

1) Conception: Gifts of God and sources of joy.

Commitment: Enjoy and be grateful for them!

The Bible and our rich Christian tradition often depict children as gifts of God and sources of joy who ultimately come from God and belong to God. Since they are gifts of God and sources of joy, adults are to enjoy and be grateful for children. Many passages in the Bible speak of children as gifts of God, signs of God's blessing, or sources of joy.

In Genesis, Sarah rejoices at the birth of her son, Isaac (Gen 21:6-7). In Luke, the angel promises Zechariah and Elizabeth that their child will bring them "joy and gladness" (Lk 1:14). In the gospel of John, Jesus says, "When a woman is in labor, she has pain...But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world" (Jn 16:21).

Many Christian theologians have emphasized this biblical theme. For example, the 17th century Moravian bishop, theologian, and educator Comenius states that children are dearer than "gold and silver, than pearls and gems."⁶⁸ Martin Luther, the 16th century reformer, who was the biological father of three sons and three daughters and took in four orphans, says children are "treasures from heaven," "blessings from God," and "great gifts."

Reflection: *When have you experienced joy or delight around or with children or youth? What examples come to your mind?*

2) Conception: Fully human and made in the image of God.

Commitment: Treat them with dignity and respect!

A text related to this theme is when Leah, Jacob's first wife, speaks of her sixth son as a dowry, or wedding gift, presented by God (Genesis 30:20). Several biblical passages indicate that parents who receive these precious gifts are being "remembered" by God (Genesis 30:22; 1 Samuel 1:11, 19) and given "good fortune" (Genesis 30:11). To be "fruitful"—have many children—is to receive God's blessing. The Psalmist says children are a "heritage" from the Lord and a "reward" (Psalm 127:3).

The ideas of Comenius (1592-1670 C.E.) are influential far beyond the church, and he is often called the "father of modern education." His popular book, *The School of Infancy*, points out the complex sensibilities and development of infants and young children and the need to nurture them at a very young age.¹

The Bible and the Christian tradition also emphasize that children are whole and complete human beings who are made in the image of God. They are fully human. Thus, adults are to treat children, like all people, with dignity and respect. The basis of this claim is Genesis 1:27, which states that God made humankind, male and female, in God's image. It follows that children, like adults, possess the fullness of humanity. Regardless of race, gender, age, or class, they have intrinsic value.

Although most of us might think it is self-evident that infants and children are human beings, in many places and times, including here and now, children have not been considered fully human. Over the centuries they have been described and perceived as property, "animals," "beasts," "pre-rational," "pre-human," "almost human," "not quite human," or "on their way to being human." Roman law, for example, considered children to be property, and a father could legally allow unwanted infants to die. But contrary to Roman law, early Christians, like Jews, consistently rejected infanticide.

Early theologians, such as Cyprian, said all people, even infants, are "alike and equal since they have been made once by God." All share a "divine and spiritual equality."² Although Cyprian is making strong claims for the spiritual and divine equality of children, he does not draw implications for their social equality.

All of us know too well the many ways that children are still treated as less than human (whether in homes, churches, or schools, whether within our own countries or countries around the world), and at the same time we also know that the simple act of truly affirming the full humanity of children can have life-changing and inspiring results! One man who has inspired me and thousands of others to view all children as fully human is Shiferaw Woldmichael. He was once a human rights lawyer and even the Attorney General of Ethiopia. But he realized that his country could not flourish if it did not support children. So he gave up his law practice, started Compassion International divisions in Ethiopia and Tanzania, and then founded and directed the Child Development Training and Research Centre in Ethiopia, a significant child-focused centre in Africa. He has a heart for children and sees each one as fully human, even the most marginal of the marginal, such as children in poverty, sexually-exploited girls, or AIDS/HIV orphans.

Reflection: *Who or what inspires us to see all children as fully human?*

¹ Johannes Amos Comenius, *The School of Infancy* (1663), edited and introduced by Ernest M. Eller (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1956), 59-70.

² Cyprian, Letter 64.3; in *Letters*, translated by Sister Rose Bernard Donna (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 1964), 217-218.

3) Conception: Vulnerable orphans, neighbours, and strangers.

Commitment: Provide for, protect, and seek justice for children (not just your own children but all children in need)!

Many biblical passages emphasize, in the third place, that children are also orphans, neighbours, and strangers; they are voiceless and among the most vulnerable people on the planet, and as such are often victims of injustice. The Bible also commands adults to provide for, protect, and seek justice for all children, including orphans, the poor, and the marginalized. Adults are to care not only for their own children but also for all children in need.

Numerous biblical passages explicitly command us to love and to seek justice for the most vulnerable: widows, orphans, and strangers. Deuteronomy 10:18, for example, states that God is a God “who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing.” Christian obligations to children in need are also grounded in Jesus’ command to “love the Lord your God with all your heart” and to “love your neighbour [and even your enemies] as yourself” (Mk 10:31). In the gospels, Jesus shows compassion directly to children. He welcomes them, receives them, touches them, and heals them. He takes them up in his arms and blesses them.

Informed by these and other passages, Christians in the past and Christians around the world today help feed and clothe poor children and orphans, value adoption and support those who adopt, and are outspoken advocates for children’s rights and political policies that protect children and families. This commitment to children in need is a task shared by Christian families, congregations, and a host of national and international faith-based organizations, agencies, hospitals, clinics, orphanages, and child advocacy and lobbying ministries. There are many powerful stories of Christians who looked outside their doorways, saw children in need, and responded. In many cases, they started with nothing, but their efforts blossomed into thriving institutions. I am sure that each of us can find examples of people in our own faith community who have shown compassion to children.

Two examples from my own Lutheran tradition are A. H. Franke (1663-1727) and Leymah Gbowee (born 1972). Franke was a 17th century pastor who saw tremendous suffering and poverty in his town of Halle, Germany. In response, he opened an orphanage in his home, starting with three or four children and no funding. Within just a few years, he had established a vast and famous set of institutions to serve children, which were called the *Franckesche Stiftungen*. These included an orphanage, a pharmacy, a publishing house, schools for rich and poor alike, and the first German paediatric hospital.

Leymah Gbowee is a Lutheran woman who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011 for helping to end the terrible 14 year civil war in Liberia. During the war she witnessed girls being raped and boys taken as child soldiers; starting with just a prayer group in her church, she was able to gather together hundreds of Christian and Muslim women for a non-violent peace movement that helped end that dreadful civil war, and which earned her a Nobel Peace Prize.

Reflection: *What stories of compassion for children do you tell in your family or church? What institutions or initiatives do you admire? Consider telling these stories of authentic service especially to children and youth in your midst. They might not know how adults in the church are caring for others, and such stories are powerful.*

4) Conception: Developing beings who need instruction and guidance.

Commitment: Instruct, guide, and bring them up in the faith, helping them to love God and the neighbour!

A fourth central perspective of children expressed in the Bible and in Christian traditions is that children are developing beings who need instruction and guidance; adults are to bring up children in the faith, helping them to love God and their neighbours as themselves. Several biblical texts address these responsibilities. For example, Christians, like Jews, refer to the famous lines from Deuteronomy 6:5-7: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.” This text and others encourage us to be teaching and talking about faith with children and youth at all times.

There are also many examples in Christian tradition of theologians who took seriously the spiritual formation and education of children. For example, John Chrysostom, in the fourth century; ³ Martin Luther and John Calvin in the 16th century; Comenius in the 17th century; and Schleiermacher in the 19th century all wrote and preached about faith formation of children. They also wrote catechisms and other materials for use in the home to help parents teach their children. In his *Large Catechism*, Luther said, “If we want able and qualified persons as civil and spiritual leaders, then we really must spare no toil, trouble, or cost in teaching and educating our children to serve God and humanity.” ⁴

These theologians, the Bible, and indeed common sense all tell us that faith formation is a cooperative and intergenerational task involving home, congregation, and the wider church. Faith formation is the task of neither parents alone nor the church alone. We cannot “out-source” or “in-source” this task. We have to do it together. Parents, church leaders, and other caring adults help to nurture the moral and spiritual lives of children in a number of ways and through a variety of spiritual practices, such as reading the Bible, worshipping, praying, singing, serving others, or participating in the sacraments. All of these practices have a very long tradition in the church throughout the world. They are powerful vehicles for creating a space for the Holy Spirit to work in our lives and opening our hearts (at any age) to God and the neighbour. Christian communities also incorporate such practices into a host of creative programs, initiatives, and activities for young people, such as youth and family ministries, religious education programs, Bible camps, music camps, national youth conventions, campus ministries, service projects, and mission trips.

Reflection: As you think about the spiritual formation of children, what practices helped deepen your own faith as you grew up? Which ones are helping to deepen the faith of children in your midst?

³ See, for example, John Chrysostom, *On Marriage and Family Life*, translated by Catherine P. Roth and David Anderson (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1986).

⁴ Martin Luther, *Luther's Large Catechism*, translated by F. Samuel Janzow (St. Louis: Concordia, 1978), 40.

5) Conception: Sinful creatures and social agents with growing moral capacities and responsibilities.

Commitment: Model for them compassion and accountability, and cultivate with them practices of mutual confession, forgiveness, and renewal!

Many, but certainly not all, forms of Christianity express the notion that children are not just developing beings; they are also, in some sense, sinful creatures and moral agents with growing moral capacities and responsibilities. Adults can help children by modelling for them compassion and accountability, and adults can cultivate with children practices and patterns of confession, forgiveness, and renewal.

The view of children as sinful is based on interpretations of several biblical texts. For example, Genesis states that every inclination of the human heart is “evil from youth” (Gen 8:21), and **Proverbs claim that folly is “bound up in the heart” of children (Prov 22:15).** The Psalms declare that “the wicked go astray from the womb; they err from their birth” (Ps 58:3; cf. 51:5). Paul writes that all people are “under the power of sin,” and “there is no one who is righteous, not even one” (Rom 3: 9-10; cf. 5:12).

Christian theologians who view children as sinful generally underscore two related points. On the one hand, they often claim children are “born in a state of sin”; they live in a world that is not what it ought to be. Their parents are not perfectly loving and just; social institutions that support them, such as schools and governments, are not free from corruption; and the communities in which they live, no matter how safe, have elements of injustice and violence. On the other hand, theologians who speak of children as sinful also claim that children possess growing moral capacities and responsibilities and that, as they develop, they sometimes carry out “actual sins.” They can sometimes act in ways that are self-centred, unjust, and harmful to themselves and others; they sometimes miss the mark, hurt others, and thus bear some degree of responsibility for their actions.

On the surface, viewing children as sinful can seem negative and destructive, and as some historical studies have shown, viewing children exclusively as sinful has often warped Christian approaches to children and led in some cases to child abuse and even death. However, the notion that children are sinful corrects an equally simplistic and dangerous view of children as primarily pure and innocent. Such a view leaves no room for appreciating a child’s own growing moral agency or levels of accountability; nor does it encourage talking to children about social and individual wrongdoing. Thus, the language of children as sinful, when used cautiously and with attention to child development, can strengthen our awareness of a child’s growing moral capacities and responsibilities, and gives us language to talk with children about human mistakes and shortcomings – theirs and ours – as well as the lifelong importance of forgiving ourselves and others.

Since children, as they grow, experience both the sins of others and their own sins against others, and since certainly adults are also sinners, adults can help children by modelling compassion and accountability. Adults can also cultivate with children practices of and patterns of confession, forgiveness, and renewal. Social scientists say that few parents say to their children, “I’m sorry.” Yet, when we say to children, “I’m sorry. I made a mistake. Can you forgive me?” we teach them much about us and about them and we create deep adult-child connections.

Reflection: *As you think about your relationships with children, how have you helped them develop responsibility and the language for confession and forgiveness (of self and others)? How have you helped them learn practices of confessing sins and asking for forgiveness? What is your experience?*

6) Conception: Models of faith and endowed with particular strengths, gifts, and talents to contribute to the common good now and in the future.

Commitment: Listen to and learn from them! Honour their contributions! Provide them with an education!

The Bible does not just speak about children as sinful and in need of instruction. Rather, the Bible also claims that children are often models of faith for adults, and that they are endowed with particular strengths, gifts, and talents to contribute to the common good now and in the future. Thus, adults do not just teach children. From a biblical perspective, we are to listen to and learn from them, honour their current relationship with God and their contributions to families and communities, and provide all children with an excellent education so that they can continue to cultivate their gifts and talents and contribute to the common good, both now and in the future.

The Bible depicts children and young people as models of faith, positive agents of change, and prophets, and it does so in striking and even radical ways, such as in the stories of the boy Samuel (1 Sam 2-4) and the young David (1 Sam 17). And in all three synoptic gospels, Jesus identifies himself with children and lifts them up as paradigms of receiving the reign of God, saying "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it" (Mk 10:13-16). All three synoptic gospels also give an account of Jesus welcoming and blessing little children. (See Mk 10:13-16; cf. Lk 18:15-17; Mt 19:13-15; also Mt 18:2-5; Mk 9:33-37; Lk 9:46-48.) The Bible also proclaims that children are Spirit-filled. God's Spirit is not limited by the age of any person. It is already working in children and young people.

You cannot stop God's Spirit. Biblical passages depict children and infants praising God (Ps 8:2; Mt 21:15). As the book of Acts declares, God's Spirit will be poured out "upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions" (Acts 2:17; cf. Jl 2:28-32).

These are just a few of the ways that the Bible depicts children as Spirit-filled; models for adults; positive agents of change; prophets; and endowed with gifts and talents. Children are to listen to and obey adults, but their highest loyalty is to God. Indeed, most serious theologians who discuss parental authority claim that it is never absolute, because a child's ultimate loyalty is to God. And building on biblical texts, they claim that adults should not provoke children to anger (Col 3:21, Eph 6:4). As Luther said, "Parental authority is strictly limited; it does not extend to the point where it can wreak damage and destruction to the child, especially to its soul."

Reflection: *Can you add insights from your own experience about the strengths, gifts, and contributions of children?*

Holding All Six Perspectives in Tension

A strong and biblically-based view of children holds all six perspectives in tension rather than isolation. Although these six perspectives provide us with a rich view of children and adult-child relationships, Christianity has often focused narrowly on only one or two of these biblical themes in the past, and continues to do so today. However, if we neglect any of the six biblical themes, then our conceptions of children become narrow and distorted and we risk treating children in inadequate and harmful ways.

There are many examples of such neglect in the church. If we say, for example, that children are primarily gifts of God and sources of joy, then we might delight in them but neglect to nurture and guide them. Or if we believe that children are primarily sinful and in need of instruction, then we might do much to educate them but neglect to delight in them and enjoy them. Or if we view children primarily as victims, we might not hear their own voices and recognize their own strengths and agency. Or if we perceive children mainly as social agents and participants, then we might recognize their gifts and strengths but neglect to protect and guide them. Certainly, too, if we focus primarily on nurturing only our “own” children, then we might overlook the responsibility of reaching out to all children in need.

We can avoid these and other dangers by incorporating a complex view of children that holds together these six biblical perspectives. We need to cultivate a child-inclusive and biblically-based perspective that views children, paradoxically, as:

- Fully human and made in the image of God, yet also still developing and in need of instruction and guidance;
- Gifts of God and sources of joy, yet also capable of selfish and sinful actions;
- Vulnerable and in need of protection, yet also strong, insightful, and endowed with gifts to serve others and act as models of faith.

The Bible urges us to wear multi-focal and inclusive lenses as we regard children – to switch from mono-focal tunnel vision to multi-focal perspectives – because stronger conceptions of children also strengthen our commitments to, and relationships with, them.

Reflection: *What examples of narrow conceptions of children do you see in your context, whether it be your daily life, your congregation, or the broader culture?*

What dangers do you see?

What are your experiences?

How can these conceptions become more multi-focal?

Life-Giving Possibilities

If we as Christians can appropriate and hold in tension all six biblical perspectives of children, then we will certainly broaden our conception of children and strengthen our commitment to children in families and in many areas of the church. For example, holding these six biblical perspectives of children in tension (rather than isolation) can help us do the following:

- strengthen child-adult relationships in all types of families
- enrich the church’s worship life as well as its spiritual formation and religious education programs
- strengthen specific child, youth, family, and intergenerational ministries
- emphasize the importance of the family in spiritual formation and faith development
- advance the church’s child advocacy efforts nationally and internationally
- strengthen theological education at seminaries and colleges around the world so that they include attention to children

Complex and biblically-informed theological understandings of children have many implications for our interactions with children in our families, the church, and our neighbourhoods, and for our child advocacy efforts in our own countries and around the world. By critically appropriating a view of children that incorporates these six central perspectives on children found in the Bible and in Christian thought, we can all take up more wholeheartedly and responsibly the Christian call to love and care for all children within our diverse settings, whether in the areas of spiritual formation, religious education, children's ministries, youth ministry, child protection and advocacy, faith-based organizations that work with young people who are at risk, or theological education.

Informed by a solid theological understanding of children, all of us (whether or not we have children of our own, and in whatever situation or places of responsibility we find ourselves) can renew and strengthen our relationships and commitments to children in our midst and around the world. Such complex and multi-focal lenses allow us to work for and with children in our quests to build and enliven the church and contribute to the common good.

Reflection: As you think of your own conceptions of and commitments to children

- What biblical (or other) perspectives of children would you add to the list of six?
- How might biblical perspectives and obligations to children strengthen your commitments to children in your midst and around the world? What biblical passages open up a fresh perspective on your view of children and your commitments to them?
- What conception or intentional commitment is ready to blossom in your work and daily life today?

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