



Review

Scottie May, Beth Posterski, Catherine Stonehouse, and Linda Cannell,
Children Matter: Celebrating Their Place in the Church, Family, and Community
(Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005)

Patrick McKinley Brennan (editor), *The Vocation of the Child*
(Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008)

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Adults mull over a question that a six-year-old had recently posed to one of them: “Am I real or am I part of God’s imagination?”

The camp ministry director says, “Counselors, you can linger in the chapel with your campers after evening worship as the Spirit leads, but God knows that children have a bedtime here.”

These sketches illustrate a tension around discerning the place of children in relation to churches, families, and communities. Children ask questions that we adults need to mull over. There is a place for children to lead; adults must responsibly listen. At the same time, adults have responsibilities to lead children by creating developmentally appropriate structures for their formation, education, and growth. There is a place for adults to lead; children must responsibly listen. Eerdmans Publishing Company has recently published two different books in which distinguished groups of church educators and religious education scholars in one volume and a distinguished group of theologians and legal scholars in another volume help us live into this tension.

In *Children Matter: Celebrating Their Place in the Church, Family, and Community* (2005), co-authors Scottie May, Beth Posterski, Catherine Stonehouse, and Linda Cannell aim to fill a void in religious education literature with a constructive proposal for relevant and formative children’s ministry that considers the presence of children in churches at a time when churches face globalization, media saturation, and other contemporary challenges. In *The Vocation of the Child* (2008), editor Patrick McKinley Brennan joins fifteen other theologians and legal scholars

to mine Christian resources in order to move beyond the “sentimentality, political manipulation, and underground assertions that characterize so much of the contemporary debate over marriage, family, and children” (ix). Originating in a Templeton funded seminar located in Emory University’s Center for the Study of Law and Religion, the edited volume joins a body of scholarship on family that has landed in one of many series organized by the late Don Browning. The following briefly reviews each volume separately before concluding remarks that address both volumes.

Children Matter: Celebrating Their Place in the Church, Family, and Community

Scottie May, Beth Posterski, Catherine Stonehouse, and Linda Cannell bring a wealth of experience in religious education practice, church based religious education workshops, and seminary teaching to this co-authored volume. In short, they argue that the church cannot be the church without children. To support this claim, the authors cover an enormous terrain, which makes sense when one volume draws on the experience, wisdom, and expertise of four scholars. Practical examples abound in every chapter, culminating in brief autobiographical sketches of two of the authors toward the end of the book.

Children Matter inspires hope. If you want to make a difference in children’s ministry and are unsatisfied or unsure about the children’s ministry at your church, it’s not too late. If you are a new children’s minister or pastor and want to evaluate and contribute positive changes to the children’s ministry at your church without alienating or offending longstanding (and likely overworked) volunteers, possibilities abound. To read this good news first, skip to Part III

(particularly the last chapter) to find a plethora of practical ideas. However, if you skip straight to the last chapter, you might get the wrong idea that implementing change is reducible to tables of tips and how-to's. For "how we do it" is where the authors end, only after inviting readers into and through carefully mapped landscape. Interestingly, the authors use the metaphor of map throughout the book as both a tool for and object of critique.

Framing the book with an introductory story of its creation and a concluding prayer for children and those who educate children, the authors divide the body of the book into three factors that matter: foundations, context and content, and how we do it. While all three parts prioritize scripture, valid sources for theological reflection also include and embrace tradition(s), parenting, community, psychology, church history, educational theory, and even neuroscience. For the most part, the authors rely on secondary sources that have already compiled massive amounts of research, giving the reader a flavor for each destination along with a suggested secondary source bibliography. The authors do not (in this volume) delve into theological texts such as Augustine's theology of infant baptism or Erikson's developmental theory, though both seem to linger in the background. Wesleyan theology gets the most attention, sustained largely in footnotes. The volume is filled with categories that both help sort through dilemmas and strategies and also raise questions about what is left out in these ways of mapping.

In Part I, "Foundations Matter," the authors explore ministerial metaphors, scripture, theology, developmental theory, and history as areas of study when considering the place of children in the church. Chapters on each of these areas compare different practices by providing a general description, identifying strengths and weaknesses, and constructing narratives of

children embedded in the respective practices. For example, metaphors (religious education as school, gold star, carnival, journey, or dance) and Christian tradition (sacramental, conversional, or the “unclear” tradition) drive children’s ministry programming in significant ways. On one hand, evaluations divided into strengths and weaknesses risk romanticizing the good (the good church, good parenting, and good children’s ministry) and demonizing the bad (the bad church, bad parenting, and bad children’s ministry). On the other hand, the authors attempt to recognize the pluralism of practices of children’s ministries. The authors suggest that within diverse options, contemporary practices that are de-contextualized and super-produced do not serve children well. The authors call on readers to reclaim a sense of tradition, history, community in which ministry makes sense (*i.e.*, according to a shared understanding) across generations.

In Part I, the authors contrast blueprint thinking with roadmap thinking, where the blueprint is a guide to be memorized and practiced with precision, while the roadmap is a more flexible guide that allows for the participation and fallibilities of we who read maps as a way of trying to get where we think we want to go. The authors imply the following questions: Do adults and children need the same kind of maps? Who writes the maps? Who evaluates them? Who teaches map-reading skills? Even though the authors explicitly prefer roadmap thinking, Part I includes several blueprint examples, even naming Scripture as “the blueprint” without also considering the significance of the interpreter for the practice of hermeneutics. Part II, “Context and Content Matter,” provides evidence for the importance of roadmap thinking, where context shapes mapping for both children and adults. Here, the authors turn to the object relations psychological concept of “good enough” parenting as a healthier way of supporting children in

families than the seemingly perfect ideals set up in some of the examples of Part I (see p. 157ff). Another interesting example is the authors' historical narrative of the creation, development, purpose, and content of Sunday School, from origins in economically-related justice ministry to more contemporary (and more problematic in many cases) models of entertainment and production. Part II argues for roadmap thinking that places children in contexts of faith communities, families, narratives, and curriculum.

While Part II emphasizes that context matters, the explicit participation of children remains a question. When we consider children's ministries, are children participants in their own right or recipients of good enough children's ministry? Part III, "How We Do It Matters," considers the ecclesial contexts of worship, learning and teaching, specialized ministries, and leadership as places where children's subjectivity and contribution matters for the whole church. An additional chapter reminds readers of the church's tendency to universalize "the" picture of "the child" in a way that impedes the church from welcoming all children as Jesus modeled. The authors suggest thinking of children's participation in terms of "all children," a phrase inclusive of children's diversity, particularly around "special needs." Not only should children participate in the church, but the children most marginalized also have a place.

To what extent can we "know" or "map" God's part and our part in imagining the place of children? Using the analogy of a map, the authors begin the book with a more rigid (blueprint) understanding of children's place(s) in the church and move toward increasingly flexibility (roadmap) and deepened imagination in considering how ministries and those who lead them embody the conviction that children matter. Part III suggests appreciating mystery,

wonder, awe, and other less certain ways of being that seem more like God and children. Maybe one way in which children matter most in the church is their uncanny ability to remind the church of the in-breaking of the Holy Spirit and indwelling of God in the midst of programmatic discernment that depends on both worn and emerging maps.

The Vocation of the Child

The Vocation of the Child begins with a provocative introduction by the editor. Rather than the typical introduction to an edited volume that summarizes its organization, Patrick McKinley Brennan names questions raised in the book of fate, moral luck, vocation, God's role, education, salvation, children's rights, children's work, baptism, limbo, and hope. He concludes that these crucial subthemes have been theorized throughout church history *and* also have continued relevance to the central organizing theme of the book: the nature and extent of a child's moral or spiritual vulnerability. With these orienting themes in mind, each successive chapter invites readers to "grapple with what the child is and what the child is called to become" (xi).

The Vocation of the Child includes four sections of single-authored (with one exception) essays. In the first section, "The Vocation, Calling, or Office of a Child," essays by Marcia Bunge, William Werpehowski, John E. Coons, and Vigen Guroian lay out scriptural and philosophical evidence for a theology of vocation in relation to the child. Bunge argues that Luther's extension of vocation to all people includes children. When we consider children as people, we must more seriously consider the inequalities regarding their access to health care,

education, and social, familial, and ecclesial support. We adults and church people in particular have failed children both at home and abroad and must work to address this injustice by emphasizing the complex tensions around how we think of children in relation to parents, God, education, and play.

Werpehowski warns of the grave and generative dangers associated with treating children as people in the same way that we consider adults to be people. He points to the tension between a developmental sense of becoming and the importance of recognizing all people as already “a self” in Christ. Coons brings the tension between children’s obedience and rights in relation to adult authority into sharp relief. He probes this tension around two understandings of “the good” that correlate to deeper understandings of obedience. He favors a deeper understanding of parental authority in a world where parents are morally diverse and children are moral beginners.

Guroian concludes the first section of the book by arguing that children are not merely people among people, but precisely embody the “kind of a person a Christian needs to become to inherit the kingdom of heaven” (105). He argues that both developmental and postmodern/social constructionist views of children’s growth and maturational needs have skewed fundamental questions (i.e., around theological anthropology, sin, and baptism) around children as children of God who is understood as a parent both of Jesus and of all people.

The second section, “Innocence, Depravity, and Hope for the Freedom of the Child,” turns to Augustine and Aquinas as sources for understanding the vocation of the child. Essays by William Harmless, Philip Reynolds, Patrick McKinley Brennan, and Anthony J. Kelly, build on themes of theological anthropology, sin, and baptism raised in previous essays. Harmless

contextualizes what Augustine might mean in his scripturally- and pastorally-informed insistence of a medical model: Christ as physician, original sin as disease, and baptism as medicine (infant baptism is emergency medicine).

Where infants held a central place in arguments between Augustine and the Pelagians, the essays by Reynolds and Brennan construct theologies of children more from the Thomistic tradition that builds on implications in and connection with writings attributed to St. Thomas. Reynolds illuminates the historical context of an interesting Thomistic paradigm of children as depraved and requiring to be cared for by adults, concluding that historicity must be a part of questions of theological anthropology and children. Drawing on Jean Maritain, Brennan constructs a contemporary Thomistic understanding of the child around the idea of their unique position of playing with God, paradoxically required of all people to grow in love.

Kelly concludes the second section with a robust essay on hope and infant baptism that has already been helpful in my pastoral theology classroom, particularly with aspiring hospital chaplains. Kelly takes the question of baptism into the thick of the postmodern present, where overconfidence and feigned certainty about God's activity not only harms grieving parents, but also harms us all.

The third section, "The Rights, Duties, and Work of the Child," consists of three essays by Charles Reid, John Witte, Jr. and Heather M. Good, and Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore. Reid turns to canon law to trace centuries old histories of child's rights language that shifted from the right of parents to sacrifice children to the fundamental right of all children, including

illegitimate children, to be cared for and supported. Furthermore, rather than a right given to all, children are included in the opportunity to receive and accept a call to a religious vocation.

Witte and Good move from rights language to the language of duties in relation to children. They review over a hundred household manuals published between the years of 1470 and 1903 (see list of manuals on pp. 292-294). These manuals spell out the meanings and implications of the child's duty to love and honor his (or her) parents, particularly in cases of parental neglect and failure. While the authors point to the dangers in making children responsible for covering up poor parenting, they also lift up the model of intergenerational communication and regard evidenced in the manual tradition.

Bonnie Miller-McLemore concludes the third section with a chapter that brings the conversation to the present day with the example of children's chores. Where Witte and Good warn against expecting too much of children, Miller-McLemore calls for more expectations of children. Building on previous contributions on children, Miller-McLemore uses unjust economic realities as example and metaphor for the need to include children in the just economy of family life where work, love, and play are shared rather than hierarchically arranged once and for all. The essays in this section invite readers to consider the place for children in the home: our own and other children; here at home and in other neighborhoods and countries.

The last section, "Deciding Who the Child Will Become" includes essays by Charles L. Glenn, George Van Grieken, Elmer John Thiessen, and Robert K. Vischer. As a group, these essays argue that education is a significant context for reflection on children's becoming, recognizing that becoming is central to any understanding of vocation. Glenn builds on previous

work to trace the history of the role and attributed responsibilities of the public school, concluding that schools not take over the responsibility of children's education from parents but rather ought to work with parents in a shared commitment.

Van Grieken's chapter provides the interesting example of the perhaps lesser known Lasallism Pedagogy that is used in Christian Brothers schools. In the pedagogical tradition of John Baptist De La Salle that began in 1680 and continues today, children (students) are privileged as capable of making choices: the best thing that teachers can do for children is to take them seriously (361). In this model, both teachers and children experience and are expected to live out a sacred calling, or vocation.

Thiessen moves from the teacher-centered focus of the previous chapter to the identity of learners in school as children. He outlines various traditions of arguments for autonomy before concluding that parents and teachers must partner in the responsibility to create appropriate (read not child led) contexts for learning as the most important vocation of the child.

Like previous sections, Vischer's essay brings the lively questions of the fourth section into the present day. Using "best interest" language, he argues that faith communities have a prophetic role in deciding who the child will become that must consider the pluralistic context of the present day, universalizing laws on child's rights, and the significant role of families in ensuring that whatever the child's vocation, she or he will flourish in its becoming.

By way of conclusion, consider a few examples of important themes treated across both volumes. First, both books connect themes of touch and abuse in relation to children. When the

goal of education is defined to be touching the hearts of children (*Vocation*, p. 379) and when practices of blessing children including touching them (*Children Matter*, Ch. 8), we must probe the meaning and limits of appropriate touch and vulnerability. Both volumes include arguments for and suggestions of how children might experience “God’s touch.” Both volumes also include warnings about the very real risks and prevalence of child sexual abuse in churches and other contexts. Neither volume is consistent in pairing these reflections together; therefore, readers who engage only certain sections of a book could miss important reminders of the real connections between healthy touch and abuse.

Another area of resonance is the emphasis across both volumes that we cannot separate economic realities, justice, and education. Both volumes implicate all of us, particularly in the context of churches, home/family life, and schools, in injustices that limit the place(s) and vocation(s) of children. A great strength of these books is their ability to invite readers into self-reflection that can lead to constructive, justice-oriented possibilities.

When considering the place of children in relation to church, one must also consider the place and role of baptism, as both of these volumes do. Both explain differences in practices and theologies of baptism across Christian traditions (*Children Matter*, Chapter 3; *Vocation*, Chapter 15). *Children Matter* proposes anecdotal evidence of different practices of baptism in relation to church and family, concluding that whatever the form, baptism ought to signify a long-term commitment of communal partnering with children in the church. *The Vocation of the Child* provides theological reasons for histories and current practices of baptism, pointing to Augustine’s implication that the metaphor of Christ the physician means that all persons,

including infants, have something to be healed of (sin). While various essays in the volume come to different conclusions, Kelly's chapter entitled "Hope for Unbaptized Infants: Holy Innocents after All?" raises important questions for chaplains who must consider and confront infant baptism in critical care situations across denominations and belief practices.

The answer for worrisome uncertainties about who children may become, who will support their becoming, and the factual injustices that impede them is not only universalizing laws (though these are crucial) or theologies with scriptural and scientific certainties (though we must keep constructing and aiming toward them). The search for answer is part of our problem. Adequate responses need to instill hope for children and the institutions that support them in a way that can accommodate pluralism, address injustice, and keep making room for imaginative play. For, children play with God and God lifts up children as mattering deeply.

My biggest concern is in the use of the singular by both books, including overwhelmingly masculine normativity that is more subtle in *Vocation* and more pronounced in *Children Matter*. Postmodern and postcolonial insights have convinced me of the subtle (or not so subtle) exclusivism embedded in the search for *the place for the child*. Surely places (plural) abound for the many children (plural) who are indeed critical to the church, family, and community, but who may as of yet be invisible. The volumes briefly surface areas where the church and society fail differently-abled children, economically poor children, children dying in poverty, children without healthcare, and other children who are vulnerable to more than what their age may indicate. However, these concerns fall to the background throughout most of both of the books.

While *Children Matter* leans to the practical and *Vocation* leans to the theoretical, that each is about children leads to a surprising and welcome integration of theory and practice. Both volumes invite readers into a dialogue that must be theoretically informed and creatively practiced. I experienced reading the two volumes together to be quite generative and mutually informative. While readers will no doubt be convinced that children matter and that children have a vocation, the “How?” and “In What Ways?” will be left up to you to discern, hopefully in conversation with the children who have places in your own context. Listening to their voices and mulling over their questions will be up to you.