

The Christian View of the Child

And they were bringing children to Him so that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked them.

But when Jesus saw this, He was indignant and said to them, "Permit the children to come to Me;

do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

Truly I say to you,

whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all."

And He took them in His arms and began blessing them, laying His hands on them.

- Mark 10:13-16

Childhood and Children are in Crisis Today:

According to the statistics published by the World Health Organization, 58% of the world's population is under the age of 25. In most developing countries, half the population is under the age of 15. UNICEF reports that 149 million children suffer from malnutrition and 100 million children are out of school because of poverty, discrimination, or lack of resources.¹

A culture can be judged by the way it treats its children and senior citizens. A culture is really a reflection of the values and practices of the prevailing "religion" of a society. Today, most cultures have a pagan or secular view of children. Children are despised in increasing numbers around the world, and never in the history of mankind, have so many little ones been aborted, abandoned and abused as occurs today. The rising generation of children is a 'fatherless generation': unwanted, unloved, deserted, and unsupported physically, spiritually, and emotionally. Even when fathers are present, they spend on the average of less than five minutes a day with their offspring. There are so many impoverished, street children in Brazil, that, according to a PBS documentary (1999), they were shot like vermin in the night hours by police who can't control the high crime rate. In eastern Europe, children go missing, snatched off the streets for the growing pornography industry, and are never seen again. Young teenage girls are prostituted to support their families. Many children in the sub-Saharan regions of Africa have AIDS and in Sierra Leone's horrific civil war last year, young boys, eight to ten years old, were conscripted as soldiers. Drugged and armed with machine guns, they were given heinous instructions to kill members of their own villages. Before the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, "Saddam's Cubs," young boys toting rifles, protected the dictator in the world's twelfth largest standing Army.² We need the spirit of Elijah and John the Baptist in this century. We need the hearts of fathers

¹ UNICEF, 2001

² Masland, T. (May, 2002). "Voices of the Children." Newsweek Magazine.

turned back to their children and those of the children to their fathers:

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. And he shall turn and reconcile the hearts of the [estranged] fathers to the [ungodly] children, and the hearts of the [rebellious] children to [the piety of] their fathers [a reconciliation produced by repentance of the ungodly], lest I come and smite the land with a curse and a ban of utter destruction. (Malachi 4:6, Amplified Bible)

Two Views of Children:

In the Church today, there are two views of children: the 'high' view and the 'low' view. In the words of Dr. Berryman, author of *Godly Play*: "We idealize children and yet we demonize them. We celebrate a 'year of the child' and exclude children from worship. We value them, yet spend relatively little time or money on their needs. We tout evangelism to add members, but we do not count children already present in the Church to be worth 'evangelizing' or even the hospitality we give to strangers."³

From early antiquity and even since the birth of the Christian Church, most adults look 'down on' children and discount their spirituality because they are 'mere children.' This low view is a result of many factors, not the least of which is that the Church has rarely held an esteemed view of children. Just as sad, in many cultures the Church does not esteem women either. Women - the bearers and nurturers of children - are viewed and treated as second-class citizens and oppressed in most cultures. The woman's role in the home is to set the tone for family life and child-rearing. She is the 'first teacher' in a child's life. The family is one of God's ordained spheres of government and meant to reflect His love. God created families and intended the family unit to be the basic building block of nations! A nation can only be as "healthy" as its families! A nation that oppresses its women and sees children as third-class citizens is spiritually unhealthy, and most likely economically unhealthy.

Jesus had a remarkable view of children and esteemed them as the "greatest in the kingdom of God" (Mt 18:1-5). He interacted with them by holding them in His arms, blessing them and healing them, and He left for us a model to emulate. There are few references, however, in the Gospels that relate to Christ and children, and the Scriptures never define 'child' or 'childhood'. Those that are there are worthy of our study and reflection. Likewise, the Church has

³ Berryman, J.W. (2002). *The Complete Guide to Godly Play*, Vol. 1, Denver, CO: Living the Good News. p. 112.

never fully developed a 'theology of childhood.' The concept of 'childhood' is relative to time and place. The construct is cultural and is ever changing. Berryman (p. 117) notes that historically, theologians have consulted the Scriptures about children, but rarely have they observed or studied children!

'child' Defined:

child, (n.) 1) The progeny of parents. 2) One created in the image of God who is young in grace (1 John 2:12); unfixed in principles (Gal 4:3; Eph 4:14; Prov 1:4); and weak in knowledge, judgment, and experience (Jer 1:6) (*Webster's 1828 Dictionary*).

The Christian View of the 'child':

*Every child has name . . .
. . . a purpose
. . . a story
... and a place in HIS-story!*

Every child is unique!

Let no one look down on your youthfulness, but rather in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe (1 Tim 4:12).

1. Children are a gift from God to parents, who are to nurture them and train them up in the admonition of the Lord.

Children are a heritage from the Lord (Psalm 127:3).

Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph 6:4).

2. Each child is made in God's image and destined for immortality. This is the central doctrine of Christianity! Each has great potential, creativity, greatness, the capacity to think, reason, love and learn.

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them (Gen 1:26-27).

I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; wonderful are Your works, and my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from You, when I was made in secret, and skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth (Ps 139:14-15).

3. Each child is ennobled with dignity and worth! In the eye of God, all children are equal. Each child is imputed with independent value apart from his station in life and his abilities.

What is man that You take thought of him, and the son of man that You care for him? Yet You have made him a little lower than God, and You crown him with glory and majesty! You make him to rule over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet (Ps 8:4-6)

But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows (Mt 10:30).

4. Each child is fashioned by God for an appointed time and place in His Story.

The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things; and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, "For we also are His children." Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man (Acts 17:24-29).

5. God has a plan for each child's life.

"Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations" (Jer 1:5-6).

Your eyes have seen my unformed substance; and in Your book were all written the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there was not one of them. How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God! How vast is the sum of them! (Ps 139:16-17).

For behold, you shall conceive and give birth to a son, and no razor shall come upon his head, for the boy shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb; and he shall begin to deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines (Judg 13:5).

6. Each child has inalienable rights, therefore responsibilities to steward his internal property, conscience, and a providential calling.

But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great

in the sight of the Lord; and he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Lu 1:13-17).

7. The primary educators in a child's life are his parents, who should seek the Lord to know how to guide and train him.

"For I have chosen him [Abraham], in order that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice; in order that the Lord may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him" (Gen 18:19).

"You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up" (Deut 6:7).

Train up a child in the way he should go . . . (Prov 22:6)

I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in truth! (3 John 4)

8. Jesus eagerly received children unto Himself and called them "the greatest in the kingdom of God."

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and said, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" And He called a child to Himself and set him before them, and said, "Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me" (Mt 18:1-5)

And they were bringing children to Him so that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw this, He was indignant and said to them, "Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all." And He took them in His arms and began blessing them, laying His hands on them (Mk 10:13-16).

I Am God's Workmanship

God made me special,	God made me for His purpose,
Like no one else you see.	He fashioned me to be
He made me a witness	An image for His glory,

To His diversity. Almighty Father He.⁴

*Rosalie Slater,
Architect of the Principle Approach*

⁴ Slater, R. (1960). *Teaching and Learning America's Christian History: The Principle Approach*. San Francisco, CA: Foundation for American Christian Education.

Two Educational Views of Children:

	Traditional View	Christian View
Child Is Seen:	Blank; empty Few are gifted and talented	Full; made in God's image Each is talented and creative
Goal:	Behavior modification	Heart transformed; Attain the full stature of Christ
Classroom Governance:	Dependent upon others Leveled Consumers of facts	Independent learners Mastery of subjects Independently productive
Methods:	Appeal to the external Entertain and control	Appeal to the internal Inspire and consecrate
Curriculum:	Language dumbed down Piecemeal, fragmented Driven by rote memorization of facts Secular worldview	Elevated language; biblical imagery Whole Taught by principles Biblical, Christian worldview
Result:	Socialization of the child	Reaching his full potential and expression of his value in Christ

Principles of Nurturing Children:

Our definition for children is *"those young in grace, unfixed in principles, and weak in knowledge, judgment, and experience."* Children are weak and frail physically when compared with adults. They are dependent upon the care of those to whom they are entrusted. A child cannot choose the company under whose influence he comes. A child is unable to discern good from evil. He needs the unconditional love of his parents and teachers to feed, nurture, tend, and guide him on a daily basis. But a child was placed by Christ as a model for adults to imitate, because a child's spirit is generally unencumbered (unless the child has been abused and abandoned) and easily receives eternal truths.

1. The Christian approach to nurturing children must embrace a wholistic view:

- Teach the whole child (the Hebrew view: heart, mind, spirit, inner man and the body).
- Teach a child how to integrate thinking and acting; how to be WHOLE! What is the potential in Christ?

2. Adults must 'hear' what children are communicating whether they use words or not! Dr. Berryman's propositions for developing a theology of childhood state that human spirituality is one of man's nonverbal powers of communication. Human spirituality is found in nonverbal communication.

3. Every child needs unconditional love, which God has provided through His Son. (John 3:16)

4. Every child is a sinner and needs a Savior. Introduce children to the Creator and His Creation and teach him the doctrines of Christianity. This is the first step to his 'becoming' what God intends him to be.

- Becoming is a lifelong process. The soul should be restored in accordance with new life in Christ.
- Teach Christianity as an incarnational religion - truth embodied in a physical world containing elements of design (form, shape, line, color) and truth embodied in real people to whom He gave the ability to respond to art by His grace
- Teach the Providence of God in His Story. God has a special plan and purpose for every child in His Story.

5. Every child needs a vision for what he can become and someone to believe with him for it!

6. God builds from the inside out! The internal always gives rise to the external. Life flows out from the heart. The heart is his 'command center' and governs his will and all his choices and decisions.

But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Sam 16:7).

Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life (Prov 4:23).

7. Every child has 'internal property' that must be carefully stewarded:

- heart: determines behavior
- reason
- conscience: tells me right from wrong
- will: seat of decision making

- character: fruit of my choices
 - ideas: intellectual property
 - temperament
 - giftings
 - emotions
8. God has endowed man with the gift of language with which to communicate ideas and to praise and worship Him. Death and life are in the power of the tongue (Prov 18:21).
9. Every child is ennobled with great potential. It is the responsibility of his parents and teachers to call it forth and affirm it.
10. Every child has a will with which to govern his thinking, conduct, property, life choices:
- We must instruct with moral principles.
 - A child has choices which can be exercised by his will. He can decide what his existence will be. He is not locked into a life of poverty and oppression.
- Incarnational principle: Jesus' life and character dwell within. A child can be taught how to choose life! (Opposes behavior modification theory: environment shapes the individual.)
- Domain of the will is not a choice between things, but a choice between ideas! (Charlotte Mason)
 - Parents and teachers must present and live out rich, noble, and biblical principles and ideals.
 - Give the will an object outside itself, and it will leap into action! (Charlotte Mason) The key is: "Where is the child's mind focused?"
- As a man thinks within himself, so is he (Prov 23:7).*
11. A child's 'receptive mind,' or the seat of his imagination and intuition, must be lovingly nurtured with truth and beauty! His aesthetic tastes and sensibilities need to be cultivated through classic literature and the fine and performing arts. If parents and teachers don't actively cultivate a godly imagination, the devil will! Man is a doer of deeds and a dreamer of dreams. God created man with an imagination and reveals His beauty and truth throughout creation!
12. Children need a 'mother' who will nourish their soul with the pure milk of the Word of God:
- ". . . like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word"*
(1 Pet 2:2).

Be constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine (1 Tim 4:6).

"O taste and see that the Lord is good; how blessed is the one who takes refuge in Him!" (Ps 34:8).

13. Children need a 'father' who will guide and guard them and bless them daily. Blessing is a biblical ethic. God blessed His children, and they in turn blessed their children in both the Old and New Testament Jewish life. Blessing heals and sustains life and relationships! The ethic of blessing is personal. Berryman (p. 139) states that "blessing awakens the child within to experience a second naiveté. . . . There is power in recognizing such childlikeness. It gives a foundation from which to call forth what is best in any one of us."

And I [God] will bless those who bless you [Abraham], and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Gen 12:3).

"He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your soul" (1 Peter 2:24-25).

Additional Resources Used:

Adams, C. G. (1991). *F.A.C.E. Journal*, Vol. II. "The Christian Idea of the Child." San Francisco, CA: Foundation for American Christian Education.

Articles and statistics about children from world and U.S. agencies:
<http://caster.ssw.upenn.edu/~restes/praxis/kidlinks.html>

Bunge, M. J. (Ed.) (2001). *The Child in Christian Thought*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

Stewart, S. M. (2000). *Following Jesus*. Louisville, KY: Geneva Press.

Glossary

1. **aesthetics** (n.) The branch of philosophy dealing with beauty and taste. It is particularly important to the study of an individual's moral core, which is formed by various factors and examples through his lifetime.
2. **beauty** (n.) An assemblage of graces, or of properties in the form of a person or any other object, which pleases the eye. 2. A particular excellence. 3. In the arts, symmetry of parts; harmony. Ps 27:4; Ps 96:6.
3. **blessing** (n.) A benediction; a wish of happiness pronounced; a prayer imploring happiness upon another.
4. **child** (n.) A son or a daughter. 2] One weak in knowledge, experience, judgment or attainments. 3] One young in grace. 4] One who is unfixed in principles. 5] One whose principles and morals are the product of another.
5. **compassion** (n.) Suffering with another; painful sympathy; a sensation of sorrow excited by the distress or misfortunes of another; pity. Compassion is compounded of love and sorrow.
6. **distressed** (adj.) 1. Pain; to afflict with pain or anguish; applied to the body or the mind. 2. To afflict greatly; to harass; to oppress with calamity; to make miserable. 3. To compel by pain or suffering.
7. **ethic** (n.) 1. The principles of right and wrong that are accepted by an individual or a social group. 2. A system of principles governing morality and acceptable conduct.
8. **ethics** (n.) A system of moral principles that teaches men their duty and the reasons of it; a system of rules for regulating the actions and manners of men in society.
9. **feed** (n.) 1. To give food to. 2. To supply provisions. 3. To nourish; to cherish; to supply with nutriment. 4. To keep in hope or expectation. 5. To delight; to supply with something desirable.
10. **good, goodness** (n.) Moral excellence or admirableness. 2. That which is good or valuable or useful. 3. Appealing to the mind.
11. **guard** (v.) 1. To secure against injury, loss or attack; to protect; to defend; to keep in safety. Innocence should be guarded by prudence and piety. Let observation and experience guard us against temptations to vice. 2. To secure against attacks of malevolence. 3. To accompany and protect; to accompany for protection.
12. **hope** (n.) A desire of some good, accompanied with at least a slight expectation of obtaining it, or a belief that it is obtainable.
13. **impoverish** (v.) 1. To make poor; to reduce to poverty or indigence. 2. To exhaust strength, richness or fertility.

14. **lead** (v.) 1. To guide by the hand; as, to lead a child. 2. To guide or conduct by showing the way. 3. To precede; to introduce by going first.
15. **moral** (adj.) Concerned with principles of right and wrong or conforming to standards of behavior and character based on those principles.
16. **nourish** (v.) 1. To feed and cause to grow; to supply with nutriment. 2. To support; to maintain by feeding. Gen 47. 3. To supply the means of support and increase; to encourage; as to nourish rebellion; to nourish virtues. 4. To cherish; to comfort. James 5. 5. To educate; to instruct; to promote growth in attainments. 1 Tim 4.
17. **nurture** (v.) To educate; to bring or train up. (n.) That which nourishes; food; diet. 2] That which promotes growth; education; instruction. Ps 144:12
18. **principle** (n.) 1. The cause, source or origin of anything; that from which a thing proceeds. 2. Ground; foundation; that which supports an assertion, an action or of reasoning. 3. A general truth.
19. **promise** (n.) 1. A declaration, written or verbal, made by one person to another, which binds the person who makes it, either in honor, conscience or law, to do or forbear a certain act specified. 2. Hopes; expectation. 3. The promise of God is the declaration or assurance which God has given in His word of bestowing blessings on His people. Such assurance rests on the perfect justice, power, benevolence and immutable veracity of God and cannot fail of performance. *The Lord is not slack concerning His promises (2 Pet 3:9).*
20. **restore** (v.) 1. To return to a person, something which he has lost, or which has been taken from him and unjustly detained. 2. To replace; to return; as a person or thing to a former place. 3. To bring back or recover from lapse, degeneracy, declension or ruin to its former state. 4. To heal; to cure; to recover from disease. 5. To repair; to rebuild. 6. To revive; to bring back to life.
21. **teach** (v.) 1. To instruct; to inform; to communicate to another the knowledge of that of which he was before ignorant. *He will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths. Is.2.* 2. To deliver any doctrine, art, principles or words for instruction. 4. To instruct. 5. To show; to exhibit so as to impress on the mind. 6. To suggest to the mind. *For the Holy Spirit shall teach you in that same hour what ye ought to say. Luke 12.* 7. To counsel and direct.
22. **transcendent** (adj.) 1. Exceeding or surpassing usual limits especially in excellence. 2. Beyond and outside the ordinary range of human experience or understanding.

23. **sensibility** (n.) 1. The susceptibility of impressions; the capacity of feeling or perceiving the impressions of external objects. 2. Capacity or acuteness of perception; that quality of the soul which renders it susceptible to pleasure or pain; shame or praise. "Culture has very much to do with the human spirit. What we find beautiful or entertaining or moving is rooted in our spiritual life. T.S. Eliot noted that 'aesthetic sensibility and spiritual perception are very closely related.'" (K. Myers)
24. **story** (n.) 1. A verbal narration or recital of a series of facts or incidents. We observe in children a strong passion for hearing stories. 2. A written narrative of a series of facts or events. 3. History; a written narrative or account of past transactions, whether relating to nations or individuals. 4. A trifling tale; a fiction; a fable.
25. **truth** (n.) Conformity to fact or reality. 2. The true state of things. 3. Veracity; purity from falsehood. 4. Honesty; virtue. 5. Real fact of just principle. *The sum of your word is truth* (Ps 119:160). "I am the way, the truth and the life" (Jo 14:6). Standard for truth in the arts: Phil 4:7
26. **wellspring** (n.) 1. A fountain; a spring; a source of continual supply. 2. The place something comes from; the cause of something; the source.
27. **whole** (n.) Complete; entire; sound; not hurt or sick.
28. **wisdom** (n.) 1. The right use of exercises of knowledge. 2. Profitable words or doctrine.