Bearing Gifts and Receiving Burdens: A Theological Approach to Ministry with Children

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After worship one Sunday morning, my youngest child, who was two years old at the time, was busily engaging me in a conversation full of his questions, comments, and observations. An older member of the congregation, overhearing such a small child engaged in what she perceived to be such an adult dialogue, was both amused and surprised. She said something – to me, not to my son – about how cute it was that he asked so many questions. She then turned to him, and in what can only be described as baby-talk, commended him for being

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such a “good little boy.” My son looked straight up at the woman, and with more indignation than any 20-pound child ought to be able to contain, matter-of-factly said, “I’m little, not stupid.”

When adults talk down to, or over the heads of, children, when adults assume children are neither capable of understanding nor even interested in knowing Bible stories, or of participating in worship or in the political life and ministry of an ecclesial community, adults rob children of the very community they need to learn what it means to be the church. And this, of course, is what happens in churches, in communities, and in families everyday. This failure to take children seriously is simultaneously to fail to receive the gift, and to bear the burden, of the child’s presence. Moreover, insofar as the church likewise fails to receive the gift and bear the burden that is the vulnerability of one another in community, made most acutely present in and through the young, the church fails, in fact, to be the church. In what follows, I suggest that fundamental to what it means to “be” church is becoming a community of people whose lives are formed in the virtues such that receiving the gift and bearing the burden of children becomes a habit, something woven into the very fabric – into the very DNA – of what it means to be the body of Christ.

And yet I say this knowing full well how difficult it is to take children seriously, to take the time to answer their questions, and to treat them with the care and the respect they deserve. In other words, I recognize that children are not only a gift – they can, in fact, be quite a burden. It is much easier, much more time effective to recognize how cute they are – to parade them around once a year for a Christmas pageant and to bring them forward for a children’s sermon

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(which is often a thinly-veiled object lesson really intended for adults) – but otherwise to work and talk around, or over, them.

My primary task in this article, as I see it, is to help began to answer the question – or at the very least to offer a compelling case for recognizing that it as a crucial ethical question – of how the church rightly both receives the gift, and bears the burden, of children. And perhaps, in the process, how we might learn to see that the gift lies in the burden, and the burden in the gift such that we recognize that often gifts are to be gracefully borne and burdens graciously received. The first task of theological ethics is that of right description.[1] Thus, I began by asking what we mean when we talk about "children." I realize, of course, that this may seem patently obvious; we all know what a child is. A good number of us live with one or more of them. And even if we don't find ourselves surrounded by a gaggle of children, every one of us was – at some point – a child. However, that we take for granted we know what we mean when we say "child" is all the more reason to consider what we mean more carefully.[2] And description, of course, is necessarily linked to language. Insofar as children are concerned, what this means is that adults – individually and collectively – act towards, on, and sometimes even against children *as they appear in the adults' linguistic imaginations* rather than as they necessarily are. So, learning to imagine rightly, and thus to articulate rightly, an ontology and a teleology of

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[1] This is a frequent underlying theme in the work of Stanley Hauerwas. See, for example "Abortion, Theologically Understood" and "Vision, Stories, and Character" in *The Hauerwas Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); and *Working With Words: On Learning to Speak Christian* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011).

[2] Iris Murdoch suggests that we can only act in a world we can see, and we can only see a world we have learned to describe. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (NY: Rutledge and Kegan Paul, 1970).

childhood is crucial for the church to begin to imagine what receiving the gift and bearing the burden of children means.

Contemporary discussions surrounding the role of children in the church tend, rather quickly, to disintegrate into heated arguments over how a particular, local, congregation is going to keep its children and youth from leaving the church – a concern that seems to become most acute at or around the time of confirmation. The pendulum swings (sometimes daily) from a battle cry for entertainment intended to compete with the surrounding culture to a back-to-the-basics focus on discipline and catechetical formation. These conversations are often little more than thinly-veiled utilitarian debates over which approach works better with children – carrots or sticks.

The debate assumes that the presence of children and youth in the life of a congregation (particularly in worship) is a good, even necessary, thing; but the conversation often assumes that children and youth need to be manipulated into engagement with the church (and therefore with God) and it rarely revolves around any consideration of what the needs of the child or the youth actually are.[3] Nor does the contemporary debate generally consider ways in which the presence of children and youth may be needed by the adults in the community. That is, there is an implicit assumption that children need the church – if not for the sake of salvation, at least for a bit of moral formation – but, there is little recognition that the church needs children in order to be the

[3] Ironically, this argument, often predicated on the claim that children are the church of the future (or the future of the church), tends to forget/ignore/overlook the reality that children are always already an integral part of the communities to which they belong. Think about it. How often do we, in our families, agonize over how to "make" our children a part of our family? How much more so is this true of a people constituted through the practice of baptism? Baptized children do not need to be *made* to be an integral part of the body, but rather need to be rightly recognized and received as the members they, in fact, already are.

church! Because of the emotive response to a felt need to keep children in the church with no thick description of what this means, the conversation around the inclusion of children and youth in the church is often truncated – reduced to a head count. The theological question of *why* the church needs children and children the church is rarely seriously considered.

Historical Overview of Perspectives on Children

I am going to begin by offering a very brief historical overview of the three broad lenses through which the church – as well as the wider society – has tended to view children – and, for the most part, continues to do so. And, I am going to suggest that all three ways are insufficient, not because they are necessarily wrong – there is, in fact, an element of truth in each – but because they are each, at best, only a partial description of the reality of what it means to be a child.

The Child as Sinful

The first, and perhaps most widely influential, perspective is the assumption that children are sinful. They are selfish, perverse little creatures in need of training and civilization. This understanding of the nature of the child goes back, of course, to Augustine, who famously declared that insofar as children do not sin it is only because they lack the physical capacity, *not* because they lack the will.[4] What Augustine perceived as the greediness of a nursing newborn was, for Augustine, ample evidence of original sin manifest in the youngest of children.

[4] Augustine, *The Confessions*, I/vii.

This notion of the nature of children did not, of course, end with Augustine. Susannah Wesley spoke of the necessity of subduing the child's spirit in order to save his soul.[5] "The first thing to be done is to conquer their will and bring them to an obedient temper."[6] This was done by making sure that, by the time the child turned one, he was taught "to fear the rod and cry quietly."[7] The "will" of the child is assumed to be something sinful, something in need of controlling, even of conquering.

And, more recently – within the past year – there have been a number of reported cases of parents using a "biblical" child-training book who have, in fact, beaten their children to death with plumbing supply tools.[8] The book promises that most children can be "brought into complete and joyous subjection after just 3 days." And, in fact, according to one happy parent, "after only 2 days of applying the principles in your book, our rebellious, miserable, 8 year-old daughter suddenly transformed."[9] The principles in the book are, according to the author, guidelines for physical discipline of children beginning as young at 6 months old and – in the author's words – are based on principles the Amish use for training stubborn mules. All concerns about what constitutes appropriate training for animals – even the most stubborn of mules – aside, that children are presumed, from early infancy, to be, well, mule-headed and therefore in need of severe physical punishment in order to be "brought into complete and joyous

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[5] Advice in Susannah Wesley's letter to John, July 24, 1732.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] The book is *To Train Up a Child*, by Michael and Debbi Perle. Self-published by No Greater Joy Ministries in 1994.

[9] From a letter on the Perle's website, http://nogreaterjoy.org/. Accessed 7/1/12.

subjection" suggests that the assumption that children are, first and foremost, willfully sinful from the get-go is alive and well today.

Though I find such supposedly biblical parenting texts deeply problematic (I think a people constituted by the peace to which Christians are called is theologically and ethically obligated to find ways of raising children without the use of violence) and though I do think there is a direct connection between theology and praxis, I am *not* suggesting that the belief in original sin *necessarily* causes abuse. However, I do think that a theological presumption of the child as one who is inherently bent towards evil and who may require severe discipline *for the sake of the child's ultimate salvation* creates a space for precisely such logic. The presumption that children need, perhaps quite literally, to have the devil beaten out of them is not a great leap if the assumption of the adults in a child's world is that children come into the world as primarily willful and sinful.

The Child as Innocent

However, the theological history of perceptions of children is not limited to images of children as perverse, willful, sinful creatures in need of severe discipline. Throughout the church's history there is an interweaving of notions of children as sinful and as innocent. Jerome, for example, in his commentary on Matthew 18, explains that Jesus' call for the disciples to be like children was a call to be like children *in* their innocence.[10] And Jerome is not alone in

[10] St. Jerome, translated by Thomas P. Schek, *Commentary on Matthew.* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 206-213.

his claim of the child's innate innocence. In fact, such claims can be found intermittently throughout the writings of the early church and stretching back into Judaism.

The notion that children are inherently sinful is not, however, widely criticized until the time of Locke and Rousseau.[11] They rejected, out of hand, the notion of children as sinful and, instead posited the child as morally pure – as a blank slate – and therefore in need, not of discipline, but of protection from the fallen and sinful adult world. Though, this presumption that children were sinless was, evidently, based on philosophical speculation alone, not on any empirical experience with real-life children.

Though her understanding of the nature of the child is considerably more nuanced than I have the time to outline in this brief essay, Maria Montessori – who did, in fact, have a good deal of experience with very real children – is perhaps one of the most well-known contemporary representatives of this notion of childhood.[12] Montessori education is, to a large extent, predicated on a respect for the child's innate goodness and curiosity, as well as on the presumption that adults, more often than not, get in the child's way. Adults are not rendered superfluous for Montessori, but are taught to shape a child's environment in ways that allow for the natural goodness and curiosity of the child to flourish.

The problem with the child as picture of innocence, it seems to me – much like the notion of the child as inherently trusting – is that it is an idealized adult projection onto children rather than a reflection of the reality of childhood, or of the reality of the lived experienced of children.

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[11] See especially John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693); and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile: or, on Education* (1762).

[12] Montessori published a number of books and articles on the nature of children. For an overview of her philosophy, see *The Discovery of the Child* (New York: Fides Publishers, 1967).

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In other words, insofar as adults hold onto an image of the child as innocent, as angelic even, this reflects the desire of the adult for such a state, a time, of innocence – not the experience with or of any real child. On the surface this view seem less detrimental to the child's welfare than the presumption of sinfulness – it is certainly unlikely to lead to abuse. However, this notion of the child as pure innocence fails to honor the child's very real struggles with sin and consequent need for forgiveness. It, in many and various ways, can overlook, ignore, or even flat-out deny the very real neediness of children for spiritual and moral guidance.

The Child as Immature

The problem, of course, with either seeing children as primarily sinful or as primarily innocent is that such a claim fails to recognize the moral complexity of children who, like adults, are always a moral mix. To ignore this moral complexity is to not see the child as the complex individual he or she, in fact, is.[13] One way this complexity has been recognized is through a developmental notion of childhood. The problem, however, with developmental models is that children are seen as immature or in some way incomplete but moving towards a state of supposed adult completion. Irenaeus, for example, held that children are, theoretically, more sinful than adults.[14] However, he did so with on understanding of sin as immaturity; that is, children, he thought, sin not because they are inherently evil or bent towards sin but because they

[13] Bonnie Miller-McLemore, for example, speaks of honoring children as "responsible moral agents" capable of both surprising depth of sin and remarkable grace, in *Let the Children Come* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2003), especially chapter 6.

[14] See Jeff Vogel, "The Haste of Sin, the Slowness of Salvation: An Interpretation of Irenaeus on the Fall and Redemption," in *Anglican Theological Review* 89 no 3 (Sum 2007): 443-459.

have not yet matured. They simply do not know better. For Irenaeus, such a notion of sin as immaturity required education, patience, and charity rather than severe discipline. Irenaeus offered what is, perhaps, the original "Be patient God isn't finished with me yet" model of child-rearing.

Aquinas also understood the nature of the child to be primarily one of immaturity.[15] He even seems to speak of children as innocent, at least within the first 7 years of life. However, insofar as this is the case it is *only* the case because children are immature and therefore not yet capable of mortal sin. Innocence, in other words, for Aquinas is actually seen as a deficiency *not* as a virtue. It is not insignificant that for Aquinas insofar as the child is immature, the child as one who is lacking in both reason and will, is incomplete – not really a person yet.[16] That point here is that for Aquinas, innocence is a lack of capacity, a lack of completeness, a lack of humanity. Though Aquinas does speak of the importance of honoring children, for Aquinas, children are honored not for who they are, but for who they may become.

Contemporary developmental models, focused on stages of development – such as those made famous by Piaget or Fowler – likewise risk presenting children as un-formed adults and therefore somehow or other less than complete persons.[17] Childhood too easily becomes a

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[15] See Thomas Aquinas, *De Malo*, ed. Brian Davies, trans. Richard Regan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[16] The Thomist theologian, Herbert McCabe, makes precisely this point. McCabe associates language with sin, understanding sin to require a rational appropriation of language that is not typically developed until a child is roughly seven years of age. See Herbert McCabe, *Law, Love, and Language* (New York: Continuum, 2003), chapter 3. Though beyond the scope of this essay, this necessarily raises questions about the connection between sin, innocence, and cognitive ability not just for young children, but for those with cognitive disabilities as well.

[17] Jean Piaget, *The Psychology of the Child* (New York: Basic Books, 1969); and James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995).

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"phase" adults merely tolerate, knowing that the child will one day "grow up" and become the person God intends them to be. The focus remains on potentiality.

The problem with the developmental notion of childhood is that it seems to suggest that there is some point at which we "become" fully human.[18] I am not at all suggesting that children do not go through developmental stages. Of course they do. And there is much good to be said about understanding the normal, developmental stages of children and teenagers. But adults go through stages as well – and I don't just mean things like the mid-life crisis. The problem with a developmental notion of children is *not* with the observation that children develop in fairly predictable ways, it is with the suggestion that there is a stage at which one is fully oneself and that all other stages are either leading towards it or receding from it. The reality of identity is that there is no stage at which I am more myself than any other stage.[19]

Ironically, adults (individually and collectively) often hold one or more, at times holding all three, of the above notions of children – as sinful, innocent, and/or immature – simultaneously, despite the obvious logical incoherence of trying to do so. Such an understanding of children holds in tension the image of the child as innately sinful and the child

[18] For Aquinas, for example, this perfect age is between 30-33 – the time of Jesus' earthly ministry.

[19] The simple act of brushing one's teeth provides an apt analogy. Though there are any number of steps involved in tooth-brushing – grasping a toothbrush, applying toothpaste, scrubbing the teeth, rinsing, spitting, returning each item to its proper place in the medicine cabinet – there is no one step which stands alone and can, in and of itself, be identified as the act of tooth-brushing. The action is temporal and "has a unity of form through time, a form revealed only in the action as a whole." That the action of brushing one's teeth is only revealed as a whole does not, however, make any single step less fully a part of the action. To omit one step is no longer to brush one's teeth, properly understood. Similarly, the claim that identity exists in time, in the act of movement towards the future does not suggest that at any moment in the past or present identity was somehow or other incomplete – nor does it imply that there will be a future point in time in which identity will become complete. Rather, it is to say that identity at any point in time always already includes the perceived movement of the individual through past and present and into the future. See Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39 (September 1971): 292.

as innately innocent in the popular imagination as children are simultaneously assumed to be up to no good and in need of protection from the adult world. Yet, this is understood to be a stage, a phase, perhaps even a pathology of sorts – it is, after all, something to be gotten over. The result is a confusing message that children are valued, even idolized, but only to the extent that they remain innocent, powerless, and in need of protection.[20]

Children as Gift and Burden

As I suggested above, the problem with each of these is that none of them does justice to the complexities of human identity, nor therefore to the real-life experiences of children as children, or of adults in relationship with children. One of the problems with reducing an understanding of children to that of theologies of sin or innocence that must be either grown into or out of is that children, like adults, are created in the image of God. And, the *imago dei* is not a developmental process but something into which all humanity is born.[21] Children are just as much reflections of the image of God as adults; they cannot be understood as partial or incomplete people. But, of course, as a consequence of original sin children, like adults, reflect this image imperfectly. This matters insofar as ontology cannot be separated from teleology. Contra any notion of Aristotelean meta-physical biology – form does *not* dictate function. That is, who we appear to be does not reveal who we are becoming. Rather, ontology is determined

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[20] Joyce Ann Mercer, likewise, suggests that children, in the North American context, are "'priceless,' materially useless but infused with emotional value." Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005), 77.

[21] See Terrence Freitheim, "'God Was with the Boy' (Genesis 21:20): Children in the Book of Genesis," in *The Child in the Bible*, ed. Marcia Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 4.

by teleology — who we are is a reflection of who we were created to be, which is who we are becoming in and through our baptism. This is as true of children as it is of adults.

So, this brings me to recognizing children as both gift and burden. The key to recognizing children as both gift and burden is recognizing the simultaneity of being gift and burden. That I suggest children are simultaneously gift and burden is not a reflection of Lutheran proclivities. That is, I am not suggesting a correlation between gift and burden and saint and sinner — as, at least as far as I can see, there is neither anything particularly saintly about being a gift, nor is there anything sinner-like about being a burden. In fact, my claim that children are both gift and burden is an ontological claim about all humanity. We are all both gift and burden – and often, perhaps most of the time – our gifts are burdens and our burdens are gifts. In fact, the right reception of a gift is, itself, a burden and the graceful bearing of a burden is, itself, a gift.

Human Telos – Worship of and Friendship with God

Acknowledging the full humanity, the presence of the image of God, in children is theologically critical and has two primary pragmatic implications. The first is the recognition that being created in the image of God entails being created *for* worship. The second is that being created in the image of God means being created for the sake of friendship with God. These two ends cannot, however, rightly be separated as it is in and through the practice of worship that friendship with God is learned and flourishes. And it is in relation to these two ends

that children are both gift and burden. *And* it is the responsibility of the church, as the body of Christ, to both receive the gift well and bear the burden faithfully.

But what does this mean?

As creatures created in the image of God, worship of God is an integral part of a child's telos. This need for worship, which is an integral part of the human person, necessarily shapes what it means to help a child come closer to God. Children need the church in order to learn how to worship and to learn what friendship means, *and* the congregation needs the presence of children in order that all may learn what it means to worship rightly as friendship with God necessarily entails friendship with God's youngest playmates.

Aquinas suggests that the created telos of humanity is friendship with God.[22] This is so not because it is the nature of humanity to be friends with the divine in an abstract way, but because God chooses to actively seek to be friends with those whom God loves. Friendship is a word which has come to mean something different for the contemporary reader than it meant for Aquinas. For Aquinas (following Aristotle) a friend is one with whom you are quite intimate, one with whom you are able to share your heart and soul, one in whom you see an "other self." So, when he speaks of friendship with God, Aquinas is not using the word casually, but saying that, by Christ Jesus and through the power of the Holy Spirit, Christians are, indeed, made intimates with God.

The church, with Jesus as its center, is the place where we are invited to gather with our friends. It is only in and through our friendship with Jesus that we receive the gift of friendship

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[22] *Summa Theologica* II-II, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 3 vols. (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947), as well as from *De Caritate,* trans. Lottie H. Kendzierski (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1960).

with God and with one another. Friendships require time spent together – time spent doing everyday things like talking and eating, like comforting the sad and rejoicing with the happy. Like caring for the sick, and for the young, and for the elderly. Like welcoming the stranger and clothing the naked and feeding the hungry. If friendship is about developing certain habits and dispositions, it is in the life of the church, particularly through the liturgy, where the habits that incorporate one into the virtue of friendship are learned. Worship is where one learns what it means to be forgiven and is therefore where one is freed to forgive. Worship, especially the Eucharist, is where friendship becomes most realized because this is where Christian identity is forged as it is in the Eucharist that we become what we are – the body of Christ. Food is not shared among those who are estranged from one another, but among those who seek to become reconciled to one another. And Jesus calls his followers to come together and share this meal regularly in order to remember who and whose they are.

For this reason it is important that the church take the role of children in worship seriously. Children are *not* cute accessories to be paraded to the altar for quaint children's sermons or occasional musical performances.[23] Nor are children mere annoyances to be tolerated but who are better seen and not heard, and who are therefore shuttled off to children's church or the nursery for as long as possible or to a cry room at the first whimper in order to allow adults to worship uninterrupted. Rather, children should be cherished as people of God who *need* to worship. Accordingly, they need to be taught to fully participate in the liturgy in

[23] This does not mean, of course, that we do away with children's Christmas pageants and whatnot – what it does mean is that we consider the reason for such pageants. If the reason is to provide parents and grandparents with photo opportunities, then forget the pageant. If, however, the purpose of the pageant is to initiate children into a story, a story that matters not just to and for the children, but for the entire worshipping assembly, then the pageant is worth doing.

age-appropriate ways, from being encouraged to stand and sit with the congregation, to being taught dip their hands in the waters of the baptismal font and to make the sign of the cross, and to kneel or bow as soon as they are old enough. As they mature their participation in worship should reflect their developing gifts and abilities. In addition to acolytes and crucifers, even relatively young children can, in fact, make excellent lectors and prayer assistants. Enabling children to participate fully in the liturgy requires a community of adults (not just a child's parents) who are willing and able to make space for the questions, the curiosity, the energy, and even the noise, which children bring with them.

The participation of children in worship allows lots of space to consider children as both gift and burden. Think for a minute of the ways in which children are a gift to the worshipping community: their energy, their questions, their lack of inhibition. Now, think for a minute about the ways children are a burden for the worshipping community: their energy, their questions, their lack of inhibition.

In order to grow and thrive, one of the greatest needs children have is of space.[24] Children need both physical and temporal space to play, as it is in play that children practice/ prepare for adulthood. Perhaps we can see the liturgy as the space with which God provides all God's children for playing. This is *not* to suggest that worship is unimportant or should be done sloppily or entered into without preparation. Rather, I choose the word "play" to capture the joy of children which should be manifestly present in our worship. As any child psychologists will

[24] Rowan Williams makes this same point beautifully in *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement* (Harrisburg, PA: T&T Clark, 2000), chapter 1.

tell you, play is serious business in which one is fully engaged in the joy of learning and being – which seems to me to be a healthy way of understanding Christian worship.

It is in the liturgy that one learns the skills needed to be at home in the kingdom of God.[25] Children who grow up in worship often "play" church in the same way they play house or store or superman or anything else. But play does not only prepare children for the future. It is in and through play that children learn who they are now. Participation in the liturgy provides children with both the stories and the vocabulary to explore what it means to be not just children, but children of God. Participation in the liturgy, in other words, helps children learn who they are. The liturgy is a gift a space – both place and time - in which God's people can come to meet God, and through participation in the liturgy children are given the tools they need to enact and embrace their relationship with God, becoming – in community with adults – who they already are.

The role of the community of adults within the church, then, becomes as much one of mentors – of playmates, even – as it is of teachers. Though in the classical tradition it is understood that friendship requires a level of equality which would seem to be lacking in adult/child relationships, perhaps rather than understanding the equality necessary for friendship to be one of social status, such equality is more properly understood theologically as telos. That is, because both adult and child are called to be friends with God there is a mutuality and an equality of being which makes space for genuine friendship.

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[25] Yoder describes discipleship in just this way. He suggests that the Christian life is largely about living in such a way that, "when the Kingdom approaches, we find ourselves among those who are 'at home' who 'fit' there, who are not out of place." See John Howard Yoder, "The Political Axioms of the Sermon on the Mount," *The Original Revolution* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003), 40.

Traditionally the adult/child relationship within the church has been viewed primarily as catechetical. That is, as one of a uni-directional imparting of information – the image this gives me is of a Pez dispenser, where children are the empty Pez dispensers and adults need only pop up their little heads and fill them with the right sort of candy. Children, in other words, have primarily been seen as passive recipients of adult attention. But, children are not objects to be acted upon; rather, they are subjects with whom we are engaged in the important tasks of ministry.[26] When childhood is reframed as initiation into a way of life, into relationship, the role of the adult cannot simply be to *make* a child into a Christian. Nor can adults merely stand in for a child as an advocate before God or before the community (though there is certainly a place for advocacy and intercession). What adults in the community are called to do is to journey with children, to *be* with them, as they together discover what it means to live the life of discipleship.[27]

This also means that worship cannot merely be about entertainment. If worship is rightly understood as a created human need on par with the need for food and shelter and love, then entertainment in lieu of genuine engagement in worship is not unlike providing our children with

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[26] Diana Garland writes quite persuasively of the importance of seeing children and youth as active partners in the ministry of a congregation. See Diana R. Garland, *Inside Out Families: Living the Faith Together* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010).

[27] Samuel Wells speaks of four models of doing ministry: working for another, working with another, being for another or being with another. And he suggests that it is the ministry of presence, of being with, that is critical. Samuel Wells and Marcia Owen, *Making it Beautiful: The Ministry of Being Present* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2011) chapter 1.

This distinction is not absolute – certainly there is an element of each necessarily involved in the raising and catechizing of children. There are indeed times and ways in which adults will need to work or do for children, to work side-by-side with children, and to be for children – that is, to advocate on their behalf by being a voice for the voiceless. However, Wells' suggestion that ministry is largely about "being with" seems a helpful way to envision what ministry with and for children is primarily about.

a steady diet of Happy Meals and assuming they are well-nourished. It seems to me that the primary reason churches resort to entertainment of children rather than engagement with children is laziness. It is simply easier to give a child a balloon and a lollipop than it is to take the time to help the child discover what it means to meet Jesus in worship. Not unlike the ease with which we drive through a drive-thru rather than taking the time to prepare and enjoy meals with our children. Meeting a child's teleological need for worship is an inherently relational activity and such relationships require time, energy, and an openness to seeing God in the other.

Ultimately, what I am suggesting is that when it comes to children, the role of the church is *not* one of coercion or manipulation or entertainment. We do not wrangle our children into the pews, we neither beat them, nor attempt to scare the hell out of them, nor do we resort to bribery. Rather, like Jesus, we are called to welcome them. To be actively hospitable to children. Active hospitality is to engage children with and in charity. But to be actively hospitable to children is risky, thus it requires the virtue of courage. To be actively hospitable to children is tricky, thus it requires the virtues of wisdom and prudence. To be actively hospitable to children is trying – sometimes, in fact it is downright exhausting – thus it requires the virtues of patience and steadfastness. In other words, the right receiving and bearing of children both requires and develops a community of virtue, through which we learn what it means to be – and perhaps we even become – the church.