

## Foreword

I FIRST MET DANA Wright after he asked me to write a chapter in James E. Loder's Festschrift, *Redemptive Transformation in Practical Theology* (2004). I was impressed by several things. First, Dana is an earnest and exacting scholar. Second, he is one of the best and most comprehensive interpreters of Loder's complete body of work. Third, he is passionate about the *importance* of Loder's ideas for practical theology and the broader theology and science dialogue. Finally, and this is where this book comes into play, he is committed to sustaining and enhancing an international critical discussion in which Loder's ideas are brought into relation to key themes and issues in practical theology.

The book before you is a first rate academic work that focuses Loder's unique theological perspective onto one thought-provoking theological signifier: "the child." Without sentimentalizing or stereotyping either children or childhood, the authors you are about to read bring biblical, theological, and social scientific scholarship into conversation with Loder's consistently theological approach to epistemology, stage theory, and human formation.

Had he lived longer, James Loder would have found much to like about the Child Theology Movement (CTM). Loder had serious difficulties with many of the more "adult" proclivities within late modern society: socialization, achievement orientation, "normal" human development, and a host of other commitments and schemes devised by adult human beings seeking to secure themselves in the world. At the same time, much of his work was concerned with what it means to educate and form children in a way that embraces the creative power of the human spirit in relation to the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. He would find it very provocative, therefore, to see his ideas brought into dialogue with a host of international scholarship regarding "child theology."

As I read this book, I found myself in complete agreement with Dana Wright, who argues that scholars from many disciplines should begin to elevate the stature and importance of Loder's ideas to match the level of critical discussion surrounding another important theologically oriented theorist of faith development, James Fowler. Loder's work made use of some of Fowler's ideas, but Loder was deeply critical of the way that faith was normalized into stages in Fowler's work. For Loder, the creative power of the human spirit in relation to the Holy Spirit, at work *across* the developmental journey, was more important than the socialization of faith within stages. The reason for this difference in perspective is *theological*, and the essays in this book are quick to highlight this significant and pervasive theological element in Loder's work.

One of the great qualities of this book is that it makes Loder's work more accessible. One reason why Loder's work has not received as much critical discussion as Fowler's lies in its complexity and erudition. Without fail, each writer in this book breaks open, and breaks down (without dumbing down) Loder's ideas so that we can see how these ideas might help us to shape a huge variety of new perspectives on the child, childhood, and child development.

The scholarship in this book is also global and interdisciplinary, and we have the Child Theology Movement to thank for that. CTM is currently investing much of its time and energy encouraging scholarship in all parts of the world where the lives of children are at stake, and in which the biblical vision of the child can operate as an important metaphor for the Reign of God. From diverse cultural perspectives and situations, this book includes essays by a biblical scholar, sociologist, pastor, missiologist, Christian educator, public educator, theologian, and children's spirituality specialist. Loder was always concerned to discover new ways to understand the human spirit in its relation to the Holy Spirit across cultures and contexts. He would have found great value, therefore, in the global and interdisciplinary scope of this book.

Keith White, who directs the Child Theology Movement and who organized and led the convocation during which the essays in this book were first delivered, and Dana Wright, who edited the essays into a cohesive volume, are much to be thanked for seeing to it that this collection has come into being. In my experience, Loder was often misunderstood among his colleagues and academic peers. In part, this occurred because he was, as Wright points out, *homo testans*, a living human testimony to

the transformative Spirit of Christ in his own life. His own personality, therefore, bore the marks of the liminal theology of the Spirit that he studied and taught. It is crucial, therefore, that those who know his work well, and believe in the value of his ideas, see to it that precisely *this* kind of critical engagement occurs in a variety of ways. One can only hope that more similar works, around a variety of topics, will follow soon.

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