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Are Children Human?  
by Barbara Pitkin

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## INTRODUCTION

Presbyterians may be familiar with the six “great ends of the church” embodied in the *Book of Order*. The proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world are faithful expressions of the church’s purposes.

Presbyterians may not be familiar with the “two great ends” of the church. That is how Freda Gardner, Moderator of the 211<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (1999), refers to children and older adults. They stand at the two ends of the church, representing its hope and its faithfulness. These two great ends of the church – children and older adults – were the theme of the 2000 Moderators’ Conference. Hosted by the General Assembly moderator, the annual moderators’ conferences provides all presbytery and synod moderators with an opportunity to consider important themes and issues before the church.

The 2000 Moderators’ Conference featured two important addresses. An address on the gifts of older adults was given by the Reverend Herbert Meza. Professor Barbara Pitkin delivered an address on children. As a contribution to the “Year of the Child,” the Office of Theology and Worship is pleased to make Prof. Pitkin’s important essay available to a wider audience throughout the church. Theology and Worship Occasional Paper No. 12 continues a distinguished series that helps the church to reflect on important matters in its life.

“Are Children Human?” brings together historical, theological, and pastoral issues in order to help the church explore the quality of its relationship with its children. “Are Children Human?” may seem to have an obvious answer, but the way we answer will affect the ways we shape church life. “Let the little children come to me,” said Jesus, “do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs” (Mark 10:14).

Who are these children? Barbara Pitkin helps to answer the question with grace and faithfulness.

Barbara Pitkin is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Stanford University. She is the author of *What Pure Eyes Could See: Calvin's Doctrine of Faith* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

The Office of Theology and Worship hopes that *Are Children Human?* will be a useful resource for pastors, educators, sessions, church committees, and parents as we seek to be faithful to God and to children.

Joseph D. Small  
Coordinator for Theology and Worship  
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

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To offer comments and responses to *Are Children Human?* contact

Office of Theology and Worship  
100 Witherspoon Street  
Louisville, KY 40202-1396  
Tel: 502-569-5334  
E-mail: PennyF@ctr.pcusa.org

**“Are Children Human?”<sup>1</sup>**

**Barbara Pitkin, Stanford University**

To ask, as Dorothy Sayers once asked of women, “Are children human?” may seem silly: of course they are!<sup>2</sup> Yet this answer is by no means self-evident. Certainly children are members of the human race, but do they not possess only *potentially* or *in graduated form* the qualities we often identify as the distinguishing characteristics of being human? Qualities such as the capacity to reason, the ability for self-transcendence, language, or, in the definition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “Of, belonging to, or characteristic of mankind, distinguished from animals by superior mental development, power of articulate speech, and upright posture.”<sup>3</sup> Clearly none of these are evident in my infant son. Moreover, these characteristics are gradually acquired and only imperfectly possessed even by my five-year-old daughter.

If being human involves the mere *capacity* for realizing these qualities rather than the actual and complete exhibition of them, then children are human from birth – or perhaps earlier, as some in the battles over abortion contend. But it is clearly one thing to affirm that children *are* human by virtue of their future potential and quite another to act as if this is so. And it is the failure to *treat* children as human that, in my view, underlies all the many crises that children face in our world today. This failure to treat children as human is not the sole cause of children’s suffering, but I believe it is an important one and something we as Christians can in no small way remedy. Therefore, I would like to consider with you the following questions: *What do Christianity and especially the Reformed tradition say about the humanity of children? How can these insights guide and support our efforts to address the serious problems children are facing?* But before we consider these directly, I want to take a closer look at two ways in which our failure to take seriously the fundamental humanity of children manifests itself in our society and, regrettably, in the church.

***Challenges to the Humanity of Children***

Across the political spectrum in our country, there is a growing consensus about the serious problems children face today. The crises are legion: poverty, inadequate health care, insufficient quality day care, declining educational standards, drugs, juvenile crime, violence in our neighborhoods and schools, child abuse. Varied also are the explanations for these problems: a breakdown in the so-called traditional family, teen pregnancy, absentee fathers, welfare mothers, working mothers, the easy availability of firearms, low pay for teachers and child caregivers, television, the internet. Because there is disagreement over the causes, there is often not agreement about the solutions. Despite advances in the past decade, there is a common conviction that children in American society and the world at large are in trouble. All one has to do is visit the web sites of Unicef or the Children's Defense Fund to find the statistics to support this conviction. We have a long way to go toward making this a better world for children.<sup>4</sup>

Many religious organizations and people of faith are trying to make things better for children. Their efforts are undoubtedly doing much good for the children they serve. But rather than catalogue some of their successes and failures, I focus here on something far less concrete but no less important. There needs to be fundamental change in our mentality, a change in the way our culture presently views children and childhood. There are resources within the Christian tradition that we can draw on to articulate this more adequate and appropriate understanding of childhood. (People of other faiths have resources within their own traditions to draw on). A shift in our mentality will by no means suffice to solve all the problems facing children in our world. But without such a shift, our best efforts will be constantly frustrated. I am not optimistic that this shift can be pushed through in society at large (it is, after all, a fallen world). But I do think that the Christian community can go a long way toward adopting this (for the present) counter-cultural image of childhood and embodying it in its attitudes and practices toward children.

The first way in which our failure to take seriously the fundamental humanity of children manifests itself in *the contradictory understandings of the nature of children and of childhood* that underlie many of our attitudes and actions.<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, we idealize children and envision childhood as a period of utter innocence and a time for the unfolding of natural potential. This image, with its roots in the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, has shaped much of modern and contemporary educational theory, including religious education. Even more recently, therapies encouraged adults to get in touch with their "inner child," that vulnerable and violated self deep within. One web site hawks Inner Child key chains and related paraphernalia as reminders of the self that is "pure, whole, and unbroken." There is certainly much to be said for holding a positive image of children and for fostering their self-development and expression. However, an overly idealized view that stresses the innocence and purity of tender consciences, focuses exclusively on experiential modes of learning, and insists on self-expression as the proper goal of education cannot provide, among other things, an adequate account of the moral accountability of children (or their elders). We can't understand how a Michigan first-grader could shoot a classmate, so we lay the exclusive blame for his actions on the environment in which he lived, to the extent that we hold legally responsible the uncle who unknowingly made the weapon available. I am not suggesting that a six-year-old should be held legally or even morally accountable for such an action, but I do think that seeing children as somehow exceptions to general humanity and general human failings is problematic.

One the other hand, we nearly demonize children and view childhood as a time for restraining and correcting dangerous natural impulses. Throughout much of Western history and among some Christian communities today, this negative image has gone hand-in-hand with a reliance on harsh corporal punishment and/or psychological domination to restrain the child's self-will and conform it to the parent's or teacher's. The infant, according to the seventeenth-century Puritan Lewis Bayly, is nothing but "a

brute having the shape of a man.”<sup>6</sup> Much more recently, a study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* has documented the sharp rise in the use of psychotropic medications in treating supposed psychiatric disorders in children as young as two.<sup>7</sup> While clearly in certain cases such treatments may be necessary, researchers suggest that in many instances these powerful drugs are used as a quick fix to problems that should be addressed through behavioral and family therapy. Seeking to “normalize” children’s behavior, our society increasingly resorts to medication: whose effects on young, developing brains have not yet been the subject of any sizable study and which have not been labeled for pediatric use.

Both the idealized and the negative images of children’s nature and of childhood reflect a common assumption that *children are incomplete human beings*. Childhood is not an end in itself but something to be gotten through, whether through the unfolding of natural potential with minimal adult interference or through a domestication of an unruly or disordered self through strict control and guidance. Or, perhaps, true childhood is something “recovered” by adults in search of psychological healing. Yet whether ideal or demonized, such understandings of children and childhood are inadequate, especially in a culture that is increasingly adult-centered. Some have suggested that in our day the lines between children and adults have become blurred, perhaps to the detriment of both. But I think it truer to say that children are more disadvantaged than adults when they live in a culture in which adult fulfillment is more important than the nurture of children, and where a premium is placed on growing up and being an adult as fast as one can.

The first obstacle to seeing children as truly human is an inadequate understanding of the nature of children that views them as incomplete human beings and sees childhood as a temporary and ultimately less valued period of human living. A second hindrance lies in what some have characterized as the broad *indifference to children that goes hand-in-hand with our adult-centered*

*culture*.<sup>8</sup> It doesn't matter whether we hold to a positive or to a negative image of children when adults are viewed as the only instances of "full" humanity and when adult fulfillment is more highly valued than children and the nurture of children. Or when, as for many women especially, personal fulfillment and the nurture of children are perceived to be in competition with each other. Children suffer regardless of how we think of them. We have recently witnessed many legislative advances seeking to promote the care and nurture of children and to support the efforts of the adults who care for them. Among these are laws setting minimum length of hospital stays for childbirth, regulations governing parental leaves, initiatives in some states to attract more qualified teachers to schools that need them most. But the values of the workplace and the marketplace usually undermine these endeavors. For example, child caregivers and school teachers are vastly underpaid; in many areas schools are overcrowded and there is an acute shortage of quality day care; few professions truly promote policies that facilitate shared parenting of young children. There are undoubtedly many individuals and a few organizations in our society who are actively working to enhance the well-being of children. Nonetheless, the actual situation has led some analysts to conclude that most of our collective actions and policies betray an attitude of indifference or even contempt.

This attitude of indifference manifests itself in numerous ways, ranging from how we conceive babies, to how we raise children, to the kind of world that we bequeath to them. In ways different than in the past, the assumption that children are primarily the property of others rather than individuals in their own right taints many of our practices. For example, theologian Ted Peters has pointed to the new reproductive technologies that not only overcome infertility and detect and even correct life-threatening abnormalities in utero, but also hold out the possibility of "designer babies" whose characteristics are selected entirely according to their parents' whims and wishes.<sup>9</sup> A recent *Newsweek* article points out that "couples have already created a frenzied market in eggs from Ivy League women" and questions whether "society will



disparage children whose parents let them be born" with natural traits such as "mental dullness, obesity, and short stature."<sup>10</sup> Regarding the rearing of children, David Elkin has described the situation of the "hurried child," who is rushed along toward adulthood by the media, parental pressure, and the consumerist economy.<sup>11</sup> These children forfeit the chance to learn and play for their own sake. They are confronted with adult situations and issues before they are ready, and are shaped from early ages to be little consumers. This pressure to grow up occurs both when children are highly controlled, pushed by parents and others to excel in academics, sports, and society, and when children are treated as abandoned property, left by adults to fend for themselves in an adult world that includes violence, drugs, and exploitation. Indifference to children expresses itself whenever we fail to appreciate children as individuals in their own right and as complete human beings, and whenever we fail to take into account the special needs and unique circumstances of being a human being who is also a child.

The church, too, wrestles with this attitude of indifference, which it receives not just from the broader culture but also inherits from its own past. It is true that many congregations spend much time and energy on special programs for children and youth, and many have on staff a youth pastor or paid youth worker. However, it is often the case that both their ministry and the theology underlying it reflect an assumption that children are not quite as important as the churches' other members. This is most obvious, of course, in congregations where no accommodations are made for children at all. Where children are not made to feel welcome in worship and where there are no opportunities for age-appropriate faith development. Where there is no care offered for infants and preschool children during the service or where the nursery and preschool rooms are not staffed adequately. But the lower status of children manifests itself also in churches with large and active ministries to children. It is evident whenever the youth pastor has the lowest status among the clergy and does not participate fully in wider leadership of the congregation. When in contrast to the

preaching for grown ups the “children’s sermons” are unprepared and theologically weak. Whenever a church delegates to untrained and unpaid volunteers the responsibility for the spiritual education of children. When only parents teach Sunday school or participate in activities for young people. Whenever the Sunday school and youth curricula are not age-appropriate, stimulating, and theologically serious. Indifference toward children and a lack of respect for their fundamental humanity is evident also in many seminaries: Whenever disciplines in which children are a focus (such as pastoral care and Christian education) are perceived as intellectually “light weight” in contrast to the “heavy weight” fields of systematic theology, ethics, and Bible. Insofar as children are marginal in these latter areas, the message is that dealing with children is somehow “beneath” the job of the serious theologian or minister.

In our wider culture and in the church, contradictory understandings of the nature of children and childhood challenge the fundamental humanity of children and envision them as incomplete human beings. In our wider culture and in the church there are evidences of an attitude of indifference toward children. Together these constitute a failure to treat children as fundamentally human. We do not attune our practices to their actual needs, honoring and respecting them as full members of society. It is now time to turn to the questions I promised to explore at the outset: *What do Christianity and especially the Reformed tradition say about the humanity of children? How can these insights guide and support our efforts to address the serious problems I have just outlined?*

### *Christian Understandings of the Humanity of Children*

What we desperately need is an understanding of childhood that recognizes the fundamental humanity of children, but also appreciates childhood as a stage in human development and resists society’s urging to hurry children toward to adulthood. I think that support for such an understanding can be found within the broader Christian, and the specifically Reformed traditions, when these are critically examined and reinterpreted. Given recent studies that

have pointed to the ways in which Christianity has contributed to the problems children face, critical examination and reinterpretation are especially necessary. While these studies also acknowledge that Christianity has been a force for children's well being, they paint chilling portraits of some behaviors supported by appeals to biblical mandates and theological understandings. Christians have not lived up to the best insights of their own tradition. We exclude children from theological reflection (both as subjects and objects), in interpretations of the commandment to honor father and mother as a moral absolute. We have condoned child rearing practices that focus on the authority of parents rather than also on the needs and rights of children. We have drawn analogies between God's righteous punishment of sinners and parents' punishment of their sinful offspring. In the church, as in society, we still have a ways to go.

What guideposts can we find for this journey within our own religious tradition? If we take up first the issue of the children's nature and the understanding of childhood, we find that the Christian tradition, too, sees children both positively and negatively. As human beings, children are both created in the image of God and fallen creatures; they are "saints" and "sinners" simultaneously. This may sound similar to the contradictory understandings that constitute the problem, but note here two differences. First, here children are assumed to be complete human beings and are included in a theological anthropology that is universal: *all* humans are in the image of God and *all* humans are fallen. In contrast to the idealized image, children are no more innocent than anyone else. And in contrast to the negative image, children are no more depraved than anyone else. Second, the Christian understanding offers a more realistic assessment of children's nature because it holds these two aspects of human personhood in paradoxical relationship. In actuality, of course, Christians have sometimes failed to uphold both elements of the paradox and have fallen into seeing children only as saints or only as sinners. Such failures need to be acknowledged, criticized, and correct

Even as Christian anthropology recognizes children as fundamentally human, it does not obliterate all boundaries between children and adults, between childhood and adulthood. It simply denies that any one stage of human development represents more fully the essence of being human. However, children and youth are different than adults and, as theologians throughout history have recognized, each age has its own special needs. We meet these needs by utilizing the very best developmental theories available to us. The aim of child rearing is not to rush children on to the next developmental stage but to allow them to attain human wholeness in whatever stage they happen to be: infants, young children, youth, adolescents. Traditional theologians and theologies have much to offer in the way of understanding how this wholeness is evident in children and how it is always qualified even in the smallest children by the problem of sin.

Perhaps the most powerful resources for speaking about children as saints are the Gospel passages in which Jesus speaks about children (Mark 10:13-16, par. Matt. 19:13-15 and Luke 18:15-17; Matt. 18:1-6, 10-14; Mark 9:33-37, par. Matt. 18:1-2, 4-5 and Luke 9:46-48). These passages underscore the full membership of children in the family of God. Jesus blesses children and urges his disciples to welcome them. They suggest also that childhood is a vulnerable stage of human development and children are special objects of Christian service. Jesus warns against impeding children in any way and says that to welcome a child is to welcome Jesus himself. Jesus' words point to ways in which children can be spiritual teachers and models for adults. Jesus claims that children are the inheritors of the reign of God and says that all who follow him must become like children. New Testament scholar Judith Gundry-Volf has argued that these Gospel images in fact portray the reign of God as a children's world in which children are the measure of Christian faith.<sup>12</sup>

Traditional theologies provide resources for building on this biblical foundation. Most Christian theologians have affirmed the membership of children in God's family. The practice of infant

baptism is one way in which this understanding is expressed. Many have also made children the object of Christian service, an activity that continues in the church today. Fewer, however, have acknowledged explicitly the spiritual capacity of children and their ability to exemplify faith and model faith for adults. In his commentary on the Psalms, John Calvin touches on this and speaks about the ways in which children *as* children express true piety. Writing on Psalm 8:2, "out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark . . ." Calvin diverges from the long tradition of reading this passage as a prophecy of the children singing "Hosanna" as Jesus enters Jerusalem (Matt. 21:4-16) or as an allegory for unlearned disciples. Calvin insists that the verse refers only to the very young, to infants who still nurse at the breast. The tongues of real, nursing infants "even before they pronounce a single word, speak loudly and distinctly in commendation of God's liberality toward the human race." Calvin says that David attributes to the testimony of infants "mature strength" and "imposes on infants the office of defending the glory of God."<sup>13</sup> So it seems that for Calvin, children—even infants lacking understanding and language—proclaim God's goodness in a way appropriate to their age, i.e., by nursing. In so doing, they indicate their fundamental humanity. Proclaiming God's goodness is not something that people grow into. It is an activity which they, along with all creation, are called (indeed, designed) to engage in at every moment of existence. Children can teach adults how faith can be "mature" and at the same time always deepening and growing over the course of life. We can strive to affirm this assumption explicitly and express it more fully in our ministry. We need to find ways to affirm the testimony to faith that children make and to make this witness more central in our churches.

Calvin is probably better known for his judgments about children as affected by human fallenness than for his discussions of their spiritual maturity. Writing of infants, he says that their "whole nature is a seed of sin; thus it cannot be but hateful and abominable to God."<sup>14</sup> It must be noted that Calvin's views were not novel, but were based on the Bible and the western theological

orthodoxy.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, by “whole nature” he does not mean that infants are completely sinful but rather that no element of their being is unaffected by sin. Most importantly, he does not think that infants or children are more depraved than anyone else is. That children are fundamentally human in their need of God’s reconciling grace is also strongly affirmed in the Reformed tradition after Calvin. For example, the *Scots Confession* and the *Heidelberg Catechism* both stress that the Fall affected Adam and Eve and their as yet unborn descendants.<sup>16</sup> Yet many moderns have been uncomfortable with the traditional affirmation of infant depravity and especially the idea that some infants may be damned. Recent scholarship by psychologist Alice Miller, historian Philip Greven, and pastoral care theologian Donald Capps has strengthened this feeling of discomfort in connections drawn between the idea of sin in children and child abuse.<sup>17</sup> While none of these studies argues that Christian beliefs inherently fuel abuse of children, they all suggest strong links among seeing children as sinful, God’s punishment of sinners, and the harsh physical and emotional treatment of children.<sup>18</sup>

The findings of a recent project researching perspectives on children in the history of Christian thought (generously funded by the Lilly Endowment) offer a corrective to this view.<sup>19</sup> Most theologians past and present affirm the presence of sin in children, and yet not all of them see harsh physical punishment as the proper response to sin. For example, the eighteenth-century German Pietist theologian August Hermann Francke spoke of the need to break the sinful self-will of children. But he thought this was best accomplished through showing respect and kindness toward children, through praying with and for them, and through educating them. He founded and ran a large complex comprising an orphanage and a series of schools for children. And, most remarkably, he went against the prevailing class-consciousness of his age by extending respect, kindness, prayer, and education toward poor children. For Francke, the idea of original sin led not to abuse of children but to a program of egalitarian charitable treatment of all children. Far from being an obstacle to treating children hu-

manely, the notion of sin in children became the foundation for a ministry to enhance their total well-being.

Modern Reformed theologians like Friedrich Schleiermacher and Horace Bushnell can help further in thinking constructively about children as fallen beings and in shaping our ministry accordingly. In their reinterpretations of the classic understandings of sin, Schleiermacher and Bushnell emphasize sin's social and corporate nature. Sin for them is transmitted through social forces, a web of sin, into which every child is born and immediately entangled. No mere innocents, children cannot but help learn the ways of the world. As they grow, they willingly participate in and perpetuate societal evils and injustices.

In speaking of sin in children, I think we need to recognize finally that just as infants, children, and adolescents express their piety in age-appropriate ways, they manifest fallenness in ways befitting their stage of development. Traditional theologians such as Augustine and Calvin acknowledged graduated degrees of guilt and moral accountability. For example, Calvin says that infants do not yet bring forth fruits of their inborn iniquity. But this does not mean, for Calvin, that they have any less need of God's reconciling grace than do their elders. In order to affirm that children are fundamentally human, we must believe them to be like all humans: both in God's image and fallen, in need of God's grace.

*What do Christianity and the Reformed tradition say about the humanity of children?* The tradition provides an understanding of children and childhood that counters the cultural image of children as incomplete human beings. Such a transformation of understanding is necessary. I would like to conclude with four ways in which these same sources can help us begin to overcome the *indifference toward children* that underlies the many ways we fail to treat them as human.

First, biblical and Christian tradition affirm that all *children are gifts of God*, classically expressed in Psalm 127. Children are

entrusted to their parents. Especially in an age of changing reproductive technologies, we cannot afford to lose sight of this truth. Mere recognition of it, of course, does not alone prepare us to wrestle with the difficult ethical decisions to which advances in genetic engineering give rise. But such acknowledgment will help us to proceed cautiously and seek to avoid viewing children as property. We must also remember that children are entrusted not just to their parents but belong to a community, the church, and to the wider world. The sacrament of baptism celebrates this reality. In baptism we acknowledge our children as a trust from God. We confirm their membership in the body of Christ. We look toward their contributions in ministry and service in the church and in the world.

Second, *children are full members of the church*. In the Reformed tradition, baptism acknowledges that children are sinners even as it welcomes them as members of the body of Christ, persons restored by Christ into the divine image. But, according to Calvin and the confessional tradition, the sinfulness of children is not the main justification for baptizing them. Rather, children are already members of the divine covenant and, as such, they have a right to baptism as the sign of their prior belonging.<sup>20</sup> Baptism thus acknowledges a child as a full member in the church and challenges us to include children more completely in our communal life. Children should be welcome in worship. They should be able to participate in and contribute to the liturgy. They should be held in the community's prayers.

Third, *the church has an obligation to nurture children spiritually and to support the physical, emotional, and social well-being of children*. Like all Christians, children need to grow in faith and in the practice of discipleship. They have a right to age-appropriate educational programs that are both theologically serious and pedagogically sound. Moreover, because of their age, social status, and our adult-centered culture, children are vulnerable and in need of the church's support and protection. The *Scots Confession* reminds us that God's law commands us "to save the



lives of the innocent, repress tyranny, and defend the oppressed,” —to care for and defend especially those who are weak and powerless in society.<sup>21</sup> Each church has an obligation to minister to the particular needs of its own children and of children in the surrounding community in whatever ways it can. By providing child care in areas where there is a shortage of facilities. By supporting families and the vocation of parenting. By intervening when children are the victims of injustice and violence.

Finally, *children are not merely the recipients of Christian service but also active agents.* Here again the sacrament of baptism points to the spiritual maturity of children and signals that they have special gifts to contribute. Calvin writes that baptized children bear the signs of God’s covenant engraved on their very bodies and so they nourish their parents’ faith in God’s promise.<sup>22</sup> How might present attitudes toward children’s bodies and physical needs be transformed, and neglect and abuse of children challenged, by taking seriously with Calvin that children bear in their bodies the engravings of the divine covenant—that children’s bodies are, in a sense, sacraments. For Protestants in the Lutheran and Reformed traditions, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers also provides a basis for taking seriously the ways children minister. One way in which children exercise the priesthood that is theirs is by teaching their elders about the nature of faith. For example, the *Heidelberg Catechism* explains that Christ has commanded us to address God as “Our Father” in order to “awaken in us the childlike reverence and trust toward God which should be the motivation of our prayer.”<sup>23</sup> Childlike faith is often emulated and held up for imitation by adults because it is thought to be simple and uncomplicated by doubt. But this is not what the faith of real children teaches us about how we should trust and revere God. Anyone who spends any time with children knows that childhood is a time of questioning, testing limits, and expanding horizons. From children, adults learn to ask difficult questions of God, to wrestle with God as Jacob did, and to maintain an attitude of openness in the journey of faith that necessarily includes doubt.

In all its activities, the church must model for the world the fundamental humanity of children by honoring them, caring for and protecting them, and respecting the contributions they bring to the family of faith. In order to do this it must continually reexamine itself — its worship, its ministry, and its programs — to see whether these reflect a commitment to the fundamental humanity of children that is grounded in its own most fundamental theological beliefs. Finally, the church must challenge the adult-centered focus of our wider culture. In light of Jesus' statements about children, the church must ask itself seriously, "What if our ministry and theology started with children, rather than expanded to include them?" Instead of just "add children to the current mix of programming and stir," what if we took to heart Jesus' radical claim that the reign of God is a children's world?

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> This is a slightly revised version of a paper presented at the Moderators' Conference on Saturday, April 8, 2000, in Louisville, Kentucky.

<sup>2</sup> Dorothy Sayers, "Are Women Human?" in *Unpopular Opinions: Twenty-one Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1947), 129-141.

<sup>3</sup> "human, a. (n.)<sup>1</sup>" *Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, 11 April 2000 <http://oed.com/cgi/entry/00109087>.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.unicef.org>; <http://childrensdefensefund.org>.

<sup>5</sup> I am indebted to the excellent discussion of this point in Richard R. Osmer, "The Christian Education of Children in the Protestant Tradition," *Theology Today*, vol. 56, no. 4 (January 2000): 506-23.

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Anthony Fletcher, "Prescription and Practice: Protestantism and the Upbringing of Children, 1560-1700," in *The Church and Childhood*, ed. Diana Wood (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), 326.

<sup>7</sup> Julie Magno Zito, et al., "Trends in the Prescribing of Psychotropic Medications to Preschoolers," *JAMA*, vol. 283, no. 8 (February 23, 2000): 1025-1030.

<sup>8</sup> For a fuller discussion, see Herbert Anderson and Susan B. W. Johnson, *Regarding Children: A New Respect for Childhood and Families* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> Ted Peters, *For the Love of Children: Genetic Technology and the Future of the Family* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 4.

<sup>10</sup> Sharon Begley, "Decoding the Human Body," *Newsweek*, 10 April 2000, 55-56.

<sup>11</sup> David Elkin, *The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast Too Soon* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1981).

<sup>12</sup> Judith Gundry-Volf, "'To Such as These Belongs the Reign of God': Jesus and Children," *Theology Today*, vol. 56, no. 4 (January 2000): 480.

<sup>13</sup> *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. W. Baum, E. Cunitz, and E. Reuss, 59 vols., *Corpus Reformatorum*, vols. 29-87 (Brunswick: C. A. Schwetschke and Son [M. Bruhn], 1863-1900), 31:89-90 (hereafter abbreviated CO); in English, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 4 vols., in *Calvin's Commentaries*, 45 vols. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844-1856); reprinted in 22 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 1:96-97.

<sup>14</sup> This statement first appeared in the first edition of the *Institutes* in 1536 and was carried throughout subsequent editions unchanged. *Christianae religionis Institutio* (1536), in *Ioannis Calvini Opera Selecta*, 5 vols., ed. Peter Barth (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1952-1962), 1:131 (hereafter abbreviated OS); in English, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: 1536 Edition*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 97.

<sup>15</sup> Calvin is merely restating the position of Western Christian orthodoxy since Augustine. These harsh images also have a biblical basis, most notably in Gen. 8:21 ("for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth") and Rom. 5:12 (understood in Augustine's sense, that all have sinned in Adam). Calvin is a bit harsher than his predecessors are in his estimate of the extent of human fallenness.

<sup>16</sup> References to the Reformed Confessions are taken from *The Book of Confessions*, Part I of *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly,

1999), and are cited according to the marginal numbers. See the *Scots Confession* 3.03; *Heidelberg Catechism*, 4.007.

<sup>17</sup> See Alice Miller, *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence*, trans. Hildegarde Hannum and Hunter Hannum (New York: Noonday Press, 1983); Philip Greven, *Spare the Child: The Religious Roots of Punishment and the Psychological Impact of Physical Abuse* (New York: Knopf, 1991); Donald Capps, *The Child's Song: The Religious Abuse of Children* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

<sup>18</sup> This discomfort emerges also in the later Reformed tradition. For example, the Declaratory Statement added to the *Westminster Confession* by the United Presbyterian Church in the United States in 1903, while not denying the sinfulness of infants outright, mitigates the effects of their participation in sin by declaring that “all dying in infancy are included in the election of grace and are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit” (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 6.193). In other words, the Statement says that only the elect die as infants, and that even these infants are in need of God’s reconciling grace and therefore sinful. But I think that underlying the Statement is abhorrence at the notion that the sin in infants could somehow be reason for God rejecting them. If this is true, then the Statement really seems to say that sin in children is qualitatively different than in adults. This assumption may seem both rational and compassionate, but in fact it jeopardizes children’s fundamental humanity by failing to hold to the paradoxical character of being human.

<sup>19</sup> See the results of this research in the forthcoming anthology, tentatively entitled *The Child in Christian Thought: A Critical Retrieval*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000). For more details on figures discussed in this paper, see especially the chapters on John Calvin, August Hermann Francke, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Horace Bushnell; for a discussion of broader issues, see the editor’s introduction.

<sup>20</sup>See the *Scots Confession*, 3.16; *Second Helvetic Confession*, 5.192; *Heidelberg Catechism*, 4.074.

<sup>21</sup> *Scots Confession*, 3.14.

<sup>22</sup> OS 5:313; in English, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), ed. John McNeill and trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vols. 20-21 of the Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), book 4, chapter 16, section 9.

<sup>23</sup> *Heidelberg Catechism*, 4.120.

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