's spirituality is evident as "relational consciousness," which is a child's ability to relate to "more than 'just me,'" and "an initially natural capacity for

---

[13] Hart, *Secret Spiritual World*, 8.
[14] Hart, *Secret Spiritual World*, 6–7.
[15] Nye, *Children's Spirituality*, 11.
[16] Nye, *Children's Spirituality*, 5.

awareness of the sacred quality to life experiences."[17] A child does not necessarily need to be convinced that God wants to have a relationship with them as they become aware of his proximity to them, their ability to hear him and be heard by him, and that they are welcome to be with him. These qualities of being with God are like those of friendship, which is often how a child best relates to God.

The third definition that Nye offers is that "children's spirituality is like a child."[18] What are the characteristics of children that Jesus' was referring to when he invited a child to stand in the midst of his disciples (Matt 18:1–5; Mark 9:36–37; 10:15; Luke 9:47–48; 18:16)? As discussed in the previous chapter there are qualities that are inherent to childhood (dependence, openness, relational consciousness), and some that represent childlikeness (wonder, imagination, and curiosity). There are also qualities of childhood that are corrupted and disempowered that affect the safe expression of childlikeness. Attributes of humility, dependence, innocence, playfulness, openness, trust, curiosity, justice, simplicity, imagination, and wonder are all intrinsic to children. A child's spirituality, or perhaps their enjoyment and exploration of their spiritual capacity, includes the validation and renewal of these same attributes. Furthermore, these qualities are not childish, but are essential to childlikeness, and ought to be celebrated in any disciple and follower of Christ.

The child's spirit is part of who they are; it is not something that they receive through growth and development. However, the maturation and development of their spiritual understanding and a relationship with God can and should be nurtured as they grow. There are unique qualities to children's spiritual experiences and their "ways of

[17] Nye, *Children's Spirituality*, 6.
[18] Nye, *Children's Spirituality*, 6.

being" that need to be understood and accepted within the developmental stage that children are in. Rosalind Tan observes that "children express their spirituality in developmentally appropriate ways as they derive representations of God images, make meaning of their God-child encounters, and connect their experiences to daily living."[19] To minimize or potentially disqualify children's experiences of God because they are expressed in developmentally appropriate ways is unfair. Children may not yet have the language or connective ability to relate their experiences to theology or Scripture, or to adequately portray the potency of their encounters with God.[20]

Models and Metaphors of Spiritual Formation in Children

The focus of teaching and practices of spiritual disciplines and development have been predominantly oriented towards adults throughout most of Christian history, with minimal attention given to the spirituality of children. Several theologians and Christian leaders (among them Chrysostom, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Menno Simons, John Wesley, and Johnathan Edwards) have been notable in their inclusion of children in Christian spiritual formation, not simply as a paradigm for entry into the kingdom of God.[21] There has been a major shift over the last century in evaluating children's engagement and application of religious understanding and

[19] Tan, "Children and Spirituality," 352–53.

[20] Hay and Nye address the difficulty within recent research that focuses on children's demonstration of stage theory 'God-talk.' Instead, they suggest that "researchers need to focus on the perceptions, awareness and response of children" to ordinary activities that may signal transcendence (*Spirit of the Child*, 60). In large part this is due to the lack of religious or spiritual language that children may have within their environment to adequately give shape to their experience. Or it could be the complete opposite; that children with religious backgrounds alter their description of their personal spirituality "towards conventionalized 'God-talk'" that is reflective of "standardized religious language (*Spirit of the Child*, 60, 88).

[21] It is not the intent of this paper to cover the breadth of historical contributions in the study of children's spirituality, however, it is valuable to note some of the theologians and leaders who have affected the contemporary conversation (Bunge, *Child in Christian Thought*, 7–9).

spiritual beliefs with the "increase in psychoanalytic and sociocultural studies in child development."[22] Particularly in the last thirty years, scholars and researchers have focused more specifically on the spiritual experiences in the lives of children.[23] This has led to theories of faith development, models for ministry, and metaphors for understanding the formational capacities of children that have been both helpful and harmful in the spiritual formation of children, particularly in church settings and the home. This section will address the influence that developmental theories have had on the models and metaphors of spiritual formation for children by considering James W. Fowler's synthesis of Piaget, Kohlberg, and Erikson in the *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. These theories can be useful for informing a broad or normalized expression of children's cognitive, moral, and behavioural development; however, that information can become a checklist for assessment rather than a trellis upon which to grow a healthy and whole person. Depending upon psychological theories of development to inform the spiritual formation of children misdirects where the focus in spiritual formation ought to be.[24] Ultimately, understanding children's spirituality and faith development must come into alignment with a Christian worldview and understanding of human identity.

[22] Tan, "Children and Spirituality," 352.

[23] Ratcliff, "Spirit of Children Past," 21. A confirmation bias can misrepresent children's spiritual experiences when researchers phrase questions in a way that may lead children to respond in pre-formulated ways that align with cognitive stage categories (30–31).

[24] Csinos and Beckwith, *Way of Jesus*, 57.

Stages of Faith

At the foundation of his theory, Fowler recognizes what this thesis has already discussed regarding the spiritual nature of humankind and spiritual formation, but seemingly blends the two concepts together as the human capacity for faith:

> Faith is a human universal. We are endowed at birth with nascent capacities for faith. How these capacities are activated and grow depends to a large extent on how we are welcomed into the world and what kinds of environments we grow in. Faith is interactive and social; it requires community, language, ritual and nurture. Faith is also shaped by initiatives from beyond us and other people, initiatives of spirit or grace. How these latter initiatives are recognized and imaged, or unperceived and ignored, powerfully affects the shape of faith in our lives.[25]

Fowler applies this understanding of faith liberally to all expressions of spirituality, although his theory and research are primarily based upon interviews with individuals from a North American Christian faith tradition.[26] For Fowler, faith is not simply belief or a religious tradition that is practiced: "Faith involves an alignment of the will, a resting of the heart, in accordance with a vision of transcendent value and power, one's ultimate concern…. Faith is an orientation of the total person, giving purpose and goal to one's hopes and strivings, thoughts and actions."[27] For the purpose of this thesis, two key questions must be considered regarding Fowler's stage theory and its application to the spiritual formation of children. First, is this true for children? And secondly, does this theory accurately represent the lived experience of the Christian faith as being one of a developing and intimate relationship with the living God?

This thesis aims to specifically consider the application of practices of prayer to children ages 7–10, who are incorporated by Fowler's theory as Stage 2: Mythic-Literal

---

[25] Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, xiii.
[26] Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 14–15.
[27] Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 14.

Faith (children ages 7–12). The Mythic-Literal Faith of Stage 2 is preceded by the Undifferentiated Faith of infancy, and Stage 1's Intuitive-Projective Faith of early childhood (ages 2–6). Much of what Fowler describes as characteristic for each of these stages is rooted in cognitive, moral, and behavioural development, which does not reflect the child's innate spirituality, but relates more to their human capabilities and their integration of religious and spiritual influences. Fowler does capture the distinctive quality for wonder and imagination that children in Stage 1 and 2 have and identifies the transition of the curiosity of children in Stage 1 who ask "Why" questions to those in Stage 2 who ask "How" questions. The emergence of concrete operational thinking which looks to differentiate between "what is real and what only seems to be" is what marks the transition of children from Stage 1 to 2.[28]

According to Fowler, the Mythic-Literal child of Stage 2[29] has received and adopted the "stories, beliefs and observances that symbolize belonging to his or her community."[30] They are storytellers who enjoy infusing meaning into their experiences and are compelled by others' narrative stories. They are also empiricists who are beginning to employ methods of scientific reasoning motivated by a desire to categorize and create order of their curiosities and imagination. Nye notes that children at this age are not only looking for rational or scientific categories, but "[welcome] categories for things that transcend simple categories too (mystery, infinite, awesome, cosmic, ultimate)!"[31] At this stage they are listeners who are beginning to consider other people's

[28] Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 134.

[29] All information in this paragraph regarding this stage is taken from Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 135–50, unless otherwise indicated.

[30] Fowler, *Stages of Faith,* 149.

[31] Nye, *Children's Spirituality*, 87. Nye's commentary is based on Fowler's stage theory (Fowler et al. *Stages of Faith and Religious Development,*, 1991).

perspectives, and the relationship between cause and effect. They are concerned with reciprocity, fairness, and justice. Additionally, children in this stage are beginning to differentiate between their inner selves and external experiences, and that their inner self has a sense of conscience which is broader than their self and inclinations.[32]

Helpful or Harmful?

Several challenges arise in applying Fowler's stage theory to the construction of a framework for spiritual formation. The first is that it is too rigidly aligned with developmental theory. Stage theory can provide helpful information for how children learn, think, and behave, but is deficient in understanding how they grow in a relationship with God and spiritual formation.[33] Psychological theories and studies can create a linear or hierarchical structure that does not account for faith influences, socio-cultural environments—especially those that are increasingly secularized—and gender differences. Hierarchies suggest that the higher one travels up the structure, the greater the value that phase offers. Contrastingly, in spiritual formation, Christianity recognizes the significance of faith at every developmental stage as valuable. Moreover, the goal of Christianity is not developmental maturity, but greater intimacy in relating with God.[34] The difficulty of universally applying stage theory is that doing so potentially disregards these characteristics of the Christian faith, and "may implicitly suggest that people are

[32] Nye, *Children's Spirituality*, 87–88.

[33] Understanding the general development functions can help to shape the types of activities or disciplines that children's ministries employ to help children develop spiritually; essentially the how and what of the activity, versus the anticipated outcome. However, psychological development is not the only measure of development (Watts et al., *Psychology for Christian Ministry*, 116).

[34] Christianity does not define maturity of faith in psychological or sociological terms. According to Hebrews 6:1–2, maturity in faith includes moving beyond elementary teachings. This does not mean that they are left behind, but rather they are the foundation upon which new understanding is built.

passively being led through their religious life by universal and inevitable processes of human psychological development. Much religious literature, however, emphasizes the role of the will, self-discipline, and active co-operation in the process of transformation."[35] David Csinos and Ivy Beckwith contend that the generalized nature of developmental theories can even rob children of their full humanity.[36] Being fully human allows each person to have the agency to make choices for themselves, whereas theories can limit the range of that freedom. David Hay and Rebecca Nye acknowledge that stage theory can be useful, however, "the major problem is [the theory's] narrowness, coming near to dissolving religion into reason and therefore childhood spirituality into nothing more than a form of immaturity or inadequacy."[37] Similarly, difficulties arise in trying to account for and study children's expressions of their spirituality when they are measured against a rubric of adult maturity and theologically accurate language. The way children experience God and relate to him is congruent with who they are, and the way that God has created them. However, it may be challenging for them to express the mystical and subjective nature of their experiences as their language and theological understanding are still in progress.[38] Even adults can struggle to convey their experiences with God.

A second challenge in applying stage theory is that it undervalues the richness that faith at each stage of life can possess and operates on the assumption that through maturation one will leave behind those childish ways of relating to God. Jesus did not

---

[35] Watts et al., *Psychology for Christian Ministry*, 116.
[36] Csinos and Beckwith, *Way of Jesus*, 56.
[37] Hay and Nye, *Spirit of the Child*, 57.
[38] Watts et al. suggest that "children may often have more 'tacit 'knowledge and implicit understanding than is revealed by what they can explicitly articulate," (*Psychology for Christian Ministry*, 87).

present a developmental framework for discipleship. Instead, he turned the understanding of maturity upside down and said, "unless you change and become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 18:3). Maturity, then, includes starting over. This principle is present in Jesus' teaching to Nicodemus about being born again (John 3:1–21), and in a cruciform perspective it means dying to self to receive new life (2 Cor 5:17).[39] Similarly, Jesus celebrates God's wisdom in hiding "these things from the wise and learned, and reveal[ing] them to little children" (Matt 11:25; Luke 10:21). Faith at every stage of life is unique and important because Jesus never changes (Heb 13:8); he is the same Good Shepherd to both the infant and the grandparent. He reveals himself to young and old, so that no matter how people may change in their cognitive, moral, and behavioural development from infancy to adulthood, they are always invited into a relationship with God (Joel 2:28–29, 32). Perhaps, rather than progressing away from Stage 2's Mythic-Literal faith, becoming like a child means reintegrating ways of being that are intrinsic to this stage, such as curiosity, wonder, imagination, questioning, valuing justice, and storytelling. Nye proposes that "spirituality calls for a mindset that sees the child's capacities rather than their handicaps."[40]

Donald Ratcliff identifies four difficulties that emerge in attempting to align stage theory and cognitive development with the development of spiritual formation in

[39] Maturation in any context requires a willingness to release previous ways of thinking to adapt and embrace new learning. Rather than being a linear progression, maturation is more like a spiral of dying to self and renewal: "A mature perspective is one always ready to embrace starting again, giving up mastery, and temporarily adopting the position of a novice.… In Christian teaching, it is made clear that this process is not completed this side of physical death," (Watts et al., *Psychology for Christian Ministry*, 117).

[40] Nye, *Children's Spirituality*, 86.

children.[41] First, stage theory can create a self-perpetuating cycle that leads the results of the studies to reflect the theory. Generally, this results in religious development appearing to correspond to the progression of cognitive development, but this does not allow for much nuance or an adequate portrayal of the range of spirituality that may exist due to the context and spiritual influences of a child's life. Secondly, stage theory is too rigid to provide a workable foundation upon which to build spiritual curricula that can flex and adapt to the uniqueness of individual children and their experiences of God. Thirdly, researchers may identify corresponding stage characteristics or lead children to express certain types of answers because they fall within the range of that particular stage. Fourthly, the research does not reflect the dynamic and personal accounts of children's spiritual experiences accurately. Ratcliff contends that spiritual experiences elude a cognitive explanation and may be difficult to convey as they are deeply personal and affective.[42] These experiences cannot be intellectually measured or related to a theory of development that only measures cognitive, physical, or psychological markers. In conclusion, Ratcliff notes that the focus has been on psychology, and that a shift is needed by theorists and researchers towards "the spirit of the child, and the transforming Spirit of God" as central to understanding faith development.[43]

A more helpful approach to understanding spiritual development and how to guide children in their relationship with God emerges from looking at the models or metaphors that Jesus proposes of sheep (John 10:1–18), seeds/plants (Matt 7:15–20, 13:1–43; Mark 4:1–20; Luke 6:43–45, 8:1:15; John 15:1–8), disciples (Matt 16:24–25;

[41] Ratcliff, "Spirit of Children Past," 31–32.
[42] Ratcliff, "Spirit of Children Past," 32.
[43] Ratcliff, "Spirit of Children Past," 32.

Mark 8:34–35; John 8:31), servants (Matt 20:25–28; Mark 10:42–45), friends (John 15:9–17), and people as God's children (Matt 18:3; Mark 10:15; Luke 18:17; John 1:12–13).[44] Two important qualities to note about each of these metaphors is that they are active and participatory, rather than passive, and that they are each relationally oriented.[45] Similarly, the metaphor of pilgrimage can be a helpful picture for ministry with children, as it denotes that faith is a journey, with feasting and trouble, yet always the Shepherd is near (Ps 23). As fellow pilgrims on the journey of spiritual formation, their progress along the path is less about developmental stages, age, and intellectual ability, and instead focused on attentiveness to, and being with Christ.[46]

These metaphors can also be distorted when they are generally applied to spirituality; therefore, it is important to remember the goal of spiritual formation as being shaped by Someone into something. Perhaps if we were to ask a child which metaphor resonates most with them and their relationship with God, they would choose that of friendship, because this most accurately reflects a child's desire for connection. The connection that a child experiences with God, their family, and their community will cultivate trust which will in turn shape and develop faith.[47]

Models of Children's Ministry

What is the role of the church in supporting children and parents as they journey along the way of spiritual formation? An important nuance to consider is whether we understand ministry to be "to," "for," or "with" children. Ministering *to* children puts the

[44] May et al., *Children Matter*, 9.
[45] These relationships can be understood in this way: Sheep and shepherd, seeds and farmer, disciples and teacher, servant and master, friend and friend, child and parent.
[46] Nye, *Children's Spirituality*, 84.
[47] Borgo, *Faith Like a Child*, 34.

minister in the power position as expert, and one through whom the child must go to access God. Ministry *for* children aligns with the developmental theories this thesis has already examined as being an insufficient foundation upon which to build spiritual formation practices. Ministry *with* children emphasizes a partnership between the minister, the child, and the Holy Spirit which recognizes that God is already present and active in the life of the child. Csinos and Beckwith propose that children's ministry is:

> More than teaching children about God, the Bible, church and Christian living…. [It] is anything and everything we do to serve children as they walk on the spiritual journey… to care for the whole of children's lives—mind, body and soul. Children's ministry is all of our efforts to nurture the spiritual formation of children, to help them live in the way of Jesus, to support them on the journey of being disciples of Christ.[48]

A large part of the role of children's ministry is to create environments that facilitate space and intentional ways of engagement for children to sense God's presence, respond to his invitation to a friendship, receive his embrace, hear his voice, and be shaped by him to become more like Jesus. This thesis will evaluate three of the most common models of children's ministry on their effectiveness in nurturing spiritual formation through its perceived strengths and potential difficulties.

Sunday School/Contained Classroom Model

The Sunday School or classroom model is one that is familiar and has roots back to the late 1700s when Robert Raikes launched school on Sundays for factory children who were terrorizing their communities when not at work.[49] The purpose was to grow the literacy skills of children by teaching them to how to read from the Bible, while also

[48] Csinos and Beckwith, *Way of Jesus*, 37.
[49] May et al., *Children Matter*, 101–102.

"impress[ing] upon them values of morality and good behaviour."[50] This model requires classroom teachers who have biblical knowledge and classroom management skills to teach a group of 15 or fewer children. Often there is a chronologically constructed curriculum that the teacher uses to help children to grow in their biblical literacy. After the children listen to a story, they further explore the story and its significance through activity pages and learning games that encourage them to open their Bibles to find the answers. Examples of this model include curricula by David C. Cook such as Scripture Press and Gospel Light.[51]

The strengths of this model include exposing children to a significant amount of Scripture, a focus on developmentally appropriate learning approaches, and grouping children of similar ages together. Due to the cohesive developmental stage structure, it can be an easier model to administrate. Children and teachers understand their roles within this model, and the expectations for behaviour and learning outcomes. Children who can regularly attend and participate in this model will understand the significance of Israel's ancient history, and the larger scope of God's activity in the lives of his people. This model depends on the skills and priorities of the teacher to adapt the basic curricular lesson to guide the children into deeper levels of critical biblical thinking and relational application in their faith.

This model presents several challenges, beginning with the foundation it is built upon. The school model correlates spiritual formation with educational learning, which tends to focus on cognitive development, memorization, and extrinsic motivation such as grading and rewards. This model can also orient children and teachers into treating the

[50] May et al., *Children Matter*, 102.
[51] "David C. Cook Curriculum," [n.d.].

Scriptures as a text to be studied, and spiritual disciplines as activities to accomplish. A child's interest in attending can be affected by their attitude towards the school-based model, their connection with their teacher, and the teaching skills of the teacher for their age level.

Large Group/Small Group Model

The Large Group/Small Group model gathers children of all ages together for teaching and worship in a Children's Church model. The teaching is an age-appropriate "sermon" that can be taught with object lessons, interactive storytelling, drama, puppets, and multimedia. As a reproduction of the "Big church" or "Adult church" model, there may also be worship that has kid-oriented lyrics, concepts, and actions with a contemporary sound and feel. Prayer is usually brief and may be used as a transitional element between worship and teaching, and before the dismissal of children to their age-based small groups. Small groups are composed of 5–10 children with a small group leader who guides the children through activities that help them to apply the learning concept or "Big Idea" from large group time. They also spend time reviewing the story, memorizing a Bible verse (usually one for the month), and growing in their prayer skills. Examples of this model are: 252 Basics from Orange,[52] Grow,[53] Saddleback Kids,[54] and Group Publishing curriculum.[55]

This ministry model has two key strengths: firstly, it can accommodate any size gathering of children. Even if the group is large, children have personal connection and

[52] "252 Basics Curriculum," [n.d.].
[53] "Grow Kids Curriculum," [n.d.].
[54] "Saddleback Kids," [n.d.].
[55] "Sunday School Curriculum," [n.d.].

are known by their small group leaders. Children who are new to the ministry can join in the large group with their siblings or school friends who may or may not be in their small group. Secondly, the lessons are usually thematically grouped, much like a sermon series, rather than chronologically structured. If children are unable to attend regularly, or are visiting for the weekend, this style of teaching and activities are considered more inclusive.

The challenges for authentic spiritual formation can be significant in this model. There can be too much focus on being culturally relevant, visitor-friendly, and entertainment driven. Often the ministry setting is one large room that can be noisy and sensorily overwhelming to sensitive children.

Godly Play

Godly Play[56] was developed by Jerome Berryman as a contemplative group model for children based on the teachings of Maria Montessori and Sofia Cavalletti. The model focuses on welcoming children into a sacred space for encounters with God through "parables, sacred stories, and liturgical symbols of the Christian language system… which have been made into objects the children can manipulate."[57] The initial circle time and lesson consists of greeting one another, singing together, and a paraphrased biblically based story. The teacher will tell the scripted story they have prepared, refraining from infusing interpretation or application. At the conclusion of the story, the teacher invites the children to respond to the story by wondering together. The teacher

[56] "Godly Play," [n.d.].

[57] Berryman, *Godly Play*, 44. Manipulatives are items that the children and teacher use to demonstrate the lesson and can include: plain wooden silhouette shapes of people and animals, pieces of felt cut into shapes to represent mountains, trees, water, etc., and different colours of fabric.

has wondering questions they can propose to the children, such as: "I wonder how the sheep feel with the Good Shepherd? I wonder how the Good Shepherd feels about the sheep?"[58] Children are encouraged to respond and pose their own wondering questions. Once the teacher demonstrates how to put the materials away, the children are prompted to choose what to work on that day. They can select the materials from that week's lesson, or a previous lesson, they can make an art response, or "constructively wander."[59] Following their response time, children return to the circle, and the teacher demonstrates where they can find that story in the Bible. They take time to offer prayers of thanksgiving to God, feast together on a prepared snack, and then children are offered a benediction as they conclude. The structure of the model that Berryman has created is patterned after the structure of the Holy Eucharist.[60] The mission statement of the Godly Play Foundation is: "Making meaning through story, wonder, and play. Nurturing spiritual lives by honouring the centrality, competency, and capacity of children."[61]

There are several strengths within this model that are distinct from the other two models. First is the predictable structure of each session. There are intentional movements within the structure of the session that represent deeper theological beliefs and rituals. Second, the invitation to respect one another's encounters with God by slowing down the pace and creating a peaceful and sacred atmosphere is countercultural and refreshing. Third, the response time with the materials from the story or in creating

[58] Stewart and Berryman, *Young Children and Worship*, 89.

[59] Berryman, *Godly Play*, 44.

[60] Berryman describes the movement of Holy Eucharist in two parts: through the Liturgy of the Word there is a greeting, the lesson, and response. This is followed by the Liturgy of Holy Communion in which the table is set, a feast (snack) is shared, a blessing given, and then dismissal (Berryman, *Godly Play*, 45). Churches that are familiar with the liturgical structure of Holy Eucharist are attracted to this model of children's ministry, such as those within the Presbyterian, Anglican, United, and Lutheran traditions.

[61] "Mission and Vision," [n.d.].

art align with the developmental characteristics of children and implements their sensorimotor abilities. However, these developmental generalizations do not become the foundation upon which the children's spiritual formation is based. The greatest strength of this model, and one that is unique to it, is the invitation to respond by wondering. The teacher invites children to express their wonderings from the story rather than providing a nicely worded moral lesson or summed up big idea. Wondering allows children to listen to one another, their own curiosities, and the promptings of the Holy Spirit within the story. Wondering invites children to engage with the lesson and to facilitate their own application of the lesson to their life and spiritual formation.

Several challenges emerge within this model regarding the recruitment of leaders, locating or building of materials needed, and establishing the culture of contemplative space. It may be difficult to recruit teachers for this specific way of ministering with children as it may be unfamiliar to them. Likewise, it may be difficult for teachers to recognize their own assumptions about the ways children learn and engage with God, and to differentiate how those biases may or may not align with this model. It can require a lot of finances, time, and construction skills to create the materials needed for the story materials. Children may find the contemplative space uncomfortable and potentially boring as they explore unfamiliar ways of being that do not include screens for entertainment or a variety of activities to choose from.

A Problematic Tension

Several obvious tensions arise between the current models of children's ministry, developmental theories, and the biblical understanding of spiritual formation and spirituality that have been examined in this chapter. The first of these tensions is in

creating environments that allow space for children to experience God in formational ways without becoming overly focused on instruction and information-transfer. The informing process is important as it creates context and a larger view of humanity's location in creation. However, this ought to be secondary to the aspect of ministry that "seeks to involve the whole child, not just his or her intellect, in the journey until Christ is formed in him or her (Gal 4:19)."[62] Again, this formation is not just moral-behavioural, which can be the default application that parents and ministers use to personalize this concept for children. Instead, spiritual formation for children (whichever model or approach is employed) is helping them to recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd, to listen for what he is speaking to them, and to follow him as he leads them in their childlike ways.

Nye describes a second tension in ministering with children as process versus product. This challenge is that of valuing children's engagement with the lesson more than arriving at a predetermined learning outcome. When product is valued, children "learn to associate biblical material and its potential to make meaning in their lives with a pseudo-reflective process," in which they give the teacher the answer that they are being led towards.[63] This also requires the minister to be aware if they are too focused on having children arrive at the correct meaning or theological understanding of Scripture. Focusing on what Scripture means can hijack the child's imaginative ability to enter into the story, ask questions, wonder, play, listen to and engage with the Holy

[62] May et al., *Children Matter*, 23.
[63] Nye, *Children's Spirituality*, 47.

Spirit. Directing children towards our interpretation of Scripture's meaning demonstrates a lack of trust that God's Word will speak for itself to the child.[64]

The third tension is like the first but is focused on a child's connection with God being intellectual versus intuitional. This is a cognitive pathway of rationalizing one's relationship with God through logic without developing or participating in relational or contemplative practices that foster the growth of intimacy and trust in God. The danger of an over-intellectualized faith is that it "leaves no room for feeling. The warmth of God's personal touch is replaced by cold, hard facts about God."[65] People need someone else to bear witness to their experiences with God. To be a trusted adult in the life of a child, ministers and parents receive the privilege of listening for those intuitional, felt moments with God and affirming the truth of them for the child. Lacy Finn Borgo observes that "human beings have experiences with the Spirit throughout their whole lives. However, without naming and reflecting on those experiences, these experiences can get buried under the comings and goings of everyday human existence."[66]

Often overlooked in ministry with children is the impact of prayer on their spiritual development, and particularly on the formation of their identity. When teaching children about prayer the focus tends to be informationally oriented (how to pray, why we pray, when we pray, what to pray, and who we pray to) rather than relationally oriented.[67] Moreover, prayer is conveyed as the words that *we* speak, and concludes

---

[64] Nye, *Children's Spirituality*, 34.
[65] Csinos and Beckwith, *Way of Jesus*, 47.
[66] Borgo, *Spiritual Conversations*, 97.
[67] It is my observation that children are often provided with all the information about prayer, without being introduced in prayer to the God who speaks. Prayer consists either of memorized prayers or simple prayers of gratitude and petition, without including time for listening, waiting, and reflecting. Chapters 4 and 5 will first identify the importance of these missing components of prayer, and then propose ideas for incorporating them into prayer with children.

when we finish speaking or proclaim “Amen.” Chapter 4 will examine the conversational-receptive aspect of prayer in which we listen for and discern the Shepherd’s voice, and the identity formation that hearing God’s voice can have in a child’s faith and personhood.

CHAPTER 4: LISTENING IN PRAYER

Introduction

"Anytime, anywhere, anything" is one of the big ideas of prayer that contemporary children's ministry leaders present to help children to engage in prayer.[1] No matter where you are or what you are doing, you can talk with God about your gratitude, fear, delights, and desires. Prayer techniques, rituals, and rhymes are often the chosen pathways for teaching children about prayer. While these aids to prayer may be helpful in laying a very basic foundation, they can also detract from the dialogical nature of prayer that involves two parties who both listen and speak. These types of prescriptive prayers can often lead to prayer becoming a short formality at the start of a meal and a brief part of the bedtime routine. Nonetheless, many of the memorized prayers, Scripture, and rituals of childhood prayer have an ongoing, subconscious influence on the perspectives and prayer practices of individuals as they mature. The prayer practices that are adopted in childhood become words hidden in the heart (Ps 119:11) that can both equip and inhibit a person from developing in their faith and a relationship with God. For this reason, it is essential that children be introduced to more than rhymes and formulas for prayer. They must be introduced to the Person they are entering into

[1] Laura Wifler has written a book for children, *Any Time, Any Place, Any Prayer: A True Story of How You Can Talk with God* (2021) that emphasizes the relational accessibility of God through prayer. God demonstrates his love and desire for a relationship with us through Christ, and by the Holy Spirit, we can pray about anything because we are friends with God.

conversation *with*, not just speaking *to*. The value of any conversation is based on who that conversation is with. Prayers spoken to the God of everything—not just any deity or spiritual entity—grow exponentially in spiritual and relational impact when space is created to listen for what God has to say both in Scripture and in prayer.

This chapter will explore a basic theology of the conversational-receptive aspect of prayer in which God speaks and we listen. Walter Wangerin presents a paradigm for a closed circle of communication between God and humankind: "We speak, God listens. God speaks, we listen."[2] The challenge is that we often stop at the midpoint of this paradigm and forego listening for God to speak. There is a myriad of factors that contribute to this interruption: distractions, busyness, frustration, poor teaching, unrepented sin, spiritual wounds, unforgiveness, and many others. All these factors create noise both internally and externally, so "that it is hard to truly hear our God when he is speaking to us. We have often become deaf, unable to know when God calls us and unable to understand in which direction he calls us."[3] By not pausing to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd speaking to us personally in prayer, are we fully capable of knowing and following him? It is in waiting on the Lord that we learn to discern his voice and grow in relational intimacy with him. This may be an unfamiliar practice for many Christians. Often waiting is understood as the period of time until the answer reveals itself. Waiting on God is unlike waiting at the doctor's office where you are trying to pass the time. Waiting is a liminal space between speaking and hearing. In waiting one is invited to rest with an awareness of God's presence, attentively attuned to his voice. Thus, by waiting on God we grow in our awareness of him, realizing our true selves in

[2] Wangerin, *Whole Prayer*, 29.
[3] Fryling, *Spiritual Listening*, 71–72.

his presence, responding to what we hear and sense, and are increasingly transformed into the likeness of Jesus through the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 3:18). This transformation process requires the willing response and participation of those who hear his voice, as they trust in him to lead and guide them.

At the end of the previous chapter, three tensions were identified as being areas for church ministries to evaluate how they support and equip children and parents in the spiritual development of children's faith in Jesus. Each of these challenges can be expressed as questions that will be explored through this chapter: First, how do we encourage children to know God personally and intimately, bear witness to those experiences, and affirm their identity in Christ? Being known and belonging to the Father comes through accepting and recognizing Jesus as our friend who invites us to know the Father as his adoptive sons and daughters in Christ. Prayer is less about our ability to come up with the proper words to say to God and more of a recognition that Christ himself prays in us and mediates our relationship with the Father through the Holy Spirit. Similarly, *being* in Christ while *being* in prayer provides a more accurate understanding of what prayer is. Rather than prayer being an activity that we *do*, prayer is a response to Christ in us.

Second, how do we guide children to utilize the intrinsic skillsets of childhood to encounter God in their daily lives so that they may follow him? Children have a natural capacity for wonder, imagination, play, dependence, and expectancy that can be nurtured to create rich encounters for them to listen, recognize, and respond to God's voice. These capacities of childhood are often left behind as people mature. Rather than viewing them as "childish," perhaps they are keys to understanding the childlike nature that Jesus references as characteristic of belonging to the kingdom of God. And finally,

how do we help children to hear and recognize God's voice? The story of Samuel in the house of the Lord creates a helpful orientation for the significance of mentorship, instruction, and posturing ourselves to hear God with a willingness to obey and trust in him. Additionally, the application of contemplative practices of prayer can help children orient themselves to hear God by being attentive to him as they wait on him.

Trinitarian Prayer

Prayer is an integral practice in spiritual formation and for growth in a relationship with God. Yet prayer is not something that we *do* to achieve spiritual and identity formation. Formation is something that is done to us in Christ, through the Holy Spirit, by the Father. Prayer is a fundamental practice that facilitates a way of being, so that we may be formed in wholeness in Christ. Contemporary culture reverses the biblical order to say that what we do determines our worth; that our identity is based on our doing.[4] Moreover, culture admires doing over being, which can lead to prayer becoming an activity that must be accomplished to demonstrate spiritual maturity and discipline and to legitimize spiritual gatherings. True prayer seeks to honour God by bringing all aspects of life into submission to him and his will. It is a posture; a way of being. Prayer also facilitates relating to God through dialogue and ought to undergird all other spiritual disciplines.[5] Prayerfully being with God reorients spiritual practices from the realm of doing into that of being. There is nothing so great that one can accomplish in doing as to impress God. Being with God and listening for what he has to say about who he is and

[4] Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey*, 36.

[5] For example, Karl Barth proposes that "the first and basic act of theological work is prayer" (Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 160).

who we are creates the foundational understanding of one's identity. Trusted and faith-filled adults who themselves have responded to God's invitation to a relationship—living into their God-informed identity—can be instrumental in helping children to receive and respond to God's invitation to be with him in prayer. The hope and intention are for children to encounter Jesus and be transformed into *his* image. The challenge for adults will be to not instruct children in an institutional and adult-friendly format that forms children into our image.[6]

Three questions arise when considering the shaping of identity through the practice of prayer: Who are we praying to, and what is the nature of our relationship? How can we hear God's voice? And why do we pray? To answer these questions, Richard Foster offers a helpful analysis of three movements within prayer that are trinitarian in nature. The first movement is prayer inward to God the Son, then prayer upward to God the Father, and third, outward in prayer with God the Holy Spirit.[7] We will adjust this paradigm slightly by first addressing upward prayer to answer the question of: Who are we praying to? The second question of how we hear God's voice will be answered in the prayer inward to Jesus. Thirdly, the outward prayer with the Holy Spirit will help to articulate why we pray.

The first underlying condition of prayer is that prayer does not begin with humans. Prayer is initiated by the Father, in Christ, through the Holy Spirit. Conversation with God is an invitation to be "incorporated into the inner life of the triune God and. . . to actually experience it"[8] through a relationship with him. Jesus

[6] Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith*, 17.

[7] It could be argued that the movement inward could also be to the Holy Spirit who indwells the believer. The outward movement of prayer "corresponds to [the Holy Spirit's] role as Empowerer and Evangelist" (Foster, *Prayer*, xii.).

[8] Wright, "Paradigm of Christian Prayer," 132.

mediates our conversation through the Holy Spirit so that we may approach the throne of God with confidence (Eph 3:12; Heb 4:16; 1 John 5:14). P. T. Forsyth observes that "when we speak to God it is really the God who lives in us speaking through us to himself. . . . The dialogue of grace is really the monologue of the divine nature in self-communing love."[9] The indwelling Holy Spirit helps us in both our speaking and discernment of the Father's voice as he intercedes and searches our hearts (Rom 8:26–27). Furthermore, all prayer is prayed through Jesus, who not only welcomes children into the loving embrace of Father, Son, and Spirit, but imparts to them a greater understanding of who they are in relation to the Trinitarian God.

A Father and His Children

Prayer first begins by understanding who we are speaking to. The Trinity can be a potentially confusing concept for children, especially children who do not have regular access to Christian education or guidance from trusted adults who themselves are growing in their faith and a relationship with God. The employment of various addresses to Father, Jesus, God, the Lord, and Holy Spirit, made within other people's prayers, can create confusion in the child concerning who is being prayed to. In the same way that Jesus instructs his disciples to address their prayers to "our Father," so too must children be introduced to God the Father as both the recipient and subject of their prayers.

In the Marcan account of the Lord's Prayer, Jesus uses the Aramaic word *Abba* for Father (Mark 14:36), which Howard Marshall notes, "is an unusual grammatical form of the word, and the evidence shows that it was the term used by a son or daughter

[9] Forsyth, *Soul of Prayer*, 31.

for their physical father and was expressive of a close, intimate relationship."[10] Children can easily understand what it means to look to their parents or caregivers to provide for their needs with the simple trust that those needs will be met. Likewise, children are intrinsically oriented toward dependence, trust, and self-disclosure in their most significant relationships, which makes the invitation to address God as Father both familiar and significant for their self-understanding. Michael Knowles points out that "since children are not, by definition, self-made, praying in this manner amounts to an acknowledgement of our spiritual paternity, as we confess that our very existence is a consequence and overflow of the Father's rich love."[11] Knowing God as Father and being a child of God denotes belonging (John 1:12–13; 1 Pet 2:9), bearing his likeness and being like him (Gen 1:27; 1 John 4:16–17), being loved (1 John 3:1), and receiving an inheritance (Rom 8:17). Through faith in Christ, we share all that is his, including his relationship with the Father. In Christ, we are welcomed and belong to God's family as his children (Gal 4:4–7). Through Christ, we can know the Father (Matt 11:27b; John 1:18; 14:9). In Christ, the Father's love is demonstrated and poured out for us (Rom 8:38–39). In Christ we are co-heirs, sealed with the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives (Eph 1:13–14; Rom 8:15–17). Our identity is received from the Father, and is reflective of him: "Our identity as children of God and our ministry as those who pray to the Father thus operate on the same basis: who we are and how we speak are both consequences of what Christ has done for us, rather than expressions of what we choose

[10] Marshall, "Example and Teacher of Prayer," 128.
[11] Knowles, "Joining Jesus," 39.

to accomplish for the sake of Christ."[12] So, we look to Jesus as our example, elder brother, and advocate.

Jesus: Our Good Shepherd, Elder Brother, and Friend

God speaks in a multitude of ways, but the two primary ways he chooses to reveal himself to humankind are through the written Word and the Word incarnate. In Jesus, God has "made [himself] perceptible and accessible to us in the flesh, in this world" (John 1:14).[13] Neither the Word written nor incarnate can contradict itself. Furthermore, we gain new access to God through Jesus as our mediator, shepherd, elder brother, and friend. Jesus demonstrates for humanity not just who God is, but how to relate to God. Jesus invites people to know God and be known by him as children brought to the Father through redemption in the Son, so that they may be empowered by the Holy Spirit to receive and respond to God as he speaks to them. Karl Barth identifies the reciprocal dynamic of our relationship with God as expressed in prayer: "In an act both objective and subjective, accomplished by himself, God causes himself to be seen, is seen, recognized, and appreciated, and we are permitted to live in this world in his presence, while knowing him, while recognizing him. This act of God becomes real for us in prayer."[14] Jesus models and teaches his followers how to relate to God in prayer. Then, he guides them to respond to the invitation to be accepted as children and friends of God in prayer. Knowles describes the progression of maturing in one's prayer life by "learn[ing] to pray *like Jesus*" in the ways that he has modelled for his followers, to then

[12] Knowles, "Joining Jesus," 39.
[13] Barth, *Prayer*, 32.
[14] Barth, *Prayer*, 32.

discovering that they are "pray[ing] *with Jesus*" in his unceasing prayer for the world, to finally "pray[ing] *in Jesus*, in union with him" as we grow in likeness to him (2 Cor 3:18).[15]

The metaphor of the Good Shepherd caring for and calling his sheep by name reveals that it is Jesus who initiates a relationship, and the sheep respond (John 10:27). Much of the nuance of this metaphor for recognizing the voice of the Good Shepherd and responding to his call has already been addressed in Chapter 2. However, by broadening our view of the Good Shepherd motif through the rest of Scripture, there are several characteristics that are relevant to the identity formation of the sheep. The Good Shepherd knows when his sheep need rescuing, and he pursues them (Matt 18:12; Luke 15:4). In Ps 23 the Shepherd provides nourishment (v. 5), rest (v. 2), and guidance (vv. 3–4). Similarly, in Isa 40:11 the sheep are tenderly cared for as "He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young." He leads his sheep with his voice (John 10:3–4), and willingly lays down his life to save them (John 10:11, 15). Consequently, the sheep are those who know the shepherd's voice, are known, valued, pursued, carried, watched over, provided for, and who follow him. The dependence of the sheep on their shepherd and the trust that they have in his provision and guidance are like the qualities of childhood that Jesus identifies as being necessary for belonging to the kingdom of God. Likewise, they are characteristics of the posture of prayerful submission: "Even prayer, says Jesus, is less a matter of striving or pleasing than of resting, waiting, and trusting in union with him" (John 15:4–5, 7).[16] Jesus demonstrates his prayerful dependence and

[15] Knowles, "Joining Jesus," 42.
[16] Knowles, "Joining Jesus," 40.

trust in the Father through his complete submission to the Father's will through his divine Sonship.

Jesus models for his followers the importance of prayer through his own personal practice of prayer. He prioritised prayer by withdrawing from the crowds for intentional times of prayer at different points of the day, sometimes alone, and sometimes with a few disciples. Jesus was dependent on the Father to receive guidance and knowledge of what to say and do (Matt 11:27a; John 8:28; 12:49–50; 14:10). When asked by his disciples how to address God in personal prayer, Jesus invites them to share in his relationship with the Father by addressing him as Father (Matt 6:9; Luke 11:2).[17] As the elder brother, Jesus brings to the Father his brothers and sisters so that they can know him as Father, relating to God as his beloved children, and becoming like the Son in their prayers, actions, and righteousness (Gal 4:4–7; Heb 2:10–12, 17).[18] Jesus demonstrates for his adopted brothers and sisters that prayer is more than making requests of God. Prayer is first attunement to his presence. Second, it is the discernment of his will. Then it is responding in obedience and trust to God's will.

Jesus also invites his followers to meet with God in prayer is as friends. This is particularly relevant to children for their understanding of identity and ability to approach God in prayer. The Gospel of John uses the language of friendship when speaking of both Jesus' love for people, and regarding those who respond in faith when they hear his voice. John 15:12–17 describes what friendship with God looks like:

> My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not

[17] Wright, "Paradigm of Christian Prayer," 132.

[18] The qualities of identity that result from knowing God as Father were covered in the previous section.

> know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. This is my command: Love each other.

Jesus extends the offer of friendship to those who listen to his voice and do the will of the Father, bearing fruit that results from choosing to receive Christ's love through the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Jesus is a "'friend of children' in a way that departs radically from [the] larger cultural and biblical pattern."[19] Children need a friend they can trust to listen and to walk with them in their hurt, loneliness, rejection, fears, confusion, and sorrows. Jesus initiates friendship by being willing to lay down his life for his friends (John 15:13). As friends of God, children can know that they are chosen and welcomed by him, even if they are picked last for the basketball team or hide in their room to avoid family conflict. Jesus is the friend who is always with them and who always accepts, knows, and empathizes with them. They can pray with confidence that God receives them, and that they are able to know, with Jesus, what the Father chooses to reveal about his "business." God trusts them to know and do his will because they are his friends. Biblical friendship is also portrayed as sacrificial (John 15:13), loving (Prov 17:17), and trustworthy (Prov 27:6). Knowing Jesus as a friend allows children to perceive his nearness to them, and trust in his accessibility and concern for all their troubles (Prov 18:24).

[19] Carroll, "Children in the Bible," 127. Carroll is referencing an essay by G. Krause, "Jesus der Kinderfreund," 79-112. In *Die Kinder im Evangelium*, ed. G. Krause (Stuttgart/Göttingen: Ehrenfried Klotz, 1973).

The Advocacy of the Holy Spirit

As children grow in their friendship with Jesus, they will recognize the Holy Spirit as a constant companion, teacher, and advocate whose presence indwelling them helps them to experience the fullness of God's love and attentiveness to them (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7; 1 John 2:1). The Holy Spirit both comes from the Father to humankind and goes to the Father on our behalf. His movement between God and people demonstrates the active and passive sides to formational prayer in which God pursues us, and we are pursuing God.[20] Children need persons with authority and greater status than themselves to speak on their behalf. The Holy Spirit is the advocate for all humankind before God, just as Jesus also mediates salvation between God and people (Rom 8:34; Heb 4:14–16; 7:25; 1 Tim 2:3–6). As the one who interprets our prayers and makes them acceptable to God (Rom 8:26–27), the Holy Spirit is a comforter and friend to children who often feel as though they may not know what or how to pray. His constant presence assures children that God is always attentive to their prayers and helps them to recognize what God is speaking to them. He articulates the Word of God so that we can receive and respond to his voice. The Holy Spirit fills the believing child so that as they grow in responsiveness to the voice of God they are strengthened, equipped, and empowered to act in trusting obedience to the will of God (Eph 3:16–19).

Prayer that Transforms

The previous two chapters have established both a biblical and Christological view of children's spirituality, whereby children are both invited and fully able to engage with

[20] Foster, *Prayer*, 61.

God relationally. Furthermore, children are in as much need of receiving salvation in Christ and the transformative sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in their lives as any person. In Christ, they are renewed and receive their true identity as fully known and beloved children of God. Every person, including children, must acknowledge three different aspects of their identity and sense of self: who they were in the past, who they are in the present, and who they will become. Christ redeems the past through the forgiveness of sins, he renews the present as we trust in him, and he guarantees the future through the sanctifying presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives.[21] Scottie May highlights two of these functions as immediate in the life of a child as "to be and to become."[22] One of the strengths of childhood is a child's ability to be present in the present, just as they are. This "'to be' aspect is the value of children as they are, not just for what they will become."[23] Conversely, Jesus invites adults to become like children, not the other way around (Matt 18:3). Children are going to become adults one day, as that is the natural process of development and maturation. However, who they become as adults, and their identity in the process of becoming, is where children need trusted adults to both nurture and guide them in their spiritual formation. This brings us to the second question presented at the beginning of this chapter: How do we guide children to utilize the intrinsic skillsets of childhood to have encounters with God in their daily lives so that they can follow him? A child's ability "to be" with Jesus can be experienced in every dimension of their being: their mind, will, emotions, body, soul, and spirit.

---

[21] For children the redemption of past sins may not be as significant as Christ's renewing presence in the present and promise for the future. However, most parents guide their children to apologize for harm caused to others, and in granting forgiveness as a fundamental practice of kindness. As children grow in their understanding of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, repentance and forgiveness will also grow in significance.

[22] May, "Identifying," 15.

[23] May, "Identifying," 15.

Guiding children to prayerfully experience God must facilitate whole-person engagement, incorporating their capacity for wonder and imagination, while nurturing their trustful dependence and expectancy that God both hears and responds to their questions.

Children who encounter God through prayer in their childhood will have a Friend who is able to empathize and redeem the brokenness and wounding they will experience in their lives. Wounds and sin sever the relational connection that people have with God and others, potentially drawing them into broken patterns of isolation and shame. Childlike orientation towards wonder and expectancy are the potential casualties when these wounds "drag us away from wonder and therefore away from connecting deeply with God and others. Our wounds deceive us about our fundamental identity as children of God."[24] Conversely, chosen dependence on and submission to God reinforces a person's identity as an accepted, known, and beloved child. As children are directed to depend and yield their whole selves to God early on, healthy spiritual disciplines can be established, and patterns of brokenness will be more clearly recognized by the child before they can become entrenched through years of repetition and avoidance.

Whole Person Prayer

The previous chapter on children's spirituality noted a strong emphasis within Christian education on communicating theological information about God and biblical literacy, often to the detriment of a child's faith development and spiritual experiences with God.

[24] Borgo, *Faith Like A Child*, 25.

Westerhoff identifies these two differing approaches as intellectual (information-transfer) and intuitional (spiritual experiences) modes of consciousness, and comments that "the development and integration of both modes of consciousness is essential to the spiritual life."[25] The intellectual mode is "focused on the universal and the abstract, and is characterized by verbal, linear, conceptual, and analytical activities."[26] The intuitional mode "focuses on the syncretic and the experiential, and is characterized by nonverbal, creative, nonlinear, relational activities."[27] The practice of listening prayer provides a pathway for developing within the child an ability to reflect on God's Word and hear God's voice, engaging both modes of consciousness as they read, comprehend, imagine, and respond. Similarly, listening prayer can also facilitate deeper intimacy with Christ than children may have the language or cognitive development to express.

Children express themselves and experience life with their whole selves: body, mind, soul, and spirit. Borgo suggests that "a child begins life in unity with the dimensions of their self."[28] An infant's bodily needs and awareness are reflected in their emotional expression. The child's body, mind, spirit, and social context are experienced holistically in childhood, but by "growing up" these dimensions of identity are often fragmented into separate spheres in order to deal with the "harsh realities of the world."[29] For a child, the function and meaning of prayer becomes personalized when they can both learn and be in prayer in ways that incorporate their body, mind, spirit, and community. Practical and physical expressions of prayer that can engage children's

[25] Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith*, 70–71.
[26] Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith*, 70.
[27] Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith*, 70–71.
[28] Borgo, *Spiritual Conversations*, 106.
[29] Borgo, *Spiritual Conversations*, 106.

whole selves both individually or corporately include: kneeling, finger labyrinths,[30] soaking,[31] prayer walks, and prayers expressed through reaching up in praise and thanksgiving, stretching wide to release (in confession, repentance, and forgiveness), drawing in to receive (mercy, love, forgiveness, etc.), and bowing down to worship.

Wonder and Imagination

The mythic-literal child (7–10 years old) is at an important point in their cognitive development to hear and recognize God's voice as they begin to differentiate between the imaginative thinking characteristic of the mythic-literal stage, and concrete/literal thinking. As they start to differentiate between what is real and what is imagined, it is foundational for them to encounter God in the mysterious fullness of his divinity, and in the Incarnation of his humanity so that they can apprehend that he is not imagined or imaginary. Many Christian parents intentionally choose not to introduce their children to imaginary characters such as Santa Claus, the tooth fairy, and the Easter Bunny, so that God—who is also unseen—will not be categorized with these fictitious legends. Instead, children need to understand that their imaginations are an important part of their creativity which reflects God's creativity. God can speak into their imaginations so that they can envision him and his kingdom. Imagination and rational thinking can work together, along with feeling, intuition, and action. Modern scientific thinking elevates rationality as the most important cognitive feature. However, all dimensions of

[30] Finger labyrinths are small, simple versions of a walking labyrinth that can be traced with a finger. Labyrinths have been used as a contemplative form of prayer walking. The person prays as they trace the path to the centre of the labyrinth with their finger. Pausing at the centre, they wait on God to speak. As they trace the path outward, they can continue to listen or respond to what they heard God say.

[31] Soaking involves listening to worship music or Scripture being read in a posture of rest in which the words or music wash over or soak into the listener. It is a contemporary form of meditation and contemplation.

personhood are created to work in harmony, not fragmented into separate spheres. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, engaging in the creativity of wonder and imagination are in large part left behind with childhood as childish practices, or they are relegated to recreational pursuits, when there is time or desire to indulge in them. Hart acknowledges the fear and control intrinsic to Western culture that misunderstands and represses wonder in children: "In schools, for example, we are not interested in tremendous mystery but in tremendous certainty, and so activities direct children away from wonder and toward things like multiple-choice examinations. The daydreamer is made to pay attention; giggles have little place in a typical classroom."[32] This is not indicative of every classroom and school, but it does acknowledge the cultural expectation, particularly within education, for children to grow up and out of their childish ways and into more measurable pursuits. This raises several questions about the practice of wonder: What does it look like to have a "posture of wonder and curiosity instead of absolute and definite answer[s]"?[33] Similarly, is it more valuable for the child to ask questions than to receive answers to them?

There are two definitions of wonder. The first is wonder as a noun, in which a person is filled with a feeling of awe, delight, or surprise. The second is wonder as a verb that expresses curiosity or contemplation. Children can encounter God in both senses of wonder:

> We want our children to do both, to wonder about the unfolding actions of God's story but also to be filled with wonder for our awesome God. Making time to wonder makes space for the Holy Spirit to speak. It allows children to connect with God's story and discover meanings that, even though they may not be able to express them in words, they treasure.[34]

---

[32] Hart, *Secret Spiritual World*, 51.
[33] Csinos and Beckwith, *Way of Jesus*, 98.
[34] Stonehouse and May, *Listening to Children*, 89.

As children are filled with wonder for God, they are drawn into knowing him more intimately, which in turn will fuel their curiosity about themselves, others, and the world around them. As discussed in the previous section, knowing God as Shepherd, Father, and Friend will shape their identity, and every dimension of their person as they no longer conform to the world's identity for them, but are transformed and renewed in Christ (Rom 11:33—12:2).

The second definition of wonder engages the imagination as children consider their responses and questions to spiritual matters. Employing phrases such as, "I wonder why or how…" stimulates curiosity about the character and actions of God in the Bible that "inspires children to value the possibility that fresh insights might be yielded each time, as opposed to things being fixed once and for all."[35] The ministry model of Godly Play encourages the practice of wondering as a method for participating in belief and faith as children engage with the Bible lessons and consider how it applies to their lives:

> Wondering together is a community's way of remaining open to the Holy Spirit, a way of meditating so the story becomes a part of the group's life. As such, wondering shapes and deepens our knowledge of God and what God expects of us. It is a way the community of children come to know God and themselves. This knowing is based on their experience of God, not on being told about God. Their experience of God in the story informs their expression, and their expression, refined by the group, begins to name their world. This activity is the foundation on which theological thinking is built. The wondering together produces thinking Christians who can enter into dialogue, share their experiences of God, and together discover God's calling for them.[36]

The key to this type of wondering is to have older followers of Jesus who both recognize and respond to God's voice for themselves, guide, and engage children's wondering. These adults (or teenagers) become trusted listening companions in the lives of children

[35] Nye, *Children's Spirituality*, 38.
[36] Stewart and Berryman, *Young Children*, 30.

as they notice and reflect back to the child what piques their curiosity. As a listening companion they can imagine with the children the context, meaning, and purposes of God's written Word, the incarnate Word Jesus, and his perceived words through the Holy Spirit.

Questions: Asking and Receiving

One of the most recognizable characteristics of childhood is question-asking. Toddlers and preschoolers are notorious for asking questions, beginning with "What" and "Where." As children enter school these questions mature to "Why" and "When." Children in the range of 7–10 years of age are beginning to transition from "Why" questions to the more scientific question of "How." Question-asking is a natural way for children to gather information for their cognitive development. Relationally, questions are a useful strategy for extending a conversation and building a connection. They allow us to compare and contrast our thoughts, feelings, and experiences with one another. Questions express interest and appreciation for the person being questioned. Jesus welcomed and encouraged people to ask him questions and used question-asking as an impactful component of his teaching and in ministering healing to the needy (Matt 20:32; Mark 10:51; Luke 18:41). Jesus encouraged his disciples to ask God in prayer for their needs (Matt 6:9; Luke 11:3), and by asking him they would receive (Matt 7:7–8; Luke 11:9–10).

The foundational component to any request is not in the response, but in who the request is being addressed to. Prayers can be offered to just about anyone or anything, but the response counts for very little if the source of that response does not have the authority or the nature of goodness, truth, and love of the Holy God. A. B. Simpson

notes that prayerful asking is rooted not in the answer to the request, but in the Source from which it comes: "For prayer is more than asking; it is a receiving, a waiting, a learning of him, a converse and communion, in which he has much to say, and we have much to learn…. For prayer is not an asking for things so much as a seeking for himself and a pressing into that fellowship which is beyond all other gifts and which carries with it every needed blessing."[37] Similarly, Barth proposes that by praying for the hallowing of God's name in our lives, the questions and requests that we have for God will be congruent with him being glorified.[38] Asking questions of God is not limited to petitions and requests, but can be a method of knowing God better, attuning ourselves to him, and growing in friendship and intimacy with him. Furthermore, it is a way to explore our hearts and minds by humbly inviting Jesus to speak to the places of pain, confusion, and sin within us. In asking questions of ourselves in the presence of God we will recognize our need of him, for "knowing ourselves teaches us what to ask…. By knowing ourselves we can approach God with a real desire to confess our sins and receive his forgiveness."[39]

Asking questions as a listening prayer practice is similar to contemplative prayer but with a guided topic asked in an open-ended way. It is a way of nurturing the wonderings of a child by addressing them to God. Adults who guide children in wondering and question-asking must be cautious not to hijack the process of a child seeking God in this manner, even if they feel that they have a great answer to the child's question. Adults who both value childlikeness and live into their relationship with the

[37] Simpson, *Life of Prayer*, 40.
[38] Barth, *Prayer*, 45–46.
[39] Houston, *Transforming Power*, 31.

Father as a beloved child will understand that "in the same way that a small child cannot draw a bad picture so a child of God cannot offer a bad prayer."[40] Our prayers and questions when asked in humility and trust can never be "bad" prayers or "dumb" questions. Children ask questions trusting that God will provide a trustworthy answer, for "Trust presumes that God shall hear and, hearing, answer."[41] Any question asked with sincerity is a good question. Encouraging children to ask God questions in their childhood, within a community, through which their identity is established in relation to God's love, creates open pathways for more difficult questions to be asked in their adolescence and later years within that same community. Becoming trusted listening companions for children requires building a relationship over time, seeking God for wisdom in how to respond, redirecting children to him, and reframing difficult questions with a clear view of Jesus and the cross. Some questions are just questions, while others are delicate and personal: "When we embrace honest, thoughtful and even challenging questions, we can guide children as they deconstruct their faith and reconstruct it in ways that allow that faith to seep into their bones, to form the core of their identity, an identity that won't fall apart when doubts arise."[42]

Prayer as Conversation

Any dialogue requires the participation of at least two people. Likewise, prayer is, at its best, a dialogue between humankind and God. It is so simple that a child can do it, and so complex that many books have been written and sermons preached to convey the

[40] Foster, *Prayer*, 9.
[41] Wangerin, *Whole Prayer*, 41.
[42] Csinos and Beckwith, *Way of Jesus*, 106.

theological and practical significance of prayer for fostering a relationship with God. Conversation begins as one person invites the other to engage. As previously noted, in prayer this initiative originates with God, then progresses to "our awareness of the movement of God toward us in which we open our hearts, minds, and wills to God by first listening and then responsively moving toward God so that we might grow in that relationship."[43] God is aware of us and desirous of relationship before we are ever aware of him (Gen 1:27; John 3:16; Rom 5:8). Wangerin's paradigm of speaking and listening, although a closed circle of communication, does have an initial starting point; it begins with God speaking. All things have their beginning in God speaking. For in speaking God not only creates, but he also reveals who he is, and what his will is for all created things. In Jesus, his Word becomes incarnate and the invitation to relationship and revelation is tangibly demonstrated through Christ's sacrificial death, and the pouring out of God's Spirit into the lives of all believers. All prayer is prayed with Jesus as our mediator and friend, as has been previously discussed.

Following the initial conversational invitation comes a response; more specifically, our response to God. Although this is usually where people focus their prayer effort, "the power of prayer is not in us, that we speak. It is in God, that he listens!"[44] Conversational-receptive prayer is characterized by people with an intent to listen for God's voice and who have willingness to respond to him with obedience and trust:

> Prayer is a verbal and nonverbal communication with God, proceeding from a relationship of trust. This act of communication usually has a purpose, either in seeking divine assistance, guidance, or some kind of intervention. Since this act

[43] Westerhoff, *Spiritual Life*, 8.
[44] Wangerin, *Whole Prayer*, 31.

> of communication is integrated in a relationship, prayer includes gratitude, adoration and praises as well.[45]

The person who prays without being integrated into relationship will have difficulty recognizing the voice of God when he does speak to them. It is the indwelling and empowering presence of the Holy Spirit who opens a person's ears and softens their heart to be able to identify God's voice (Matt 13:11–17). Even if they do perceive his message, without the foundational experience of a loving relationship with God, it will be difficult for them to trust him and obey. Preceding Jesus' instruction to the disciples on how they should pray in Matt 6:9–14, he cautions them not to pray for performance or with verbosity, for it is not the quality or quantity of words used that the Father recognizes as authentic prayerfulness. Rather, it is the orientation of the heart as "openness to God, submissiveness to God, listening to his 'still small voice,' [that] may give us far more insight than the constant chatter which we are used to calling prayer."[46] Jesus tells his disciples that "your Father knows what you need before you ask him."[47] This orientation of the Father towards his children, and his invitation for their prayer to be one of openness and trust, is exemplified in Jesus' welcome of the children to come to him and not to be hindered.

The intent of this thesis is to focus on the dynamic within prayer of God speaking, and the impact on the formation of Christian identity in children as they perceive his voice. Often prayer for children is communicated as either too simple to be formational, or too formal to be conversational. Children need to "begin with a currently

---

[45] Hvalvik and Sandnes, "Early Christian Prayer," 4. Richard Foster calls this 'simple prayer' that focuses on communicating our needs, desires, and concerns to God (Foster, *Prayer*, 9).

[46] Houston, *Transforming Power* 129.

[47] Matt 6:8; cf. 1 John 5:14–15.

helpful, spiritually genuine, formula of prayer, the properties of which they should never need to 'unlearn' at some later date."[48] Learning to pray must also include moments for listening, speaking, receiving, and responding. Moreover, prayer for children ought to be experienced within community, in a variety of expressions and settings, with opportunity to ask questions, and with encouragement to participate, not just spectate. Prayer may be the simplest expression of our relationship with God, but many people are confused from a young age in their beliefs about their ability to pray because they believe that they, "will never have pure enough motives, or be good enough or know enough in order to prayer rightly. We simply must set all these things aside and begin praying. In fact, it in is the very act of prayer itself—the intimate, ongoing interaction with God—that these matters are cared for in due time."[49]

Listening For/To and Hearing the Voice of God

In John 10:3–4 Jesus expands upon the familiarity of the Good Shepherd with his sheep: "The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice." Those sheep that recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd listen for his call and follow his command. There may be other sheep present in the same sheep pen who do not recognize his voice, and do not respond to his call. It is the responsibility of the sheep to be familiar with the shepherd's voice and to be ready and attentive to his call. A key aspect of hearing is recognition of the voice. When what is heard is understood to be

[48] Nye, *Children's Spirituality*, 61.
[49] Foster, *Prayer*, 8–9.

relevant to the hearer, they start to listen because they recognize and know who is speaking.

The story of Samuel sleeping in the house of the Lord in 1 Sam 3 illustrates how recognition of God's voice affects Samuel's response to God's call. Three times Samuel mistakes God's call for that of his mentor, Eli (vv. 5, 6, and 8), because "Samuel did not yet know the Lord: The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him" (v. 7). On the climactic fourth time, God comes to stand near and calls Samuel's name twice (v. 10). Robert Bergen identifies similarities between Samuel's call and that of Abraham (Gen 22:1, 11) and Moses (Exod 3:4), which "suggests that this moment was as important in Samuel's life and for all Israel as the parallel moments were in the lives of the earlier heroes of the faith."[50] Samuel—coached by Eli on how to respond—offers to God his willingness to listen and obey: "Speak, for your servant is listening" (v. 10b). In doing so, Samuel receives from God a prophetic message (vv. 11–14), and through his obedience to convey the word to Eli, the Lord favours Samuel and is with him as he grows up (1 Sam 2:26; 1 Sam 3:19–21). Eli, as a trusted adult, guides Samuel to ready himself to both hear and respond to God's voice.[51] Samuel's experience of hearing God's voice as a child completely transforms Samuel's present and future as he steps into the prophetic calling that God set him apart for.

Many ways that God chooses to speak are demonstrated throughout the Bible: audibly (1 Sam 3; Jesus' baptism Matt 3:17; the transfiguration Matt 17:1–8), intuitively (Neh 7:5; Acts 6:5), in Scripture (Ps 119), creation (Ps 19:1), through dreams and

[50] Bergen, *1–2 Samuel*, 85.

[51] It is troublesome that Eli does not hear or respond to God's voice for himself regarding the wicked behaviour of his sons that God has previously warned Eli about (1 Sam 2:31–33). The dimness of Eli's eyes is symbolic of his waning spiritual insight (Bergen, *1–2 Samuel*, 85). Yet, the guidance that Eli offers to Samuel equips Samuel to listen and respond to God appropriately.

visions (Joel 2:28; Dan 2; Acts 10:9–23), angels (Luke 1–2), preaching (1 Thess 2:13), prophecy (1 Cor 14:3), and revelation (Eph 1:17).[52] However, the primary ways God speaks are through his Word, both written and incarnate in Christ, and through the inner voice and guidance of the Holy Spirit. People may find it challenging to identify the ways that God speaks to them personally. This is not because they do not hear him. Rather, it can be difficult to articulate how they know with certainty that they are hearing God speak. Alternatively, people may have difficulty distinguishing God's voice from their own thoughts, or perhaps even other voices that they hear echoing in their heads. Alice Fryling suggests that "as we mature spiritually, we learn to recognize the voice of the Spirit in our inner being, in circumstances, and through other people. Cultivating the art of spiritual listening means that we become more and more attentive to the whispers of the Spirit around us and within us."[53]

Stonehouse and May created a research project to listen to children and learn from them about "their experiences of feeling God close, talking to God, and hearing God speak to them."[54] They invited 40 children from two different churches in the same community who were between the ages of 5–10 to participate.[55] The children from both churches were asked a variety of questions about their relationship with God, including the question: How does God speak? Children's responses included: by feeling his words in their heart, hearing him in their mind, as a voice inside, moral guidance, and "He just

[52] This is not an exhaustive list; however, it demonstrates the various way God chooses to reveal himself.

[53] Fryling, *Spiritual Listening*, 96.

[54] Stonehouse and May, *Listening to Children*, 2.

[55] Stonehouse and May, *Listening to Children*, 139–40. Twenty children from one church were familiar with the Godly Play model for children's ministry (described in Chapter 3), and the twenty children from the other church had participated in a variety of worship experiences not based on a particular model. The participants were interviewed three times at three and a half year intervals in 1998, 2002, and 2005.

talks."[56] The authors' conclusion from their interviews was that "through the experience of prayer, children are getting to know God."[57] Spiritual maturity, as Fryling mentioned, is one aspect of developing attentiveness, but as pointed out by Stonehouse and May, children can and do have an awareness of God speaking to them. Since they need time and experience to grow in spiritual maturity, the presence of a trusted adult as a listening companion to a child—as Eli was, in part, to Samuel—can bring their wisdom and experience to help children recognize and respond to moments of transcendence. The spiritually mature adult can direct children in their attentiveness to the whispers of the Spirit and guide the child as they identify the ways that God speaks to them personally and in community.

Listening to God in prayer encourages children to anticipate that God will speak with them. Learning to recognize God's voice in prayer can be nurtured through disciplines of waiting on the Lord in silence, solitude, meditation, and contemplation. Each of these practices seems counterintuitive to the active lifestyles of children who have short attention spans. However, in a busy and noisy world, these disciplines provide a countercultural and personalized way for children to encounter God and grow in their recognition of the Shepherd's voice. These listening disciplines can be adapted to incorporate ways for children to employ the childhood capacities for wonder, imagination, and curiosity, particularly in the practices of meditation and contemplation.

[56] Stonehouse and May, *Listening to Children*, 46–47.
[57] Stonehouse and May, *Listening to Children*, 47.

Solitude and Silence

Silence and stillness are not the first thoughts that come to mind regarding the activity of children. However, silence and stillness with the purpose of hearing God is an invitation for children to discover a new discipline that nurtures growth in intimacy with God. Jesus models the necessity of intentional withdrawal for the purpose of listening in prayer to the Father (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16; 6:12). Likewise, there is a scriptural expectation that those who intentionally wait on God will be heard by him and hear his voice (Pss 27:14; 40:1; 130:5; Isa 30:18b; 64:4; Mic 7:7). By waiting on the Lord, the gaze of the listener is shifted away from themselves and their concerns, and set upon God, so that he captivates their full attention. For a child, the invitation to silence and stillness ought to be appropriate to their age and capacity for attentive listening.[58] Children are familiar with periods of silence and solitude in their daily lives through activities such as silent reading in school and quiet/rest times at home. At home, solitude can be experienced together in a common area of the home or individually in a quiet setting. Spending time with God, "involves drawing near to God via meditation and contemplation and developing an ear to hear the gentle voice of the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Kings 19:12). . . . More often, waiting for the Lord is long on listening, but short on speaking, and implies a readiness to obey."[59] Waiting on the Lord can also be as simple as an intentional pause, as the musical notation of *selah* indicates in the Psalms.[60] Foster

[58] In a group setting, 15–30 seconds of silence may suffice, while 1–2 minutes could be excruciatingly long. However, as children grow accustomed to waiting in silence, the length of time can be incrementally increased. In my experience children are eager to listen in prayer together, and curious to hear from one another what God has spoken to them. Although listening in silence may feel awkward at first, through repetition and encouragement from a trusted adult, children will begin to anticipate waiting on the Lord in a group setting. This skill is easily transferrable for children to engage with on their own.

[59] Brandt and Bicket, *The Spirit Helps Us*, 393.

[60] The meaning of *selah* in Hebrew remains unknown, however the Greek translation to *diapsalma* means an instrumental interlude without words (Limburg, "Psalms," n.p.).

quotes Martin Luther as saying that the *selah* is an invitation to "a quiet and restful soul, which can grasp and hold to that which the Holy Spirit there presents and offers."[61] It is a discipline to stop what we are doing, to quiet our heart, mind, and soul in the presence of God and shift our full attention toward him. Similarly, in silence and expectancy, we stop striving and acknowledge our childlike dependence on the Lord to provide for our needs as we trust in him.

Contemplation

Whereas meditation focuses more upon listening prayerfully to God's voice as he reveals himself in Scripture, contemplation is a listening posture of "awareness of God's being, an act of thinking about God with concentration and attention."[62] Ps 63:1–5 typifies the contemplative language of desire (earnestly I seek, I thirst, my whole being longs) that drives the poet to set his gaze on God so that he may know him more intimately and love him more fully. Foster describes "the contemplative life [as] the steady gaze of the soul upon the God who loves us."[63]

Contemplation is a listening posture well-suited for children who are often filled with many questions and wonderings about the character and nature of God. Directing their childlike curiosity into practices of contemplation will empower them to bring their questions directly to the Father,[64] personally express their gratitude and love for Jesus, and receive the Holy Spirit speaking directly into their inner selves.

---

[61] Foster, *Prayer*, 116.
[62] Brandt and Bicket, *The Spirit Helps Us*, 393.
[63] Foster, *Streams of Living Water*, 49.
[64] The practice of asking questions to God will be further addressed in Chapter 5.

Meditation

One of the staple activities used in Christian education with children is the memorization of Scripture. Unfortunately, many of the verses that children memorize are as easily forgotten as they are committed to their short-term memories. Meditation differs from memorization as a discipline because it is "the spiritual practice of focused attentiveness," in which a person considers a verse or passage of Scripture by thinking about it contextually, Christocentrically, and personally.[65] Engaging in meditation can be done silently and individually, but may also be done corporately through drama, movement, art, music, journaling, oral reading, and recitation.[66] Providing a variety of meditative practices allows children to engage with their whole person, listening with their bodies, imaginations, will, emotions, and empathy in memorable ways that will draw God's words into their hearts where it will transform them from the inside out (Ps 119:11; Luke 6:45). The purpose of spiritual listening through meditation is to experience God in his Word, and to live "in communion with Jesus, the Word of God."[67]

Conclusion

Although lessons about praying anytime, anywhere, and about anything are important; encouraging children to grow in their listening attentiveness to God speaking to them all the time, everywhere, and about everything is even more important. People may think that prayer begins when the rituals of prayer—bowing heads, folding hands, and closing

---

[65] Hancock, "Meditation," 606.

[66] Hancock, "Meditation," 606. In particular, the practice of *lectio divina* is a formative practice of listening prayerfully to Scripture, beginning with *silencio* (preparation) and progresses to *meditatio* (reflection) as its second movement, and *contemplatio* (rest) as the fourth movement (Barton, *Sacred Rhythms*, 59–61). This practice will be addressed more fully in Chapter 5.

[67] Fryling, *Spiritual Listening*, 41.

eyes—are observed, or when words of address are made to God. However, prayer is always initiated by God, and it is in listening and responding to his voice that the invitation deepens into conversation. Within that conversation, all God's children can encounter him in his glory, and in doing so will be "transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:16). None of this is dependent in any way on the child. As they listen for his voice they are invited to respond and follow him. Prayer is dependence. It is entrusting God with our best ideas, biggest problems, greatest joys, and most troubling questions to yield our whole selves to him. By surrendering to God our striving and desire for independence, we can receive his best ideas, solutions, affirmations, and responses. Hearing his voice is possible as we relinquish our need to control, and instead, rest in him. By resting, and being present to God, friendship can develop: "Prayer is listening as well as speaking, receiving as well as asking; and its deepest mood is friendship held in reverence."[68] Children who can learn the discipline of waiting on God, and resting in him will grow in their friendship with him. In these sacred moments of silence, meditation, and contemplation children can engage their whole selves: to imagine Jesus, wonder at the Father, worship, ask questions, surrender through the Holy Spirit, hear God speak, and receive from him. Within this posture of prayerful communion, we all have permission to be as children: small, weak, dependent, welcomed, known, and loved.

Hearing God's voice in prayer has both a communal and personal aspect that is inclusive of all generations. Much of this chapter has reflected on the personal experience for children of hearing God's voice, often accompanied by trusted adults.

[68] Foster and Smith, *Devotional Classics*, 91. From the entry on George A. Buttrick.

These trusted adults may be within a child's immediate family, but they may also be present within their faith community. Community is essential for children to participate in and experience belonging within the family of God, knowing that they are "wanted, needed, accepted, and important to the community."[69] Children are often viewed within the church as those most in need of supervision and instruction. However, they can also be invaluable teachers and models of how to listen to God and to live within his kingdom. Adults and children need one another to grow in faith and wonder:

> So the children prevail where their elders fail. I suspect that their unashamed dependency, their peaceful need of others' help for health and safety and daily life, makes them aware that prayer is not one act only: a cry unto God, words shot out of a hot need, words tendered gently to the Deity. The dependent child also watches and waits upon her parent in order to discover what will come next.[70]

Children need adults who can help them to discern God's voice and to grow in their desire to know him. Adults are important models of prayerfulness and a "spiritual way of being… hunger[ing] for God's presence."[71] Likewise, adults need children to remind them how to be present with God. Children in their childlikeness model humility and dependence on Jesus.

---

[69] Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith*, 94.
[70] Wangerin, *Whole Prayer*, 28–29.
[71] Nye, *Children's Spirituality*, 59.

CHAPTER 5: PRAXIS

Accompanying Children

In a world as noisy as the one in which today's children are growing up in, contemplative practices of prayer with the desire to listen for God's voice seem radically countercultural, if not impossible. However, they are essential for guiding children to develop in their practices of both listening and speaking in prayer. This chapter seeks to build upon the normative task of Chapter 4 that presented listening in prayer as an important component of the discipline of prayer with considerations for both practice and evaluation. For children to grow in the practice of listening in prayer, they need trusted adults and a community who are willing to journey with them and model listening to God and to children. Adults who model listening as "curiosity laced with empathy and love guided by the Spirit [have] the potential to listen a child into recognizing their own voice and the voice of God in their life."[1] This allows children to see God in the listening adult, perceiving his invitation for them to dialogue with him. It also allows children to see themselves as God sees and delights in them. When adults and community intentionally come alongside children, they can "listen, invite, mirror, encourage, and hold mystery" together.[2]

[1] Borgo, *Spiritual Conversations*, 61.
[2] Borgo, *Spiritual Conversations*, 133.

In Deut 6:4–9 Moses directs the entire Israelite nation to collectively keep the Lord's commandments:

> Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

As a community, they are required to impress upon the children of Israel love for God with their whole being. This is not a command just for parents or grandparents to obey but for the entire faith community. Moses proposes four intentional times of day to nurture the children's love for God: at home, when travelling, going to bed, and at the start of the day (v. 7). These commandments and truths about God were intended to shape the identity of the entire community, including the next generation, and would be reinforced wherever they went and by whomever they saw (vv. 8–9). The principles that are offered to the nation of Israel help guide the contemporary discipleship of children by families and faith communities today. This chapter proposes three prayer practices that reflect the previously discussed disciplines of silence and solitude, contemplation, and meditation that can make a formational impression of God's love upon children as they listen for his voice. The Ignatian examen, asking God questions, and *lectio divina* are three listening prayer activities that can be done in group settings at church or with families at mealtime, bedtime, when travelling, or after school. As children grow in their understanding of and familiarity with these prayer disciplines, they will be equipped to practice waiting on God.

Examen

The Ignatian examen is an ancient practice of self-examination that can help families and faith communities to encourage children to engage in prayerful listening and response. The examen consists of two parts: to evaluate one's consciousness of God, and one's conscience. The examen of consciousness "develop[s] our capacities to recognize the presence of God"[3] in a daily review. Pausing to recognize the presence of God is an important component of the practice of listening in prayer and can help children to grow in their ability to wait on the Lord in silence and solitude. The examen of conscience prompts self-reflection to evaluate one's life, desires, longings, and faults in the presence of God.[4] Loyola "believed that discernment came out of awareness of how God moved uniquely in each soul. The examen provides a way of noticing where God shows up in our day."[5] Through the conscious awareness of both their response to and neglect of God's presence and evaluation of their actions and thoughts (conscience), children can recognize "these as an invitation to prayer."[6] As the discipline of the examen becomes familiar to the child, they can begin to turn the self-reflection questions into questions they ask of God, effectively asking him: What do you have to say about this part of my day, God?

Lacy Finn Borgo offers a version of the examen that can easily be used with children to help them to reflect on their day and notice God's presence with them.[7] She

---

[3] Barton, *Sacred Rhythms*, 95.

[4] Ps 139 offers some excellent prompts that invite self-examination in the presence of God: "You have searched me, Lord, and you know me…. Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?… Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (vv. 1, 7, 23–24).

[5] Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 83.

[6] Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 84.

[7] All of Borgo's suggestions in this paragraph are taken from her teaching video: "Examen for Families," [n.d.].

suggests maximizing collective family times to engage in the examen together, such as bedtime, shared mealtime, and when travelling in a vehicle together. This process of the examen consists of five movements:

1. Become aware of God's presence through bodily recognition, such as kneeling, making the sign of the cross, or cuddling together.
2. Look for the graces of God's presence by evaluating the day in "chunks," such as: waking to leaving for school, until lunch, until dinner, until bed, and while sleeping. Consider: when did you encounter goodness, beauty, or the fruits of the Spirit in your day?
3. Look for growth of when wise and unwise choices were made. Do you need to receive or offer forgiveness for anything?
4. Talk with Jesus about the graces and the growth from the self-reflection. Looking to Jesus, the Good Shepherd, hear what he has to say about your graces and growth.
5. Think about tomorrow: What are the feelings that you have about tomorrow and bring those anxieties and excitements to Jesus in prayer? End the time with another bodily recognition of the awareness of God's presence.

Here are some other ways to consider phrasing the moments of desolation and consolation[8] children experience in their day so that they can accurately reflect and recognize God's presence with them:

1. What are you most grateful for today? What are you least grateful for today?

[8] Classically the awareness of God's presence is known as "consolation", and neglect of his presence as "desolation."

2. When did you give and receive love today? When did you experience the least amount of love today?
3. What was the most life-giving part of the day? When did you feel least alive?
4. When did you feel a sense of connection to God, others, yourself, and creation? When did you feel the least connected?
5. When was your happiest moment of the day? When was your saddest moment?
6. What was the high point of your day? What was your low point? Or most favourite and least favourite?
7. When did you feel that you were living with the fruit of the Spirit in your day? When did you feel like you were not displaying the fruit of the Spirit?

The examen can be done individually, as a family, or in a group setting at church. Adele Calhoun suggests it can be adapted into a playful game of "I spy God," where children work together to notice the presence of God in their lives.[9] It could even be further adapted to be "I spy God in you," so that the group can encourage one another with ways that they see God's character manifested in each child's identity and character. Calhoun points out that "Awareness of the Spirit's enlivening and enlightening presence puts you in touch with the kind of person God created you to be. When you begin to recognize who God created you to be, you have the raw material for discerning God's unique call and design for your life."[10] The examen can draw attention to the appearance of common themes that may direct children and families to perceive God's whispers about direction and calling in their lives.[11] Similarly, by incorporating

[9] Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 86.
[10] Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 84.
[11] Linn et al., *Sleeping with Bread*, 17.

the examen regularly at set times and throughout daily life, it can be used to adapt perfunctory prayers into personal expressions of gratitude and petition.

Asking God Questions

Much of the foundation for asking questions in listening prayer was discussed in Chapter 4. Within children's Christian education, "teachers are usually taught to ask questions rather than invite them. And children are usually taught to answer questions instead of [asking] them."[12] The practice of asking God questions suggests that God holds the clearest answers to our questions if we would wait on him. In Matt 7:7–8 Jesus invites us to bring our questions to God, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened." Many people are content to stop at the first part of the verse and never progress to seeking and knocking with the questions that they have. Both seeking and knocking suggest a kind of asking that requires persistence, perseverance, and an orientation of the heart toward God. The internal formation and renewal in prayer comes from spending time in God's presence, having our desires and petitions surrendered to him, as we listen for and receive his will. Jan Johnson suggests that waiting on God with persistence and perseverance that is interested in God for utilitarian purposes will be a frustrating and discouraging process, "But if you're in the relationship for God himself, waiting means you still have what you want—God—even while you wait."[13]

---

[12] Csinos and Beckwith, *Way of Jesus*, 97.
[13] Johnson, *When the Soul Listens*, 106.

Waiting on God in prayer may be challenging for children due to their shorter attention spans. Parents or teachers can encourage children to write their prayer questions in a journal in which the child can be reminded of the important questions they are seeking God to answer. They can use that journal space to write down answers when they come, and while they are waiting, they can write down the things they know to be true about God that are related to their questions.

This can be a challenging discipline for children to grow in on their own. Parents and children's ministry leaders can help children to expand their capacity for waiting on the Lord by joining with the children in asking God questions and taking 30–60 seconds to wait in silence for an answer. If any Scripture or perceived whispers from the Holy Spirit come to mind, sharing those ideas together can help children to begin to discern the ways that God speaks. Children may be frustrated or discouraged that they may not hear a specific word. It can be helpful to remind children to reflect on God's nearness to them as they wait on him.

Johnson suggests three questions that we can continuously be asking God: "What are you telling me about my relationship with You? What are You telling me about how my character needs to change? What are You telling me about how You want me involved in advancing Your kingdom?"[14] These types of listening prayer questions may be difficult for children ages 7–10 to begin with as they are too open-ended. By narrowing the focus of the question slightly, children can listen for God's voice with confidence, rather than feeling as though they are searching for an answer or trying to

[14] Johnson, *When the Soul Listens*, 101.

manufacture one on God's behalf. By developing the practice of wondering from Chapter 4, Johnson's suggested questions can be adapted to begin with "I wonder:"

- I wonder what You think of me.
- I wonder what is one way that You would like me to become more like Jesus?
- I wonder how You would like me to show kindness (or any other fruit of the Spirit) to my sibling (or any other person)?

Phrasing the questions in this manner shifts the questions to become contemplative in nature. These questions could also be phrased more concretely, beginning with the phrase: "Let's ask God for an idea."

- Let's ask God for an idea about what his love is like.
- Let's ask God for an idea about a way that he wants to help us become more like Jesus.
- Let's ask God for an idea about how we can help others to see Jesus in us.

The challenging questions children have "about [God], faith, the Christian life, and their own personal problems and relationships" can also be addressed to God.[15] Often, adults will too quickly provide answers for children, without determining why they are asking those questions. A helpful practice in guiding children in question-asking can be to simply ask them why they are asking the question or what they think the answer might be. These questions can be phrased as gentle wondering questions: I wonder why you are thinking about this question? I wonder what you think the answer

[15] Stonehouse and May, *Listening to Children*, 131.

might be. An important final step in question-asking is to lead the child to ask God directly that question in prayer.

How adults handle the questions children ask matters; it "can make a difference in whether children accept God's story as their own and experience the joy of joining in God's kingdom work."[16] Questions are often motivated by curiosities about God's character and nature, experiences they have had that seem incongruent with their faith and Christian worldview, something that they have read in the Bible, or heard someone say about God. "When children are encouraged to freely ask questions about what they're learning, seeing, doing and experiencing within our faith communities and families, they do so out of the contexts of their lives."[17] Children need trusted adults who can help them to work out their faith questions, and who can direct them to listen and see God at work in those questions and their salvation (Phil 2:12–13).

By addressing questions to God, children can develop "from being 'askers for things' to being 'simple seekers of God.'"[18] There are different types of questions that encourage seeking God, rather than asking for our desires. Questions may be confessional: I do not know what to do, or I have messed this up. God, will you help me? As God receives and responds to their confession and cry for help, they will start to experience who he is to them personally. Trusted adults can help them to pay attention to his answers as revealing his goodness, provision, faithfulness, and love. Some questions involve submitting to God and recognizing that we cannot control the outcome or the answers that he offers. In humbly waiting upon the Lord, we shift our eyes from

[16] Stonehouse and May, *Listening to Children*, 131.
[17] Csinos and Beckwith, *Way of Jesus*, 183.
[18] Johnson, *When the Soul Listens*, 103.

the question or problem, and onto God. The question shifts from being "Why is this happening to me?" to "I wonder where are you in this problem, Lord?" Through submitting to his will, and by looking for his presence in the circumstance, children will be reminded that they are not alone. He is there with them and they can rest in him (John 15:5). Knowles offers this helpful reminder about what the purpose of prayer is in asking and seeking God: "However counterintuitive it may seem, prayer is not so much an attempt to solicit answers from God as it is a process whereby God solicits our requests in answer to his own insistence on mercy and grace. That is why learning to pray will always involve learning more about the One to whom we pray."[19]

Lectio Divina

Children love stories and learn best from stories that involve their whole person, as discussed in Chapter 4. Biblical stories that make the greatest impressions captivate their attention, encourage emotional response, provoke curiosity, and engage their bodies. Hay and Nye observe that "Imagination is central to religious activity through the metaphors, symbols, stories and liturgies which respond to the otherwise unrepresentable experience of the sacred."[20] Imagination is central not just for children, but all participants in religious activity. However, it is especially important when considering how to help children to engage with Scripture and storytelling. Children's ministry appears to make two different types of impressions upon children through their approach to storytelling: one option is that storytelling is entertaining, creative, and intended to be memorable through clever object lessons. The other option is that the

[19] Knowles, "Joining Jesus," 42.
[20] Hay and Nye, *Spirit of the Child*, 73.

story is told in a way that children feel they have heard all of this before, and what difference does it make? Ironically, the story can often get lost in the clever and entertaining storytelling of the first option. The "boring" repetition of the second option can allow the stories to make quiet impressions in childhood that reappear in adulthood. Story and identity are intrinsically linked, and stories have been a useful tool throughout humanity for communicating culture, worldview, and self-understanding.[21] Stories teach and remind us of who we are. They also help us to perceive answers to our questions and can inspire action.[22] Telling stories is an invitation to children to experience the story with their whole selves as they "[begin] to identify not only with the cognitive content, but also the emotions, the suspense, the totality of the story, and all the senses as well as reason and imagination are involved. The child is 'into' the story."[23] Biblical stories create a space for children to encounter God in someone else's experience that opens them up to hearing him speak to them through Scripture (2 Tim 3:15–17).

One method of listening for God's voice in Scripture is through the practice of *lectio divina* ("spiritual reading"), which is a sixth-century Benedictine discipline. *Lectio divina* consists of four core movements of contemplative prayer focused upon a short piece of Scripture that progressively move the pray-er towards greater awareness of God and the supernatural. These movements are: *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio* and *contemplatio.*[24] In each of the first three movements, the passage of Scripture is read, either quietly to oneself, or aloud in a group setting by a designated person.[25] Parents or children's

[21] Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith*, 95.
[22] Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith*, 95.
[23] Lawson and May, *Children's Spirituality*, 18.
[24] Barton, *Sacred Rhythms*, 56–58.
[25] The storytelling component of Godly Play's lesson time appears to have adapted the practice of *lectio divina* by creating quiet, reflective space to listen to a paraphrased story that is spoken aloud. The

ministry leaders can guide children through these movements as a discipline for hearing God speak in Scripture to the original audience, and to hear from God for themselves. Additionally, engagement with Scripture through the practice of *lectio divina* invites children to use their imaginations to listen to God in selections that are not narrative-driven.[26] The intent of listening to Scripture in this way is not for exegesis and information, but to encounter God and experience his presence.[27] *Lectio divina* "requires an open, reflective, listening posture alert to the voice of God. This type of reading is aimed more at growing a relationship with God than gathering information about God."[28] In addition to the four core movements, Ruth Haley Barton offers an additional two that bookend the original practice: Preparation (*silentio*), Read (*lectio*), Reflect (*meditatio*), Respond (*oratio*), Rest (*contemplatio*), and Resolve (*incarnatio*).[29]

In preparation, children can settle their hearts and minds, choosing to be present in listening attentiveness to God's presence. Trusted adults can coach them to pray a simple prayer to invite Jesus to meet with them, such as: "Come, Lord Jesus," or "Here I am. I am ready." Someone reads the Scripture once, slowly and without too much dramatic embellishment. Children are invited to listen for a word or phrase that stands out to them, and to repeat it to themselves internally. The passage is read again with an encouragement to wonder about what stood out in listening the first time.

---

lesson offers group time for *lectio*, *meditatio*, and *oratio*. In the response/work time following the lesson children are given opportunity to individually move through *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio* as they play with the lesson materials or create an art project.

[26] Children's ministry curricula and children's Bibles rely heavily on the narrative aspects of Scripture. This can impact children's understanding of Scripture and their relationship with God as they mature. However, this topic is not within the focus of this thesis.

[27] *Lectio divina* incorporates all three listening prayer practices discussed in Chapter 4: silence, contemplation, and meditation.

[28] Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 284.

[29] Barton, *Sacred Rhythms*, 59–61.

In this movement of reflection, children can exercise their curiosity and imaginations to envision the setting of the story and the people within it: Can they picture themselves there? Who are they in the story? What sensations would they experience (touch, smell, sound, sight, taste)? What are they curious about in the scene? Where is their attention drawn to? This type of story-experience "uses the whole of the imagination in their meditation, rather than simply the intellect."[30]

After a time of silent reflecting, the passage is read a third time, and children are invited to respond to God in silent prayer with whatever the Holy Spirit brings to mind: thanksgiving, worship, conviction, confession, repentance, receiving forgiveness, forgiving others, or being filled anew with the Holy Spirit. Children can also respond through journaling or drawing, depending on their attention span or personal preference for speaking with God.

The fifth stage is to rest in God's presence, like the weaned child of Ps 131:2 who snuggles up to their mother, enjoying their shared companionship. It may be helpful to encourage children to choose a different bodily posture for this stage that expresses their trust and surrender to God. Adults must pay attention to the children to determine how long each movement should last.

The final movement is *incarnatio*, in which children ask God how he would like them to live out what they have heard him say to them. Leaders or parents can guide the group to share with one another what they heard God speak to them if they would like to share. Children will be interested to hear the different ways that God speaks to different people through the same passage of Scripture. Each person is uniquely invited "into

[30] Hay and Nye, *Spirit of the Child*, 73.

God's presence to listen for his particular, loving word… at this particular moment in time."[31] Reflecting together can be a valuable time of affirming the truth of what each child heard and experienced. If there are any thoughts or feelings expressed that may need clarification or to be explored further, this is a great opportunity to ask the wondering questions that were suggested in the previous section.

Prayer and Scripture

One of the clear benefits of practicing *lectio divina* is utilizing Scripture to direct and shape listening in prayer. As much as "the first and basic act of theological work is prayer,"[32] so is Scripture the foundation of prayer. Prayer and the Word support and interpret one another. They must be held in tandem. The more familiar we are with the written Word of God, allowing it to penetrate our entire being, the more easily we will discern the Holy Spirit speaking God's words to us personally. For this reason, children, who may be less familiar with the entirety of Scripture need trusted adults who can encourage them in their practices of listening in prayer and help them to grow in their love for the Word of God.

Conclusion

Through the contemplative prayer practices of the examen, asking God questions, and *lectio divina*, this chapter has sought to provide practical ways to engage children in recognizing and hearing God's voice both personally and corporately. Children learn best through hands-on activities that create memorable experiences and personal

---

[31] Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines* 287.
[32] Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 160.

application. These three prayer activities allow children to move beyond observation to be deeply engaged in the process as participants in and recipients of God's presence. "Developing an ear to hear what God is saying becomes the application and the fruit of meditation and contemplation" in children's spiritual lives.[33] Furthermore, children need trusted adults to model prayerful listening and accompany them in their listening. Faith-filled adults can invite children "to listen and look for the movement of God in their life, [as] a tangible reminder that they are not alone."[34] Through the prophet Jeremiah, God promises that those who seek him with their whole hearts will find him (Jer 29:13). As children seek to discern God's voice amidst the noise of their lives, he promises them that he hears them and that they too will hear him.

Though children are among the marginalized and lowliest in society, Jesus identifies with them through his interactions with them, and incarnationally as having been a child himself. He commends children as recipients of the kingdom of God and commends them as models of greatness in the kingdom. Moreover, in Jesus, children find a friend and good shepherd who is willing to lay down his life so that they can know him and follow him. Children are relationally conscious of God, and through the gospel accounts' portrayal of Jesus' interactions with them, we see that children are drawn to Jesus, wanting to know him and to be blessed by him. The qualities of childhood that Jesus refers to as a paradigm for discipleship are the dependence and weakness through which the glory of God can be revealed. These qualities are necessary for all disciples to grow in their faith and intimacy with God, being able to recognize his voice amidst the noise of life. Through the contemplative practices of listening in prayer

[33] Brandt and Bicket, *Spirit Helps Us*, 393.
[34] Borgo, *Spiritual Conversations*, 43.

children can grow in their discernment of hearing God's voice. In prayer they will discover their confidence grows when it becomes less about the words that they say, and more about recognizing who they are praying to (the Father), with (Jesus), and through (the Holy Spirit). As they bring their questions, wonderings, imaginations, and whole selves humbly before the Father in prayer they will begin to understand their identity as beloved children as they behold his glory (2 Cor 3:18). He is always speaking to them, inviting them to know him as the Good Shepherd who knows them and loves them deeply: My children listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

"252 Basics Curriculum" [n.d.], https://thinkorange.com/252-kids-ministry-curriculum.

Allison, Dale C., and W. D. Davies. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew, Volume II*. International Critical Commentary. London: Continuum, 1991.

———. *Matthew: A Shorter Commentary*. New York: T. & T. Clark, 2004.

Barth, Karl. *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*. Translated by Grover Foley. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963.

———. *Prayer: 50th Anniversary Edition*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002.

Barton, Ruth Haley. *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging our Lives for Spiritual Transformation*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006.

Bergen, Robert D. *1, 2 Samuel*. The New American Commentary, vol. 7. Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996.

Berryman, Jerome W. *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1991.

Bock, Darrell L. *Luke*. 2 vols. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996.

Bologna, Caroline. "What's the Deal with Generation Alpha?" *Huffpost*, Nov 8, 2019, updated Sept 25, 2021, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/generation-alpha-after-gen-z_l_5d420ef4e4b0aca341181574.

Borgo, Lacy Finn. "Examen for Families" [n.d.], https://renovare.org/messages/examen-for-families.

———. *Faith Like a Child: Embracing Our Lives as Children of God.* Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2023.

———. *Spiritual Conversations with Children: Listening to God Together*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2020.

Brandt, Robert L., and Zenas J. Bicket. *The Spirit Helps Us Pray: A Biblical Theology of Prayer*. Springfield, MO: Logion, 1998.

Bunge, Marcia J. "Childlikeness, Spirituality of." In *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, edited by Glen G. Scorgie et al., 350–51. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011.

———. *The Child in Christian Thought*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001.

———. "The Child, Religion, and the Academy: Developing Robust Theological and Religious Understandings of Children and Childhood." *Journal of Religion* 86 (2006) 549–79, DOI: 10.1086/505894.

Calhoun, Adele Ahlberg. *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*. Rev. and Exp. ed. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015.

Carroll, John T. "Children in the Bible." *Interpretation* 55 (2001) 121–34, DOI: 10.1177/002096430005500202.

"Child Theology Movement" [n.d.], https://childtheologymovement.org.

Csinos, David M., and Ivy Beckwith. *Children's Ministry in the Way of Jesus.* Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2013.

"David C. Cook Curriculum" [n.d.], https://davidccook.org/curriculum.

Edwards, James R. *The Gospel According to Mark.* The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans: 2002.

Fee, Gordon D. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians Revised Edition*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014.

Forsyth, P. T. *The Soul of Prayer*. Reprint, Waterford, NY: CrossReach, 2020.

Foster, Richard. *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*. London: Hodder, 2008.

———. *Streams of Living Water: Essential Practices from the Six Great Traditions of Christian Faith*. New York: HarperOne, 1998.

Foster, Richard J., and James Bryan Smith. *Devotional Classics: Selected Readings for Individuals and Groups*. Revised and Expanded Edition. New York: HarperOne, 2005.

Fowler, James W. *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1981.

France, R. T. *The Gospel of Mark.* New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.

Fryling, Alice. *The Art of Spiritual Listening: Responding to God's Voice Amid the Noise of Life*. New York: Waterbrook, 2003.

Garland, David E. *1 Corinthians*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003.

"Godly Play" [n.d.], https://www.godlyplayfoundation.org.

Green, Joel. *The Gospel of Luke*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997.

"Grow Kids Curriculum" [n.d.], https://growcurriculum.org/kids-ministry-curriculum.

Gundry-Volf, Judith. "'To Such as These Belongs the Reign of God:' Jesus and Children." *Theology Today* 56 (2000) 469–80. Online: https://doi-org.dtl.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/004057360005600403.

———. "The Least and the Greatest: Children in the New Testament." In *The Child in Christian Thought*, edited by Marcia J. Bunge, 29–60. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001.

Hancock, Maxine. "Meditation." In *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, edited by Glen G. Scorgie et al., 606–08. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011.

Hart, Tobin. *The Secret Spiritual World of Children*. Novato, CA: New World, 2003.

Hay, David, and Rebecca Nye. *The Spirit of the Child: Revised Edition*. London: Jessica Kingsley, 2006.

Houston, James. *The Transforming Power of Prayer: Deepening Your Friendship with God*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1996.

Howard, Evan B. *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008.

Hvalvik, Reidar, and Karl Olav Sandnes. *Early Christian Prayer and Identity Formation.* Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014.

Ingersoll, Heather Nicole. "Making Room: A Place for Children's Spirituality in the Christian Church." *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 19 (2014) 164–78. DOI: 10.1080/1364436X.2014.979774.

Jeremias, Joachim. *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus*. New York: Scribner's, 1971.

Johnson, Jan. *When the Soul Listens: Finding Rest and Direction in Contemplative Prayer*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1999.

Joiner, Reggie. *Think Orange: Imagine the Impact When Church and Family Collide*. Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2009.

Knowles, Michael P. "Joining Jesus: Prayer as Mission and the Mission of Prayer." In *Singing into Splintered Spaces: The Rhythms of Mission and Spiritual Discipline*, edited by E. Janet Warren, 31–43. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2022.

Koester, Craig R. *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. The Anchor Yale Bible, vol 36. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001. DOI: 10.5040/9780300261738.

Krause, G. "Jesus der Kinderfreund." In *Die Kinder im Evangelium*, edited by G. Krause, 79–112. Stuttgart: Ehrenfried Klotz, 1973.

Lawson, Kevin E., and Scottie May. *Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research, and Applications. Second Edition*. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2019.

Limburg, James. "Psalms, Book of." In *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary A–Z,* edited by David Noel Freedman, 5:522–36. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992. DOI: 10.5040/9780300261912-0427.

Linn, Dennis, et al. *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1995.

Longman, Tremper, III., and David E. Garland, eds. *Matthew–Mark*. The Expositor's Bible Commentary Revised Edition. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010.

Louw, Johannes P., and Eugene A. Nida. *Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*. 2nd ed. 2 vols. New York: United Bible Societies, 1989.

Marshall, I. Howard. *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. The New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978.

———. "Jesus—Example and Teacher of Prayer in the Synoptic Gospels." In *Into God's Presence: Prayer in the New Testament*, edited by Richard N. Longenecker, 113–31. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001.

May, Scottie. "Identifying Children's Spirituality, Walter Wangerin's Perspectives, and an Overview of This Book." In *Children's Spirituality, Second Edition: Christian Perspectives, Research, and Applications*, edited by Kevin E. Lawson and Scottie May, 13–25. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2019.

May, Scottie, et al. *Children Matter: Celebrating Their Place in the Church, Family, and Community*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005.

McCrindle, Mark. “Understanding Generation Alpha.” *McCrindle*, [n.d.], https://mccrindle.com.au/article/topic/generation-alpha/generation-alpha-defined/.

Mercer, Joyce, and Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore. *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2005.

“Mission and Vision” [n.d.], https://www.godlyplayfoundation.org/the-foundation/mission-vision.

Moltmann, Jürgen. “Child and Childhood as Metaphors of Hope.” *Theology Today* 56 (2000) 592–603, DOI: 10.1177/004057360005600412.

Mulholland, M. Robert, Jr. *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2016.

Nash, Sally. “The Editorial.” *ANVIL: Journal of Theology and Mission* 35 (2019) 3–4. Online: https://churchmissionsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Church-Mission-Society-Anvil-Volume-35-issue-1-Feb-2019.pdf.

Nye, Rebecca. *Children’s Spirituality: What it is and Why it Matters*. London: Church House, 2009.

Osmer, Richard R. *Practical Theology: An Introduction*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008.

Ratcliff, Donald. “‘The Spirit of Children Past’: A Century of Children’s Spirituality Research.” In *Nurturing Children’s Spirituality: Christian Perspectives and Best Practices*, edited by Holly Catterton Allen, 21–41. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2008.

Rahner, Karl. “Ideas for a Theology of Childhood.” In *Theological Reflections Vol 8: Further Theology of the Spiritual Life 2*, 33–50. Translated by David Bourke. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1971. Online: https://archive.org/details/theologicalinves0008rahn/page/n7/mode/2up?view=theater.

“Saddleback Kids” [n.d.], https://saddleback.com/connect/ministry/saddleback-kids.

Scorgie, Glen G. “Overview of Christian Spirituality.” In *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, edited by Glen G. Scorgie et al., 27–33. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011.

Sheldrake, Philip. *Spirituality: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Simpson, A. B. *The Life of Prayer and the Power of Stillness*. Reprint, [N.p.]: Scotts Valley, CA: 2010.

"SOGI 123" [n.d.], https://www.sogieducation.org.

Stanton, Graham. *The Gospels and Jesus: Second Edition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Stewart, Sonja M., and Jerome W. Berryman. *Young Children and Worship*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1989.

Stonehouse, Catherine, and Scottie May. *Listening to Children on the Spiritual Journey: Guidance for Those Who Teach and Nurture*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010.

"Sunday School Curriculum" [n.d.], https://www.group.com/childrens-ministry/sunday-school.

Tan, Rosalind Lim. "Children and Spirituality." In *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, edited by Glen G. Scorgie et al., 351–53. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011.

Thatcher, Adrian. "Theology and Children: Towards a Theology of Childhood." *Transformation* 23 (2006) 194–99.

Tolbert, La Verne, and Marilyn Brownlee. "The African American Church and Its Role in Nurturing the Spiritual Development of Children." In *Nurturing Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives and Best Practices,* edited by Holly Catterton Allen, 320–38. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2008.

Wangerin, Walter, Jr. *Whole Prayer: Speaking and Listening to God*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998.

Watts, Fraser N., et al. *Psychology for Christian Ministry*. London: Routledge, 2002.

Westerhoff, John H., III. *Spiritual Life: The Foundation for Preaching and Teaching*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994.

———. *Will Our Children Have Faith?* Third Revised Edition. New York: Morehouse, 2012.

White, Keith. "A Little Child will Lead Them: Rediscovering Children at the Heart of Mission." In *Toddling to the Kingdom: Child Theology at Work in the Church*, edited by John Collier, 137–53. London: Child Theology Movement, 2009.

———. "Child Theology as Theology." *ANVIL: Journal of Theology and Mission* 35 (2019) 13–20. Online: https://churchmissionsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Church-Mission-Society-Anvil-Volume-35-issue-1-Feb-2019.pdf.

Wifler, Laura. *Any Time, Any Place, Any Prayer: A True Story of How You can Talk with God.* [N.p.]: Good Book, 2021.

Wright, N. T. "The Lord's Prayer as a Paradigm of Christian Prayer." In *Into God's Presence: Prayer in the New Testament*, edited by Richard N. Longenecker, 132–54. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001.