

Preface

The Child Theology Movement (CTM) and Its Interest in the Work of James E. Loder

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THE CHILD THEOLOGY MOVEMENT convened a small conference on the campus of Princeton Seminary in March of 2012. This event brought together members of CTM and several scholars who had studied with James E. Loder, Jr., who, for 40+ years until his death in 2001, served as the Mary Synnott Professor of the Philosophy of Christian Education at Princeton Seminary.¹ Both CTM members and Loder's former students delivered papers interacting with various aspects of Loder's work. Lively and frank discussions followed, and a special camaraderie developed among the participants. Hoping to share the experience with others, these papers were later revised, recollected and edited for inclusion in this collection. The purpose of this preface is to explain the brief history of CTM and why the directors committed the movement to a conference on the legacy of James E. Loder.



Child Theology Movement

1. See the survey of Loder's life and work in the introduction of this volume.

Child Theology

The putting together of the two words “child” and “theology” was done consciously for the first time as far as we know just a decade or so ago.² This close juxtaposition of terms does not mean that no one had thought of the relationship between child and theology, or theology and child, before that. There has been implicit attention to what we call Child Theology over the centuries, and this attentiveness continues today. For example, Jerome Berryman’s *Children and the Theologians*³ (which has a very full review on the Child Theology Movement website),⁴ coupled with Marcia Bunge’s *The Child in Christian Thought*,⁵ provide ample evidence that others are at work in this general area.

So what, then, if anything, is distinctive about Child Theology as a contemporary movement? Let me begin by saying that history will be the judge. CTM comprises a small, but growing international network of theologians (of every hue) that seeks to explore what it means for followers of Jesus, whether as individuals or as church (including para-church) communities, to change and become humble like little children. CTM pays close attention to the little child Jesus placed in the midst of the Gospel story as a call to welcome little ones in his name. We note particularly that in Matthew chapter 18 it is Jesus the Christ who acted by putting a little child in the midst of a theological argument among his disciples. Jesus spoke about what this act meant and how disciples of his should live in light of this act. Therefore his followers (historical and contemporary) cannot, and hopefully do not, wish to evade the implications of what we have called Child Theology. And it is precisely because it was not obvious to the disciples then, and has not been obvious to the church ever since—what this means, or how we should change—that there is important, possibly compelling and urgent, theological work to be done by all of us who call ourselves followers of Jesus.

Now in some parts of the world there are tighter categories of theology than in others, and so it may be asked which categories of theology

2. The first written record of their use is in an unpublished paper by Keith J. White, “Child Theology,” given at the Annual Forum of the UK Christian Child Care Forum on 5th February 2002, in London.

3. Berryman, *Children*.

4. See www.childtheology.org

5. Bunge, *Child*.

those who are part of CTM are most interested in or committed to developing and living out. The answer is that we seek to live out whatever the action and teaching of Jesus commands of us. In order for us to follow this Jesus and live out his Gospel, we must mine the deepest levels of biblical, systematic, and historical theology. Yet our goal is always transformed practice. Those hundreds worldwide who have attended consultations and connected to the CTM network include perhaps a majority of Christians who seek what might be called transformational practical theology, including transformed Christian education (significantly enough for a Loder conference!) and a transformative mission and ministry with children as their focus.

So there is, and can be no neat answer to this question, “What is Child Theology?” Haddon Willmer (one of the contributors to this volume) and I have spent over ten years trying to work out what Child Theology—starting with Matthew 18—might look like.⁶ By inclination and commitment we are both drawn to doing theology in real life situations, and therefore to practical theology. Yet ours is a practical theology that does not cease to wrestle with the very heart of biblical, systematic and historical theology—God in Jesus Christ, crucified, risen, and ascended. Some members of CTM come from different perspectives. Elizabeth Barnett, another contributor to this volume, concentrates her attention on Pauline theology. Others look through the lens of “children’s spirituality,” while still others from the standpoint of the history of Child Theology. CTM, therefore, is an ecumenical and inclusive movement that seeks to connect with all persons and groups who bow the knee before Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

It may help if we can hold on to the fact that the words “child” and “theology” do not in themselves, in English at least, define the relationship between them.⁷ This fact is significant. CTM is not primarily about developing “theologies of children” (whatever they may look like). Neither is it about a child or children doing theology.⁸ Nor is it intended to describe a form of liberation or contextual theology that

6. Willmer and White, *Entry Point*.

7. We have discovered over the past since 2002 that there are many languages, including Russian, German and Mandarin that have no way of conveying the open-ended nature of these two English nouns placed side by side, without one qualifying or being more prominent than the other.

8. An example of this interpretation would be Richards and Privett, *Through the Eyes*.

places children's concerns at the center of the theological task, as in say Feminist or Dalit theology. And it is certainly not to be equated with Holistic Child Development. Rather, the relationship between "child" and "theology" must be allowed to remain subtle and many faceted, as befits a venture that takes as its starting point a sign given by Jesus. By definition both signs and the kingdom of God are provisional—we see through a glass darkly on earth—and therefore so is the theological task that links "child" and "theology."

We have discovered, possibly at some cost to the integrity of their interrelation, that when one utters the two words "child" and "theology" together, it is always the former that trumps the latter. No matter whether you are talking with theologians in a seminary, or Christian child activists on the street, when the word "child" is heard loud and clear, the word "theology" quickly tends to get lost in the background noise or recede rapidly down the corridor. But if we take seriously Jesus' action of placing the child in the midst of our theological deliberations, we dare not make the child herself the primary focus of our attention and enterprise. This was not the purpose of Jesus, and it would be wayward of his followers to misconstrue his intentions! Rather, the child was a clue to the nature of the kingdom of God and a sign of how we can and should relate to Jesus. As we see it there is every reason to allow the child as sign to lead us into every area of theology. Right here CTM resonates with the work of James Loder, who, we will see, was not tied to any one area, doctrine or type of theology (perhaps his colleagues wished he was!). Loder offered insights applicable across the whole spectrum of theology, and indeed across the whole of human experience and the sciences that seek understanding of dimensions of experience, between what he himself called the little and big infinities.

The child placed by Jesus may well do the same: offering insights way beyond the particular context and conversation described in Matthew 18. So it is not about territory or putting boundaries around the limits of our interest, but rather seeking to follow where God in Christ through the transformational dynamic of the Holy Spirit leads. (The last phrase has been chosen to resonate with the work of Loder). And so, in the 2012 conference and throughout this book that resulted from our meeting together, we explore possible synergy, connections and insights between the concerns of CTM and those of James Loder. If it is anything, the Child Theology Movement sees itself as a response to

an invitation by Jesus to follow Him, with no guarantee from Him where it will lead. The Child Theology Movement seeks to function in ways that respect and underline this Christological invitation, distinguishing Child Theology from other related enterprises described above, but without being doctrinaire in its diverse efforts.

So Why a Conference on the Work of James E. Loder?

The Child Theology Movement convened this Loder event, and did so by faith and at some financial risk, in part because of my personal intuition. I became convinced that the vitality of the development of Child Theology depended in particular on its ability to engage the deepest dimensions of practical theology. And this intuition (or hunch, if you will) developed in a particular crucible, called Mill Grove, where the world of children and the call of the Gospel of Jesus Christ become vivid for me.⁹ All I knew of humanity through children, all I knew of theology, and all I knew of child development (in its broadest sense) came together in my book *The Growth of Love*.¹⁰ And this book would not have been possible to write without the work of James Loder. Now *The Growth of Love* is not Child Theology: indeed it specifically points this out. It is, rather, an exploration on the theme of love always open to human experience, secular theory, and biblical theology.

In his book *The Logic of the Spirit*, James Loder seeks to understand human development (including of course, child development) in theological perspective. He does so, being acutely aware of the many challenges raised by those who seek to achieve a proper relationship among the disciplines, a relationship that does justice, for example, to theology (“the view from above”) and socio-psychological theory (“the view from below”). Now Child Theology as we have already seen is not simply about this interdisciplinary issue: it has a far wider remit. But

9. Mill Grove is the name of the home of a unique extended family and residential community that began as an informal foster family in 1989. It is still a place of love and care where children and young people who cannot live with their own families may be fostered, or for families who need accommodation and support. In this home-like setting and atmosphere Christians share their lives, and many of these, now living in many different parts of the world, regard Mill Grove as their home. Hundreds more, though continuing to live with their own families, have found Mill Grove to be a place of acceptance, encouragement, and nurture.

10. White, *Growth*.

what Loder is doing is integral to any attempt to work at practical theology with children and young people. So it was and is that CTM decided to convene this event and to underwrite the publishing of the papers delivered in March 2012.

We were aware that Loder's legacy is known to a very loyal and enthusiastic band of former students and colleagues, but that his work is little quoted outside this coterie. And so we hope that the conference and this collection will bring his work to a wider international audience. Over time it has become clear to the directors of CTM that our calling is to find ways of identifying, connecting, nurturing and empowering a "Community of Scholars." Certainly universities were intended at the outset to be just such communities. This intention explains the architecture, design and philosophy of Princeton Theological Seminary, for example. The contemporary scholarly emphasis on specialization, autonomous disciplines, and insular routines makes true interdisciplinary conversation in community rare indeed. Now if that interdisciplinary conversation fails to happen when scholars have actually gathered in a single location, imagine how much more challenging it is to support a community of scholars drawn from every part of the planet! Our gathering together, and this modest collection of essays seeks to model a community of scholars that captures something of this need for international conviviality and trust. CTM has taken on this tall order as a central feature of its own sense of call. We trust that time will be a favorable judge of our efforts to enable a truly radical, worldwide, conversation.

Works Cited

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