

**LET THE LITTLE CHILDREN COME:
TOWARD A SEVENTH-DAY
ADVENTIST THEOLOGY
OF CHILDHOOD**

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The subject of children and childhood has not traditionally been considered worthy of serious theological consideration. In fact, reflection on the nature of children and their spiritual formation has often been considered “beneath” the work of theologians and Christian ethicists, and thus relegated “as a fitting area of inquiry” only for those directly involved in ministry with children.¹ As a result, the few teachings that the church has offered on the nature of children have developed in light of practice. While it is true that our practice of ministry does “influence our theologising about it,” pastoral ministry with children should ideally flow out of a carefully articulated theology of childhood, and not *vice versa*.² Thus the purpose of this paper is to (1) explore biblical perspectives on children and childhood, (2) examine historical perspectives on children in the Christian church, and (3) begin to articulate a Seventh-day Adventist theology of children and childhood, as well as the implications of such a theology for the practice of ministry with children within an Adventist context.

Old Testament Perspectives on Children

Children play a crucial role in the story of God and humanity. In the opening book of the Bible, God creates human beings in his image. Then, in his “first recorded words” to humanity, God pronounces a blessing on human beings, a blessing that concerns children: “God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it’” (Gen 1:28a).³ In these simple words, God confers the blessing of procreation on humanity. This blessing is reiterated when God establishes a covenant with Noah and his children: “Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth’” (Gen 9:1).

¹Marcia J. Bunge, “Historical Perspectives on Children in the Church: Resources for Spiritual Formation and a Theology of Childhood Today,” in *Children’s Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research, and Applications*, ed. Donald Ratcliff (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2004), 43.

²*Ibid.*

³Scottie May, Beth Posteroski, Catherine Stonehouse, and Linda Cannell, *Children Matter: Celebrating Their Place in the Church, Family and Community* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 26. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of the Bible will be from the NIV.

Children are also central to the promises that God makes to Abraham: “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing . . . and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen 12: 2-3). These divine promises were dependent on the birth of children. Therefore, it is striking that across three generations children were so “hard to come by” in this family chosen by God.⁴ When God did fulfill his promises, however, the descendants of Abraham recognized that their children were a fulfillment of these divine promises. When Jacob fled from Laban and returned to the land of his brother, Esau asked, “Who are these with you?” Jacob answered, “They are the children God has graciously given your servant” (Gen 33:5). When Joseph met Jacob in Egypt, he introduced his children as “the sons God has given me here” (Gen 48:9). Ultimately, God’s promise to make Abraham into a great nation is also fulfilled: “[T]he Israelites were fruitful and multiplied greatly and became exceedingly numerous, so that the land was filled with them” (Exod 1:7a). By using the terms “fruitful,” “multiplied,” and “filled,” Moses not only recognized the fulfillment of God’s promises to Abraham, but also alluded to his covenant with Noah and the first blessing on humanity at the creation of the world, thus reminding the reader that “the gift of children in general, and of the Israelite children in particular, is a distinguishing, tangible manifestation of God’s ongoing blessing of humankind.”⁵

Children continue to play a prominent role in the book of Exodus, particularly in the first half of the book: in the genealogies of the first and sixth chapters; in Pharaoh’s attempt to kill the male Hebrew infants; in the birth and rescue of baby Moses; and in the climax of the plagues upon Egypt, when the firstborn of Egypt are killed, while the firstborn of Israel are “passed over” (Exod 12:27). Children are also central to the instructions that God gives to the Israelites regarding the commemoration of this event: “when your children ask you, ‘What does this ceremony mean to you?’ then tell them” (Exod 12:26-27; cf. 10:2). In Exod 13:15-16, the command is once again reiterated, and the fate of Egypt’s children, at whose cost Israel’s children had been redeemed, is highlighted.⁶ Leviticus and Numbers continue

⁴Terrence Fretheim, “God Was With the Boy: Children in the Book of Genesis,” in *The Child in the Bible*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 6. Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel all experienced barrenness; see Gen 15:2-4; 18:1-15; 25:21; 30:1-8, 22-24.

⁵Claire R. Matthews McGinnis, “Exodus as a ‘Text of Terror’ for Children,” in *The Child in the Bible*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 28.

⁶While such a meaning may not seem evident at a first reading of the passage, the *Haggadah* or Passover Seder, a Jewish document that provides the order of the Passover celebrations, refers to the suffering of the Egyptians. The document includes this group reading: “Though we descend from those redeemed from brutal Egypt, and have ourselves rejoiced to see oppressors overcome, yet our triumph is diminished by the slaughter of the foe, as the wine within the cup of joy is lessened when we pour ten drops for the plagues upon Egypt.” This group reading is preceded by the quote from the *Talmud*: “Our rabbis taught: When the Egyptian armies were drowning in the sea, the Heavenly Hosts broke out in songs of jubilation. God silenced them and said,

to highlight the importance of children. The Israelites are expressly forbidden to sacrifice their children (Lev 18:21; 20:1-5), as such practice is linked directly with profaning God's name. Thus Roy Gane comments, "This was a particularly heinous form of idolatry because it showed cruel disrespect for precious life entrusted to parents."⁷ In addition to giving children prominent attention, the book of Deuteronomy highlights their centrality to the survival of Hebrew national and religious identity. It is evident, therefore, that the theme of children and their importance to God's plan of redemption plays an important role in the books of Moses. The "gift of children," given at creation, is reinforced in the covenant between God and Abraham and plays a crucial role in the survival of Hebrew nationality and identity, ultimately serving as continuing evidence of God's blessing upon humankind.⁸

The message that children are a blessing given by God is confirmed throughout the remainder of the OT. Solomon, for example, proclaims that children are "a heritage" and "a reward" from the Lord, and that "the man whose quiver is full of them" is blessed (Ps 127:3-5). Similarly, the author of Psalm 128 declares that the man who "fears the Lord" is blessed with a wife and children (vv. 1-4). Coupled with this view that children are gifts from God and a sign of his blessing is the concept of children as sources of joy.⁹ From Abraham and Sarah, who rejoice in the birth of their son Isaac (Gen 21:6) to the promise given to Zechariah and Elizabeth that their child will be "a joy and delight" to them (Luke 1:14), the Scriptures are filled with examples in which children are spoken of as sources of joy and a special blessing from the Lord.

In addition to pronouncing children a blessing and a joy, the OT also speaks of adult obligation to children. In Genesis, God asserts that he has chosen Abraham, "so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just" (18:19). This theme of adult responsibility to guide and nurture children in the "way of the Lord" is repeated in many passages of Scripture. In the ordinary tasks of "sit[ting] at home" and "walk[ing] along the road, parents are to teach their children to love the Lord their God with all their heart" (Deut 6:5). During annual celebrations and when encountering sacred monuments, parents are to tell their children what God has done for them (Exod 12:26-27; 13:8; Lev 23:43; Josh 4:23). Again

"My creatures are perishing, and you sing praises" (Herbert Bronstein, ed., *A Passover Haggadah* [Middlesex, UK: Penguin, 1982], 48-49). In his commentary on Exodus, Terrence Fretheim sees the statements found in chap. 13 as a reminder to the Jewish people that their redemption came at the cost of Egypt's firstborn children. He thus writes that this passage gives "a special twist to the issue of the firstborn. In essence, Israel is to continue to be attentive to its firstborn because of what the *Egyptian* firstborn have suffered. . . . This is thus an everlasting reminder in Israel at what cost Israel's firstborn were redeemed" (*Exodus* [Louisville: John Knox, 1991], 149).

⁷Roy Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 361.

⁸McGinnis, 42.

⁹Bunge, 45.

and again adults are reminded to “tell their children about [God’s] faithfulness” (Isa 38:19) and “the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord” (Ps 78:4). Adults are also to teach children in “the way [they] should go” (Prov 22:6), so that they may know what is “right and just and fair” (Prov 2:9).

In addition to the obligation for guiding and nurturing their own children, the Scriptures also teach communal responsibility for “the fatherless” or “orphan” children of society (Exod 22:22-24; Deut 14:28-29; James 1:27). This “human obligation” is grounded in God’s pledge to execute justice and mercy to these most vulnerable members of society (Deut 10:17-18; Hos 14:3; Pss 10:14, 17-18; 68:5-6; 146:9).¹⁰

New Testament Perspectives on Children

Children also play a remarkably prominent and important role in the writings of the NT, particularly in the Synoptic Gospels. Even though Jewish society considered children a blessing from God, children in Jesus’ day still lived on the margins of society. This was “a world of and for the adult.”¹¹ Yet the Gospels are replete with stories of children, particularly the Gospel according to Luke, which not only records the birth of both John the Baptist and Jesus, but which alone among the Gospels that “pauses to open a window” onto the childhood of Jesus.¹² Furthermore, the Gospels record that Jesus repeatedly focused his attention on children, taking the time to hold them and bless them (Matt 19:13-15; Mark 10:16; Luke 18:15-17), as well as heal them (Luke 8:41-42, 49-56; 9:37-43; cf. Matt 17:14-18; Mark 7:24-30). Not only did Jesus welcome and bless the children, he affirmed their place in the kingdom of God. When the disciples sought to turn the children away from him, apparently considering them insufficiently important to warrant his attention, Jesus commands, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these” (Matt 19:14; Mark 10:14; Luke 18:16). Then, in an even more radical statement, Jesus continues: “Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child

¹⁰Walter Brueggemann, “Vulnerable Children, Divine Passion, and Human Obligation,” in *The Child in the Bible*, ed. Marcia Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 399.

¹¹John T. Carroll, “‘What Then Will This Child Become?’ Perspectives on Children in the Gospel of Luke,” in *The Child in the Bible*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 177-178, 191. Catherine Stonehouse and Scottie May point to the fact that in the accounts of feeding the five thousand in Matthew and Luke only men are counted (Matt 14:21; Luke 9:14) (*Listening to Children on the Spiritual Journey: Guidance for Those Who Teach and Nurture* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010], 13). A general disregard for children is also evident in the disciples’ rebuke to the mothers who brought their young ones to Jesus (Matt 19:14). The same Greek word, translated as “rebuke,” is used in Mark 9:33 when Jesus “rebukes” Satan, who was behind Peter’s words, as well as in various accounts where Jesus “rebukes” the demons. Cf. W. A. Strange, *Children in the Early Church* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996), 6-7.

¹²Carroll, 177.

will never enter it” (Mark 10:15; Luke 18:17). As Catherine Stonehouse and Scotty May so poignantly state: “Children, not just adults, belong in God’s kingdom. Furthermore, they are not marginal members of the kingdom, just tagging along with their parents, waiting to grow up and become real members. No, children are models in the kingdom of God, showing adults how to enter.”¹³

According to Jesus, anyone who wishes to enter God’s kingdom should look to those of lowest power and status as models to be emulated. Just as Jesus himself is “the paradigm of greatness in the upside-down world where God is in charge,”¹⁴ so children are symbolic of the “upside-down, inside-out” world that is God’s kingdom.¹⁵ When the disciples argue about who will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus again challenges them to demonstrate greatness according to the upside-down values of God’s kingdom by welcoming children. In welcoming children in his name, he asserts, they will discover they have welcomed God himself (Matt 18:1-5; Mark 9:33-37; Luke 9:46-48).

While in the remainder of the NT children do not appear to play a prominent role, it is evident that they were included in the households of those who came to believe in Christ. At a time when children continued to be marginalized, the early Christian church, as portrayed in the book of Acts, appears to have followed the example of Jesus and welcomed children.¹⁶ It seems of importance to Luke, for example, to indicate that the entire households of Cornelius and the jailer came to believe in God (Acts 11:14; 16:31-34). Commenting on the Greek word *oikos* (translated as “household” or “family”), Otto Michel suggests that in the discourses of Acts “it is explicitly emphasized that the conversion of a man leads his whole family to the faith; this would include wife, children, servants and relatives living in the house.”¹⁷ While Luke’s language is ambiguous regarding the value of individual decisions, his statements appear to be in harmony with Peter’s thinking, when, in his Pentecost sermon, he exclaimed: “the promise is for you and your children” (Acts 2:39). Furthermore, while the Epistles seem to exclusively use the term “children” to describe Christian believers, Paul’s exhortation for fathers to not “exasperate” (Eph 6:4) or “embitter” (Col 3:21) their children indicates a countercultural sensitivity to children’s needs.

In summary, the Scriptures portray children as blessings from God and sources of joy, deserving of guidance and nurture from both parents and members of the faith community. Jesus’ suggestion that children are “models of greatness”¹⁸ further reinforces God’s great valuing of children. Theologians within the Christian era, however, have not always depicted children in such

¹³Stonehouse and May, 14.

¹⁴Carroll, 191.

¹⁵Ibid., 194.

¹⁶Strange, 70-71.

¹⁷Otto Michel, “Oikos,” *TDNT* (1967), 5:130.

¹⁸Stonehouse and May, 17.

positive terms. It is to a brief examination of historical perspectives on children within the Christian tradition that we now turn.¹⁹

Historical Perspectives on Children

Throughout the centuries, theologians within the Christian church have expressed a variety of perspectives on children and childhood. Much of this diversity has revolved around the nature of children, particularly in regard to the sinfulness of children and thus their salvation. Were children to be considered innocent and good, or were they, by nature, evil and depraved? What was the status of children within the church, including when and why were they to be baptized? Were they to be considered of an equal status within the community of faith, or were they, until a certain age, in a different category than adult believers? Some discussion has also centered on the nature of adult obligations to children.

The Post-Apostolic Church

Although the Christian church evolved in a world where children were not highly valued,²⁰ the historical evidence suggests that the early post-Apostolic church attempted to follow the example of Jesus by providing a countercultural, all-inclusive environment for children and other marginalized groups.²¹ The Patristic evidence of this era suggests that children tended to be embraced by the community and functioned not just as spectators during worship services, but were taught alongside the adults, occasionally called on to serve,²² and partook in the celebration of the Lord's Supper.²³ Similarly, the early church

¹⁹For a more comprehensive overview of historical perspectives on children in the Christian tradition, see James Riley Estep Jr., who explores views of children in the Ante-Nicene (second- and third-century) church ("The Christian Nurture of Children in the Second and Third Centuries" in *Nurturing Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives and Best Practices*, ed. Holly Catterton Allen [Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2008]); and Marcia J. Bunge, ed., who examines how key theologians from the fourth to the twentieth centuries have viewed children (*The Child in Christian Thought* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001]).

²⁰Frank R. Cowell, *Life in Ancient Rome* (New York: Perigee, 1980), 35; Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 69, 73.

²¹This period encompasses the last part of the first century and stretches out to the middle of the second century. The subapostolic writings such as 1 Clement and *Didache*, as well as the writings of the Apostolic Fathers appear during this period. See Francis Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops* (New York: Newman, 2001), 54.

²²See, e.g., Cyprian, *Letter 32* (ANF 5:312).

²³Strange, 104, suggests that while the NT is silent on children's participation in the early Christians' Lord's Supper, there are no reasons why they should have been forbidden from being a part of the ordinance. After all, Strange notes, the early Christians were familiar with the Passover celebration, in which children were required to participate. Furthermore, he argues "we can also say that when we begin to have some

appears to have looked to Jesus' teachings on children for understanding their nature.²⁴ Thus the Patristic writers of the early second century tended to highlight the innocence, rather than sinfulness, of children.²⁵ It was not until

firm evidence, in the third century, we find children receiving Communion without the matter being controversial. If a change had occurred in the century and a half that separates the NT from our first reference to child communion, then it was a change that had happened without causing a stir. It would also have been a change in a period when children were generally relegated to a sphere of family religion and away from full participation in the church. If children were first admitted to communion during the second century, it would have been a move against the tide of the times. It seems more probable that they were admitted to the Lord's Table from the beginning" (ibid., 74). Generally scholars are in agreement that the evidence for children's participation in communion during the earliest Christian centuries is more implied than evident. One of the strongest evidences for the widespread acceptance of paedocommunion (i.e., infant communion) in the early centuries comes from Cyprian (d. ca. 258), who reports an incident where a child refused the cup: "When, however, the solemnities were finished, and the deacon began to offer the cup to those present, and when, as the rest received it, its turn approached, the little child . . . turned away its face, compressed its mouth with resisting lips, and refused the cup. Still the deacon persisting, and, although against her efforts, forced on her some of the sacrament of the cup" (*The Treatise on the Lapsed* 25 [ANF 5:444]). For more evidence supporting the claim of paedocommunion in the early Christian centuries, see Blake Purcell, "The Testimony of the Ancient Church," in *The Case for Covenant Communion*, ed. Gregg Strawbridge (Monroe, LA: Athanasius, 2006), 132-145; and O. M. Bakke, *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 246-251.

²⁴Estep, 65-67.

²⁵In the early Patristic writings, one finds statements such as: "Be simple and guileless, and you will be as the children who know not the wickedness that ruins the life of men" (*Herm. Mand.* 2.1 [ANF 2:20]). "They are as infant children, in whose hearts no evil originates; nor did they know what wickedness is. . . . Such accordingly, without doubt, dwell in the kingdom of God, because they defiled in nothing the commandments of God" (*Herm. Sim.* 9.29 [ANF 2:53]); "Since, therefore, having renewed us by the remission of our sins, He hath made us after another pattern, that we should possess the soul of children" (*Barn.* 6.11 [ANF 1:140]). Other Apostolic Fathers expressed similar sentiments. Aristides, e.g., wrote that on the death of a child God was to be thanked, "as for one who has passed through the world without sins" (*Apology* 15 [ANF 9:278]); Athenagoras argued that "for if only a just judgment were the cause of the resurrection, it would of course follow that those who had done neither evil nor good—namely, very young children—would not rise again" (*Res.* 14 [ANF 2:156]); Irenaeus (d. ca. 202) spoke of children as examples of "piety, righteousness, and submission" (*Haer.* 2.22.4 [ANF 1:391]); he also used the garden imagery of creation to describe the innocence and simplicity of children (*Epid.* 14, trans. J. Armitage Robinson [Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2002], 5); similarly, Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-215), and his pupil Origen (ca. 185-254) emphasized the innocence of children. Clement spoke of children as young lambs and birds, whose inner "harmlessness and innocence and placable nature . . . are acceptable to God"

the third century, within the context of debate over infant baptism, that the notion of children's sinfulness was introduced.

The first unambiguous reference to infant baptism appeared in the third century in writings ascribed to Hippolytus (d. ca. 235).²⁶ It appears that, at the time, the practice was still divisive and subject to debate. Tertullian (ca. 150-220), for example, argued for a "delay of baptism." "Why does the innocent period of life hasten to the 'remission of sins?'" he asked. Children, he believed, should know what they are asking for as far as salvation is concerned.²⁷ In contrast, Cyprian (d. ca. 258) was supportive of infant baptism, arguing that although children were not guilty of their own sins, they were "born after the flesh according to Adam," and thus in need of remission for "the sins of another."²⁸ Cyprian's views constitute the foundation upon which Augustine, one of the most important early church fathers, developed his views on infants and original sin, which became a watershed for the Christian understanding of the nature of children.²⁹

Augustine's (354-430) unique thoughts on the nature of children developed during the period of his disputations with Pelagius.³⁰ Prior to his involvement with this debate, Augustine appeared to affirm the innocence of children. In his treatise, *On the Freedom of the Will*, for example, and with reference to the children "slain by Herod," he suggested that, even though they had died unbaptized, these children were to be considered "martyrs" for whom God had some "good compensation."³¹ Later in his life, however, after

(*Paed.* 1.5 [ANF 2:212]), while Origen devoted several sections of his *Comm. Matt.* (13.16 [ANF 9:484-486]) to extol the virtues of children who have "not tasted sensual pleasures, and [have] no conception of the impulses of manhood."

²⁶"And they shall baptise the little children first. And if they can answer for themselves, let them answer. But if they cannot, let their parents answer or someone from their family" (*Trad. ap.* 21.3, ed. Gregory Dix [London: SPCK, 1968], 33). See also *NCE* (2003), s.v. "Baptism of Infants." For a discussion of whether Hippolytus authored this text, see Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 89-92.

²⁷"Let them know how to 'ask' for salvation, that you may seem (at least) to have given 'to him that asketh'" (Tertullian, *Bapt.* 18 [ANF 3:678]).

²⁸Cyprian, *Ep.* 58.5 (ANF 5:353-354).

²⁹Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 18-19.

³⁰Pelagius, a British monk, was a teacher in Rome around the time of Augustine. In essence, his teaching revolved around the theme of absolute freedom of human beings who are endowed with the ability to initiate the process of salvation by their own efforts without the need for God's unmerited grace (*ODCC* [1997], s.v. "Pelagianism"). For a comprehensive overview of Augustine's position on the nature of children, see Martha Ellen Stortz, "Where or When Was Your Servant Innocent? Augustine on Childhood," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 78-102; and Bakke, 97-104.

³¹Augustine, "Free Will" 3.23.67-69, in S. Aurelii Augustine, *De libero arbitrio*, trans. Carroll Mason Sparrow (Richmond, VA: Dietz, 1947), 141-142.

reflecting on his own infancy and in response to the Pelagian controversy, Augustine firmly rejected any form of innate innocence of newborn human beings. Against Pelagius's argument that infants were born in the same state as Adam before the fall, thus possessing perfect free will, and that sin was the result of forming a habit of sinning as a result of "evil examples" of sinning individuals such as parents,³² Augustine argued that "the sin of Adam was the sin of the whole human race."³³ As a result, he asserted, although they lacked the physical ability to do harm, infants were sinful from birth. They not only inherited and exhibited sinful tendencies, but as a further consequence of Adam's transgression they carried personal moral guilt for Adam's transgression (or original sin) and could not be considered "innocent."³⁴ Baptism was then needed to remove the guilt of sin and to cement the infant's status as being a part of the family of God, i.e., the church.³⁵ Thus Augustine's understanding of children and childhood as reflected in his *Confessions* was much less positive than that of his patristic predecessors.³⁶

The Medieval Church

Augustine's teachings on original sin, its influence upon children's nature, and the importance of infant baptism "formed and informed, transformed and deformed" attitudes toward children within the Christian tradition.³⁷ By the fifth century, infant baptism was well established; and by the eleventh century, the Medieval church, preying on parental fears of their children's eternal damnation, had introduced baptismal regulations, including penance and monetary fines for infractions.³⁸ It was also during the Medieval era that the church came to question children's participation in the Lord's Supper. Although the liturgical guidelines from the eleventh and twelfth centuries allowed for the administration of the eucharistic elements to newly baptized infants, this practice was beginning to die out by the late Middle Ages. This coincided with the development of the doctrine of transubstantiation, a belief that, following the priestly blessing, the elements were substantially, but not

³²J. L. Neve, *A History of Christian Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1946), 141.

³³*Ibid.*, 141.

³⁴Augustine, *Conf.* 1.7, trans. Vernon J. Bourke (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1953), 12.

³⁵Roger Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Academic, 1999), 270-274. For a deeper study of Augustine's response to Pelagianism, see Augustine, *Four Anti-Pelagian Writings: On Nature and Grace, On the Proceedings of Pelagius, On the Predestination of the Saints, On the Gift of Perseverance*, trans. John A. Mourant and William J. Collinge (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1992).

³⁶See Augustine, *Conf.* 1.1-20, in Bourke, 3-32.

³⁷Stortz, 79.

³⁸Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Children* (London: Yale University Press, 2001), 23-24.

accidentally, transformed into the real blood and body of Christ.³⁹ Because of this, church leaders became convinced that the elements, i.e., the bread and wine, should be treated with greater reverence, and guarded against “being spit or regurgitated.” Children came to be seen as too young to understand and believe in the real presence, both necessary for “receiv[ing] communion rightly.”⁴⁰

The Medieval church also saw an attempt at a more middle-of-the-road position on the doctrine of original sin. Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1224-1274), a Medieval theologian, endeavored to reconcile the Augustinian doctrine of original sin with a more optimistic, Aristotelian vision of children, which tended to view children as essentially innocent, but immature.⁴¹ Although Aquinas accepted the official Augustinian position of the fundamental sinfulness of children, he viewed children as having “potential for spiritual growth, with the aid of grace.”⁴² The greatest challenge to Aquinas’s thinking was the apparent contradiction between his acceptance of an Augustinian understanding of original sin as an impediment to salvation⁴³ and his Aristotelian belief in the actual innocence of unbaptized children.⁴⁴ In his solution to this theological quandary, Aquinas proposed the existence of *limbus infantium*, or children’s limbo,⁴⁵ a state between heaven and hell where unbaptized children were consigned.⁴⁶ As bearers of original sin, Aquinas

³⁹*Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1994), 336-337. The term “transubstantiation,” or change of substance, was used for the first time during the Lateran Council (1215) and developed under the influence of the newly discovered Aristotelian writings, in which Aristotle distinguished between the substance and the accidents of all things. It became accepted that during the eucharistic sacrifice the visible accidents such as taste, color, and texture remained unchanged, while the underlying invisible substance became the real body and blood of Christ (John Strykowski, “Transubstantiation,” in *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, ed. Richard P. McBrien [New York: HarperCollins, 1995], 1264).

⁴⁰Orme, 214.

⁴¹Christina L. H. Traina, “A Person in the Making: Thomas Aquinas on Children and Childhood,” in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 106; cf. Joseph James Chambliss, *Educational Theory as Theory of Conduct: From Aristotle to Dewey* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 34-35; and A. Scott Loveless and Thomas Holman, *The Family in the New Millennium: Strengthening the Family* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2006), 6-9.

⁴²Traina, 106.

⁴³Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III, Q68. Art. 2, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1981), 4:2393-2394; cf. idem, Appendix 1, Q1, Art.2 (5:3002).

⁴⁴Eileen Sweeney, “Vice and Sin,” in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen J. Pope (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 158-159.

⁴⁵Christopher Beiting, “Limbo in Thomas Aquinas,” *Thomist* 62 (1998): 238-239.

⁴⁶Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Suppl. Q69, Art. 6 (5:2822-2823); cf. Shulamith Shabar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 1990), 45.

asserted, the souls of unbaptized children know that they do not deserve heaven, thus they do not “grieve through being deprived of what is beyond [their] power to obtain,”⁴⁷ but rather, “enjoy full natural happiness.”⁴⁸

While Medieval theologians wrote little on the nature of children and childhood, and generally upheld the Augustinian doctrine of original sin and the need for infant baptism, Medieval Catholicism was influenced by Aristotelian philosophy, and thus tended to present a milder picture of children, and humanity in general, than that of Augustine. The Reformation of the sixteenth century, on the other hand, rejected Aristotelian influences upon Christian theology and attempted a return to an Augustinian vision of childhood.⁴⁹

The Reformation

In many ways, the Protestant Reformers’ views on children and childhood were congruent with that of their predecessors. Martin Luther (1483-1546), for example, was an Augustinian monk who held deeply pessimistic anthropological views. Like Augustine, he believed that infants entered the world not merely inclined to evil, but as fallen sinners, evil from birth and infected with “irreversible egoism,” which he saw as the “all-pervading symptom of human perversion.”⁵⁰ Thus he vehemently defended the practice of infant baptism on the grounds that children come into the world infected with original sin and need the grace of this sacrament as urgently as do other human beings.⁵¹ Gerald Strauss, however, notes that while such a pessimistic anthropology satisfied “the claims of theology,” in practice Luther viewed children as “tractable, open to suggestion and receptive to mollifying influence.”⁵² In their early years, he believed, children were relatively innocent, only to be “spoiled” in later years. For this reason, children needed firm parental guidance in order to implant “religious and moral impulses.”⁵³ It is in this area of parent-child relations that Luther contributed a unique perspective on children and childhood.⁵⁴ At a time when the church viewed the vocation of

⁴⁷Aquinas *Summa Theologica*, Appendix 1, Q1, Art. 2 (5:3004).

⁴⁸*ODCC*, s.v. “Limbo.” Cf. Beiting, 238. In recent centuries, Aquinas’s doctrine of limbo created much theological difficulty for Roman Catholic theologians. See George J. Dyer, “Limbo: A Theological Evaluation,” *Theological Studies* 19 (1958): 32-49.

⁴⁹Gerald Strauss, *Luther’s House of Learning: Indoctrination of the Young in the German Reformation* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), 33-34.

⁵⁰Strauss, 33.

⁵¹For a detailed study of Luther’s view on the sacrament of baptism and the reasons why Luther saw baptism as an essential part of the Christian life, see Jonathan D. Trigg, *Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther* (New York: Brill, 1994).

⁵²Strauss, 34, attributes this to the fact that eventually the monk Luther became a kind and loving father.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 35.

⁵⁴Jane E. Strohl, “The Child in Luther’s Theology: ‘For What Purpose Do We Older

priests and monks as a “religiously superior or more spiritual” occupation than any other, Luther insisted on the priesthood of all believers.⁵⁵ This, according to William Lazareth, conditioned him to see the vocation of parents, or any other vocation of the common life, as an equally significant exercise of that priesthood.⁵⁶ Therefore, Luther devotes much time delineating the duties of parents toward their children. Providing children with care and nurture, he believed, was central to Christian discipleship, for when parents fulfilled their duties to their children, they were serving as their “apostle and bishop.” “There is no greater or nobler authority on earth than that of parents over their children, for this authority is both spiritual and temporal.”⁵⁷ “Indeed,” he concluded, “for what purpose do we older folks exist, other than to care for, instruct, and bring up the young?”⁵⁸

In the same vein as Luther, John Calvin (1509-1564) also espoused a deeply pessimistic anthropology, spawned by the Augustinian concept of original sin. In fact, his position on the nature of children is often seen as even “more pessimistic than that of any of his predecessors or contemporaries,” ultimately leading to his doctrine of total depravity.⁵⁹ Regarding children, he wrote, “For that reason, even infants themselves, while they carry their condemnation along with them from the mother’s womb, are guilty not of another’s fault but of their own. For, even though the fruits of their inquiry have not yet come forth, they have the seed enclosed within them. Indeed, their whole nature is a seed of sin; hence it can be only hateful and abhorrent to God.”⁶⁰ While Calvin occasionally spoke positively of children,⁶¹ more

Folks Exist, Other Than to Care for . . . the Young?” in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 134-141; cf. “Apology of the Augsburg Confession,” in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 103.

⁵⁵Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian,” in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 399; cf. Alister E. McGrath, *Christianity’s Dangerous Idea* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 52-53; Jaroslav Pelikan, *Reformation of Church and Dogma* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 272-273.

⁵⁶William H. Lazareth, *Luther on the Christian Home: An Application of the Social Ethics of the Reformation* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 132-133.

⁵⁷Martin Luther, “The Estate of Marriage,” in *Luther’s Works*, ed. Walter I. Brandt and Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962), 45:46.

⁵⁸Martin Luther, “To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany,” in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 464.

⁵⁹Barbara Pitkin, “The Heritage of the Lord: Children in the Theology of Calvin,” in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 167.

⁶⁰John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. and indexed Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973), 1:251.

⁶¹In book 1 of the *Institutes*, e.g., we find this statement: “‘Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings thou hast established strength.’ Indeed, he not only declares that a

frequently he portrayed God as “wondrously angry toward them; not because he [was] disposed of himself to hate them, but because he would frighten them by the feeling of his wrath in order to humble their fleshly pride, shake off their sluggishness, and arouse them to repentance.”⁶² As Jerome Berryman notes, however, despite his pessimistic understanding of the nature of children, Calvin tended not to dwell on the sinfulness of children and was deeply concerned with their upbringing and education.⁶³ Unfortunately, those who followed Calvin tended to take his teachings to the extreme, portraying an angry God to children, and instilling fear, rather than love, of God.⁶⁴

The first serious challenge to the doctrine of original sin did not occur, primarily, within a discussion of the nature of children, but instead transpired within the debate over baptism. The Anabaptists, the “step-children” of the Protestant Reformation,⁶⁵ agreed with much of the teachings of other Reformers; however, many of them believed that the magisterial Reformers had only gone halfway in implementing true reformation of the church and returning to NT Christianity.⁶⁶ One issue that became of central importance to the Anabaptists was baptism, which, they believed, should be voluntary and based on an understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ.⁶⁷ Menno Simons (1492-1559), a former Catholic priest and a prominent Anabaptist leader, asserted that since infants and young children “have no faith by which they can realize that God is, and that He is a rewarder of both good and evil, as they plainly show by their fruits, therefore they have not the fear of God,

clear mirror of God’s works is in humankind, but that infants, while they nurse at their mother’s breasts, have tongues so eloquent to preach his glory that there is no need at all of other orators” (*Institutes* 1.5.3 [McNeill and Battles, 55]).

⁶²Calvin, *Institutes* 3.2.12 (McNeill and Battles, 557); cf. Jerome W. Berryman, *Children and the Theologians: Clearing the Way for Grace* (New York: Morehouse, 2009), 101.

⁶³Berryman, 102; Pitkin, 165.

⁶⁴Philip Greven, *Spare the Child* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 136; cf. Berryman, 101. Also see Jonathan Edwards’s sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” in *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God and Eleven More Classic Messages* (Orlando: Bridge-Logos, 2003), 37-56.

⁶⁵For a detailed study of Anabaptism, see Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964).

⁶⁶Olson, 415; Verduin, 11-20.

⁶⁷Williston Walker notes that the Anabaptists’ opposition to infant baptism stemmed from the larger issue of “their opposition to the use of force in matters of faith and their abandonment of the age-old requirement of religious uniformity” (*A History of the Christian Church* [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970], 327); cf. Menno Simons, “Christian Baptism,” in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, trans. Leonard Verduin, ed. J. C. Wenger (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 257; Keith Graber Miller, “Complex Innocence, Obligatory Nurture, and Parental Vigilance: ‘The Child’ in the Work of Menno Simons,” in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 195.

and consequently they have nothing upon which they should be baptized.⁶⁸ Baptizing infants, he asserted, gave parents a false sense of security about their children's salvation, resulting in the possibility of children being "raised without the fear of God," and thus living "without faith and new birth, without Spirit, Word and Christ."⁶⁹

Instead of baptizing infants, "who cannot be taught, admonished, or instructed," Simons exhorted Christian parents to nurture their children's faith until they had reached the "years of discretion,"⁷⁰ when they could make the decision to be baptized. He thus states:

Little ones must wait according to God's Word until they can understand the holy Gospel of grace and sincerely confess it; and then, and then only it is time, no matter how young or old, for them to receive Christian baptism as the infallible Word of our beloved Lord Jesus Christ has taught and commanded all true believers in His holy Gospel. . . . If they die before coming to years of discretion, that is, in childhood, before they have come to years of understanding and before they have faith, then they die under the promise of God, and that by no other means than the generous promise of grace given through Christ Jesus. And if they come to years of discretion and have faith, then they should be baptized. But if they do not accept or believe the Word when they shall have arrived at the years of discretion, no matter whether they are baptized or not, they will be damned, as Christ Himself teaches.⁷¹

Implicit in Simons's rejection of infant baptism was his understanding of the nature of children. Although Simons acknowledges that children have an innate tendency to sin, "inherited at birth by all descendants and children of corrupt, sinful Adam," a tendency that "is not inaptly called original sin,"⁷² he appears to differentiate "between a *nature* predisposed toward sin and actual *sinning*, disallowing the former to obliterate childhood innocence."⁷³ Thus, according to Simons, although children inherit original sin, they are innocent "as long as they live in their innocence," and "through the merits, death, and blood of Christ, in grace," they are "partakers of the promise."⁷⁴ Children who die "before coming to the years of discretion," declares Simons, "die under the promise of God."⁷⁵

⁶⁸Simons, 240.

⁶⁹Menno Simons, "Reply to False Accusations," in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, trans. Leonard Verduin, ed. J. C. Wenger (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 570.

⁷⁰Simons, "Christian Baptism," 241.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Simons, "Reply to False Accusations," 563.

⁷³Miller, 201, emphasis original.

⁷⁴Menno Simons, "Reply to Gellius," in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, trans. Leonard Verduin, ed. J. C. Wenger (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 708.

⁷⁵Simons, "Christian Baptism," 241. Furthermore, Simons suggests that children of both believing and unbelieving parents remain innocent through the grace of Christ (ibid., 280; idem, "Reply to Gellius," 707).

The concept of an “age of discretion” presented the Anabaptists with a “theological conundrum”; namely, if children were born with a sinful nature, but were innocent of Adam’s sin, at what age did they become accountable for the actual sin in their lives?⁷⁶ Early Anabaptist leaders, including Hans Hut (ca. 1490-1527), Ambrosius Spittelmaier (ca. 1497-1528), and Hans Schlaffer (d. 1528), suggested that “adults aged thirty and over qualified for believers’ baptism,” basing their view on a “desire to imitate Jesus,” who was baptized at age thirty.⁷⁷ At the other end of the spectrum, Balthasar Hubmaier (ca. 1480-1528) suggested that a minimum age for baptism was seven, which was the age at which the “will” of the child was thought to develop.⁷⁸ In contrast, Simons did not identify an exact age of discretion, suggesting only that as they grew, children increasingly demonstrated “the evil seed of Adam.”⁷⁹ Furthermore, he asserted, “no matter how young or how old” a child,⁸⁰ it was spiritual maturity rather than age that determined accountability and readiness for baptism.⁸¹ Until that time, the grace of Christ covered the sinful nature of children.

The Anabaptist perspective, which affirmed the sinful nature of children and the need for God’s grace for salvation, while moving away from an Augustinian concept of original sin, impacted only a minority of Christian traditions.⁸² The Lutheran and Reformed traditions continued to embrace the traditional concept of original sin. One significant exception was Jacobus Arminius, a Dutch Reformed theologian, who took exception to the view that the guilt of Adam’s sin was imputed to infants. Because of the atoning work of Christ, infants were innocent, and if they died in infancy, their salvation was secure.⁸³ Other Reformers, particularly those influenced by Calvinism, vehemently opposed Arminius’s views; however, his thinking ultimately influenced the beliefs of John Wesley (1703-1791) and the Methodist movement.

⁷⁶Holly Catterton Allen, “Theological Perspectives on Children in the Church: Anabaptist/Believers Church,” in *Nurturing Children’s Spirituality*, ed. Holly Catterton Allen (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2008), 118.

⁷⁷Miller, 206; cf. Allen, 119.

⁷⁸Miller, 206.

⁷⁹Simons, “Christian Baptism,” 240.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 241.

⁸¹Miller, 206.

⁸²Today the Amish, some Baptists, Brethren, Hutterites, Mennonites, Bruderhof Communities, and Quakers are considered successors of the Continental Anabaptists. See Allen, 115.

⁸³Jacobus Arminius, *Apology or Defence*, 13-14, in *The Works of James Arminius*, trans. and ed. James Nichols (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 10-14; cf. Mark A. Ellis, *Simon Episcopius’ Doctrine of Original Sin* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 77-79.

The Early Modern Era

Wesley's views on the nature of children, which some scholars consider eclectic, are neither "fully consistent" nor "complete."⁸⁴ Most commentators agree that Wesley accepted the notion of original sin,⁸⁵ which he seemed to have understood as an inherited "corruption of nature" that affects "all mankind," and requires "even infants [to be] born again."⁸⁶ Wesley saw this corruption as so pervasive that even the "holiest parents beg[a]t unholy children, and [could] not communicate their grace to them as they [did] their nature."⁸⁷ Even though every child inherited original sin, Wesley asserted, God's grace was also at work from the beginning of life. God extended this grace, which Wesley termed "preventing grace" to every human being, without waiting "for the call of man."⁸⁸ It was because of God's preventing (or prevenient) grace that all human beings had the ability to respond to God.⁸⁹ Although Wesley's understanding of the nature of children has been interpreted in many ways,⁹⁰ it appears that he held a belief in original sin "in dynamic tension" with a conviction that God's grace was at work in the life of a child.⁹¹ This same tension is inherent in Wesley's views on baptism and conversion.⁹² Although scholars disagree on

⁸⁴ See Susan Etheridge Willhauck, "John Wesley's View of Children: Foundations for Contemporary Christian Education" (Ph.D. dissertation, Catholic University of America, 1992), 123. The incompleteness is perhaps because Wesley himself married late and had no children of his own. See Richard P. Heitzenrater, "John Wesley and Children," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 298, 286.

⁸⁵Willhauck, 123.

⁸⁶John Wesley, *The Doctrine of Original Sin according to Scripture, Reason and Experience in Answer to Dr. Taylor* (New York: Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States, 1817), 340-341.

⁸⁷Ibid., 340.

⁸⁸John Wesley, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation" in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 3:207. Roger Olson defines prevenient grace as follows: "it is simply the convicting, calling, enlightening and enabling grace of God that goes before conversion and makes repentance and faith possible" (*Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Academic, 2006], 35).

⁸⁹Michael J. Scanlon, "The Christian Anthropology of John Wesley" (Th.D. dissertation, Catholic University of America, 1969), 100-101; cf. Wesley, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation," 207-209.

⁹⁰For a detailed examination of Wesley's Christian anthropology, as well as an overview of the many ways it has been interpreted by commentators, see Willhauck, 102-173.

⁹¹Catherine Stonehouse, "Children in Wesleyan Thought," in *Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research and Application*, ed. Donald Ratcliffe (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2004), 140.

⁹²Ibid.

his understanding of infant baptism,⁹³ Wesley himself affirmed and practiced the baptizing of infants. He did not, however, view baptism as necessary for salvation.⁹⁴ Rather, his position was that baptism was the “initiatory sacrament which enters us into covenant with God;”⁹⁵ but being part of the covenant did not automatically secure salvation. Each individual still needed to experience conversion or new birth through justifying faith,⁹⁶ which, according to Wesley, was possible even in early childhood,⁹⁷ thus making it imperative that children’s faith be carefully nurtured.⁹⁸

American revivalist preachers, including Calvinist Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)⁹⁹ and Arminian Charles G. Finney (1792-1875),¹⁰⁰ underscored this theme of childhood conversion. In contrast with Wesley, however, revivalists’ appeals were often accompanied by threats of hellfire and expectations for both children and adults to experience emotional conversions.¹⁰¹ Fearing for the salvation of their children, “parents regularly took their children to such meetings, ‘that they might be converted.’”¹⁰²

Horace Bushnell (1802-1876), a prominent Congregational pastor who came to be considered “the quintessential American theologian of

⁹³For an overview of the debate over infant baptism among Wesleyan scholars, see Willhauck, 134-136.

⁹⁴Ibid., 164.

⁹⁵John Wesley, “On Baptism,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 319.

⁹⁶For Wesley, infant baptism was clearly equivalent to the Jewish rite of circumcision, which required both a converted heart and an “inward circumcision” for salvation (“On Baptism,” 322-323). For a detailed discussion of Wesley’s views on infant baptism and conversion, see Willhauck, 125-173.

⁹⁷In his journal, Wesley provides an account of a three-year-old child, who went through a conversion just prior to his death (“Journal 6,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater [Nashville: Abingdon, 1991], 20:123; cf. Heitzenrater, 295).

⁹⁸Willhauck, 168, 238. For details of Wesley’s views regarding the nurture of children, see *ibid.*, 174-242. Cf. Heitzenrater, 285-299.

⁹⁹For an overview of Edwards’s theology of children, see Catherine A. Brekus, “Children of Wrath, Children of Grace: Jonathan Edwards and the Puritan Culture of Child Rearing” in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

¹⁰⁰May, Posteroski, Stonehouse, and Cannell, 104.

¹⁰¹Ibid., 104-105.

¹⁰²William Fee, *Bringing in the Sheaves* (Cincinnati: Cranston & Curts, 1896), 32, cited in A. Gregory Schneider, *The Way of the Cross Leads Home: The Domestication of American Methodism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 74; cf., Margaret Bendroth, “Horace Bushnell’s Christian Nurture,” in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 353.

childhood,¹⁰³ reacted against the revivalist emphasis on emotional experience as the mark of true conversion, claiming, in Margaret Bendroth's words, that "this requirement spiritually disenfranchised children from the start."¹⁰⁴ Instead of urging children to undergo emotional conversion experiences, Bushnell envisioned that children could be gradually guided toward faith by their parents.¹⁰⁵ In his classic text, *Christian Nurture* (first published in 1847), Bushnell suggested: "the child is to grow up a Christian, and never know himself as being otherwise."¹⁰⁶ This was a very simple statement, notes Theodore Thornton Munger, "but it shook New England theology to its foundations. The phrase, by its very form, challenged the extreme individualism into which the churches had lapsed, and recalled them to those organic relations between parents and children."¹⁰⁷ Although Bushnell assumed that the individual experience of conversion might eventually occur in the child's life,¹⁰⁸ he did not see that this needed to be "a sudden, cataclysmic event"; rather, he saw conversion as a "gradual awakening of the soul to God" under the influence of godly parents.¹⁰⁹ Instead of indoctrinating their children "in respect to their need of a new heart" and "turning all their little misdoings and bad tempers into evidences of their need of regeneration,"¹¹⁰ parents should "rather seek to teach a feeling than a doctrine; to bathe the child in their own feeling of love to God, and dependence on him, and contrition for wrong before him."¹¹¹

¹⁰³Ibid., 352; cf. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *Theology in America: The Major Protestant Voices from Puritanism to Neo-Orthodoxy* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003), 317.

¹⁰⁴Bendroth, 352.

¹⁰⁵Much of Bushnell's classic, *Christian Nurture*, is devoted to a call for nurturing children's faith in a very different way from the one traditionally assumed within his contemporary Protestant circles ([New Haven: Yale University Press, 1888], see esp. "What Christian Nurture Is," 1-51).

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 4; cf. Berryman, 151. Bushnell's attitude toward children may have been spawned by his enjoyment of his own children. In her *Life and Letters of Horace Bushnell*, one of Bushnell's daughters, Mary Bushnell Cheney, recounts a happy childhood, due in part to her father's personality. She wrote: "First among my recollections of my father are the daily, after-dinner romps, not lasting long, but most vigorous and hearty at the moment." Her father's "frolics" became part of her memory of a rich and stimulating childhood, in which life was made "a paradise of nature, the recollection of which behind us might image to us the paradise of grace before us" ([New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903], 452-453).

¹⁰⁷Theodore T. Munger, *Horace Bushnell: Preacher and Theologian* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1899), 67.

¹⁰⁸Luther A. Weigle, "Introduction," in *Christian Nurture*, Horace Bushnell (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1888), 35; cf. Bushnell, 9-10, 15-16, 62.

¹⁰⁹Bendroth, 353.

¹¹⁰Bushnell, 59-60.

¹¹¹Ibid., 39.

Not surprisingly, Bushnell's opponents viewed his scaled-down understanding of conversion and faith formation as overly optimistic. Some suggested that he had essentially discarded the notion that children were born with a sinful nature, thus encouraging children to underestimate their need for regeneration and to "believe in the 'delusion' of their own righteousness."¹¹² Although scholars struggle to pinpoint Bushnell's views on human nature and original sin,¹¹³ it appears that he did not deny that sin was a universal human problem;¹¹⁴ however, he saw the transmission of sin as the result of intergenerational interactions. He thus wrote: "The sin of no person can be transmitted as a sin, or charged to the account of another. But it does not therefore follow, that there are no moral connections between individuals, by which one becomes a corrupter of others."¹¹⁵ Indeed, according to Bendroth, he viewed "salvation as a thoroughly intergenerational process, taught and transmitted" through family interactions.¹¹⁶ His faith in the influence of the home environment, particularly "the near salvific power" of a godly mother,¹¹⁷ led him to believe that careful Christian nurture would most certainly lead children to become faithful Christians.¹¹⁸ Although Bushnell's views on Christian nurture developed in reaction to revivalism and to the individualism of the Victorian era, the broader context of his work was a society influenced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's views on the innate goodness of children.¹¹⁹ Thus despite opposition from his more theologically conservative critics, Bushnell's views "soon came to dominate Protestant conceptions" of children and childhood.¹²⁰

The Contemporary Period

Despite the weaknesses of Bushnell's views, particularly his belief that good Christian nurture always produced good children and thus could solve

¹¹²Bendroth, 360.

¹¹³See William R. Adamson, *Bushnell Rediscovered* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1966), 90-95; Barbara Cross, *Horace Bushnell: Minister to Changing America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 126-130; H. Shelton Smith, *Changing Conceptions of Original Sin* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), 144-163; Berryman, 153.

¹¹⁴Weigle, 35. For a detailed exposition of Bushnell's doctrine of sin, see also Smith, 144-163.

¹¹⁵Bushnell, 101-102.

¹¹⁶Bendroth, 362.

¹¹⁷Ibid., 358; cf. Bushnell, 44-45 and 248, who writes that the mother "gives them [the children] a great mark of honor, and sets them in a way of great hope and preferment, as regards all highest character."

¹¹⁸Brekus, 325; cf. Bushnell, 211-215.

¹¹⁹Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) was a French philosopher and writer. His novel *Émile* became a groundbreaking work on children's education during the Enlightenment era. For a careful study of Rousseau's views regarding human nature, see James Delaney, *Rousseau and the Ethics of Virtue* (New York: Continuum, 2006).

¹²⁰Bendroth, 350.

the problems of humanity,¹²¹ the contemporary view that the family plays a critical role in faith formation of children owes much to Bushnell.¹²² His work provided the impetus for the religious-education movement of the twentieth century, which incorporated the principles of child growth and development emerging from psychological research and contributed to a growing understanding of children's spiritual formation.¹²³

While the twentieth century was marked by burgeoning interest in the education and Christian formation of children,¹²⁴ the twenty-first century has seen an escalation of interest in the theology of children and childhood. Marcia Bunge, a theologian at Valparaiso University, Indiana, and editor of two seminal works, *The Child in Christian Thought* and *The Child in the Bible*, has been instrumental in the rediscovery of this area of theology. Reflecting on the "narrow and even destructive" ways in which Christian theologians have depicted children and childhood through history, she challenges contemporary Christian thinkers to "retriev[e] a broader, richer, and more complex picture of children."¹²⁵ She suggests that the Scriptures and Christian tradition offer six seemingly paradoxical "ways of speaking about the nature of children," which, when "held in tension," can provide a richer understanding of children and adult responsibilities to them.¹²⁶ While children are "gifts of God and sources of joy," they are also "sinful creatures and moral agents," and are born into a brokenness that makes them less than what God intended for them to be. Children are also "developing beings who need instruction and guidance"; however, this must be held in tension with the biblical teaching that they are "fully human and made in the image of God." In addition, Jesus taught that children are "models of faith and sources of inspiration"; yet, simultaneously, they are also "orphans, neighbors, and strangers in need of justice and compassion."¹²⁷ Unless the

¹²¹See Smith, 144-149, for an account of various theologians who responded critically to Bushnell.

¹²²Marcia Bunge, "Introduction," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 22.

¹²³Many contemporary educators consider Bushnell to be the undisputed "Father of Modern Christian Education" in America. See E. A. Daniel and J. W. Wade, eds., *Foundation for Christian Education* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1999), 55; cf. Michael J. Anthony and Warren Benson, *Exploring the History and Philosophy of Christian Education: Principles for the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003), 326.

¹²⁴For a concise overview of twentieth-century developments in religious education, see Maria Harris and Gabriel Moran, *Reshaping Religious Education: Conversations on Contemporary Practice* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998).

¹²⁵Marcia Bunge, "Historical Perspectives on Children in the Church," in *Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research and Applications*, ed. Donald Ratcliffe (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2004), 44.

¹²⁶Ibid.

¹²⁷Ibid, 45-50.

paradoxes of all six perspectives are held in tension, suggests Bunge, we “risk treating [children] in inadequate and harmful ways.”¹²⁸

Thus perspectives on children have undergone dramatic changes in the past two millennia of Christian tradition. In the earliest decades of the Christian church, perspectives on children were predominantly positive, and the innocence of children was emphasized. Further, at a time when children lived on the margins of society, the evidence suggests that the Christian church welcomed children as equal members of the faith community. With the doctrine of original sin, however, came an emphasis on the sinfulness and moral responsibility of children, resulting in both inadequate and destructive ways of thinking about children. An attempt to reject the perspective that sees children as sinful, however, gave rise to two distinct challenges: (1) the theological challenge of an age of accountability; and (2) a more naturalistic view that a child can grow into faith through adequate Christian nurture, negating the need for an encounter with the living Christ. In contrast, the contemporary perspective on children “primarily as gifts of God and models of faith” can result in a neglect of their moral and spiritual formation.¹²⁹ Christian history gives evidence to the inadequacy of a “narrow” view of children, and to the need for the “broad” and “complex” perspective, such as suggested by Bunge.¹³⁰

Toward a Seventh-day Adventist Perspective on Children

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has a rich history of ministry to and with children; however, there has been little theological reflection about the nature of children and their spiritual formation among Adventist theologians.¹³¹ Thus a carefully articulated theology of children and childhood has not always been the foundation for ministry with children in the Adventist Church. As a result, Adventist parents and those involved in ministry with children have at times reached out to non-Adventist sources, without realizing the theological underpinnings of these sources.¹³² The premise of this article is that the practice of ministry with children within an Adventist context should flow out of an Adventist theology. The remainder of this paper will utilize Bunge’s “six ways of speaking about the nature of children”¹³³ as a framework for exploring an Adventist perspective on children.

¹²⁸Ibid, 50.

¹²⁹Ibid.

¹³⁰Ibid., 44.

¹³¹Despite careful research, we have been unable to locate any significant work on this topic.

¹³²Many Adventists have embraced the popular parenting program, “Growing Kids God’s Way,” which is based on Calvinist presuppositions, and thus is not always congruent with an Adventist understanding of parent-child relationships.

¹³³Bunge, “Historical Perspectives on Children in the Church,” 44.

Gifts of God and Sources of Joy versus
Sinful Creatures and Moral Agents

From Scripture, it is evident that children are a sign of God's blessing on humanity, as well as sources of joy and delight; however, children are also born into a brokenness that makes them less than what God intended for them to be. Contemporary understandings of children's developmental needs might seem to imply that speaking about children's sinfulness is more destructive than helpful. Indeed the historical emphasis on children as sinful and morally responsible has often "warped Christian approaches to children";¹³⁴ however, the Scriptures do teach the universality of human sin.¹³⁵ Thus, as Bunge suggests, "the notion that children are sinful is worth revisiting and critically retrieving."¹³⁶

Although Adventists reject a purely Augustinian conception of original sin, the official teaching of the church affirms that Adam's sin "resulted in the condition of estrangement from God in which every human being is born. This estrangement involves an inherent tendency to commit sin."¹³⁷ This must, of necessity, include children. Despite much discussion regarding the nature of humanity, however, little of the contemporary Adventist debate has pertained directly to children. Thus Adventism does not have a complete or systematic theology of the nature of children. Early Adventists had diverse views on the innocence versus sinfulness of infants. James White, one of the founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, maintained that Adventists had "no settled faith on this point,"¹³⁸ and given that the Scriptures were silent on this topic, "no possible good" could come from such discussions.¹³⁹ White's counsel did not, however, deter others from commenting on this subject. Uriah Smith suggested that the law had "no claim on infants; for they never transgressed it,"¹⁴⁰ and thus, he believed, infants would be saved even though they "[died] in Adam" like the rest of humanity.¹⁴¹ Similarly, G. W. Morse suggested that children who died prior to reaching the age of accountability would be saved,

¹³⁴Marcia J. Bunge, "The Dignity and Complexity of Children: Constructing Christian Theologies of Childhood," in *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality: Perspectives from the World's Religious Traditions*, ed. Karen-Marie Yust (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 59.

¹³⁵See, e.g., Rom 5:12, 19; Gal 5:17; Eph 2:3.

¹³⁶Bunge, "Historical Perspectives on Children in the Church," 46.

¹³⁷*Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1966), s.v. "Sin;" cf. J. M. Fowler, "Sin," in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 265; A. E. Cairus, "The Doctrine of Man," in *ibid.*, 216-217, 226.

¹³⁸James White, "Questions and Answers," *Review and Herald* 21/4, 23 December 1862, 29.

¹³⁹James White, "Matthew 18:1-6," *Review and Herald* 18/21, 22 October 1861, 164.

¹⁴⁰Uriah Smith, "The Resurrection," *Review and Herald* 62/3, 20 January 1885, 48.

¹⁴¹Uriah Smith, "To Correspondents," *Review and Herald* 47/17, 17 April 1876, 133.

as they had no sins for which they were personally accountable.¹⁴² A significant contribution to the discussion on the nature of children transpired within the debate about infant baptism. In a similar vein to the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century, J. H. Waggoner suggested that infants who had committed no sin did not need baptism for the purpose of washing away original sin and were saved through “the Gospel.”¹⁴³ He wrote, “The death of Christ avails for them without conditions, because they have committed no sin.”¹⁴⁴ This teaching appears to have been affirmed by Ellen White, the wife of James White and also one of the founders of Adventism, in her words regarding the resurrection of infants:

As the little infants come forth immortal from their dusty beds, they immediately wing their way to their mothers’ arms. They meet again nevermore to part. But many of the little ones have no mother there. We listen in vain for the rapturous song of triumph from the mother. The angels receive the motherless infants and conduct them to the tree of life.¹⁴⁵

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has traditionally heeded James White’s advice, and has adopted no official position on the innocence of infants and children. However, although, on one hand, Adventists affirm that every human being is born with an innate tendency to evil, on the other, they reject a purely Augustinian notion of original sin. This potentially presents Adventists with two theological challenges. First, if children are considered innocent, and thus are not baptized as infants, what is their status in the church? Should they “be considered simply as pagans, until they make a positive voluntary commitment?”¹⁴⁶ Should unbaptized children be just spectators during worship services, or should they be taught alongside the adults and occasionally called on to serve, as was the practice in the early church? Should they partake in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, or should they be excluded on the basis that “that which is holy” should not be given “to the dogs?”¹⁴⁷ This lack of theological clarity regarding the status of unbaptized Adventist children has

¹⁴²G. W. Morse, “Scripture Questions,” *Review and Herald* 65/32, 7 August 1888, 506.

¹⁴³J. H. Waggoner, “Thoughts on Baptism,” *Review and Herald* 51/12, 21 March 1878, 89.

¹⁴⁴J. H. Waggoner, “Infantile Logic,” *Signs of the Times* 5/15, 10 April 1879, 116.

¹⁴⁵E. G. White, *Selected Messages* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 1958), 2:260.

¹⁴⁶G. Vandervelde, “Believers Church Ecclesiology as Ecumenical Challenge,” in *The Believers Church: A Voluntary Church*, ed. W. H. Brackney (Kitchener, ONT: Pandora), 213, cited in Holly Catterton Allen, “Theological Perspectives on Children in the Church: Anabaptist/Believers Church,” in *Nurturing Children’s Spirituality* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2008), 118.

¹⁴⁷The earliest surviving church manual, dating from early in the second century A.D., says: “let no one eat or drink from your eucharist except those baptized in the name of [the] Lord, for the Lord has likewise said concerning this: ‘Do not give what is holy to the dogs’” (*Didache* 9:5 in *The Didache: Text, Translation, Analysis, and Commentary*, trans. and ed. Aaron Milavec [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004], 23).

resulted in their exclusion from participation in the Lord's Supper, despite the assertion that Adventists practice "open Communion."¹⁴⁸

Second, if children are born with "tendencies to evil"¹⁴⁹ but are innocent until some later age when they are considered accountable for actual sin, "one is left with the conundrum of discovering what that age is."¹⁵⁰ Although this poses a theological challenge for Adventists, the concept of an age of accountability does appear to be grounded in the Scriptures, which teach that "Regarding matters of salvation," children are different from adults.¹⁵¹ The apostle Paul recognized this differentiation when he wrote, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I put childish ways behind me" (1 Cor 13:11). Several OT passages also make a distinction between children and adults, based on developmental differences in moral reasoning and discernment. Moses speaks of children as those "who today do not yet know right from wrong" (Deut 1:39).¹⁵² Similarly, Isaiah speaks of a time in children's lives when they do not yet know "enough to reject the wrong and choose the right" (Isa 7:16).

Early Adventists also referred to a "time of . . . personal accountability"¹⁵³ or "years of accountability."¹⁵⁴ Although they did not identify an exact age, Ellen White suggested that "Children of eight, ten or twelve years" were "old enough to be addressed on the subject of personal religion."¹⁵⁵ Although it may not be possible to identify an exact age of accountability for all children, it is evident that, as they grow, children are increasingly capable of self-centered actions that are hurtful to others, as well as to themselves. Even Christian parents often see these actions only within a context of the psychosocial and

¹⁴⁸*Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2005), 85. A discussion was initiated in 2007 on the pages of *Ministry* magazine regarding children's participation in the Lord's Supper. Two opposing views were presented and the editors left readers to draw their own conclusions (see Darius Jankiewicz, "The Lord's Supper and Children's Participation," *Ministry*, June 2007, 11-15; and Robert Johnston, "Unbaptized Children and Communion," *Ministry*, June 2007, 15).

¹⁴⁹E. G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 2004), 373.

¹⁵⁰Allen, 118.

¹⁵¹Klaus Issler, "Biblical Perspectives on Developmental Grace for Nurturing Children's Spirituality," in *Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research, and Applications*, ed. Donald Ratcliff (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2004), 54.

¹⁵²Moses spoke these words to the Israelites when predicting that with the exception of their children and Joshua and Caleb, they would all die in the wilderness. Interestingly, Num 14:28-31 confirms that all those twenty years and older did indeed die without entering the Promised Land, which would seem to imply that those below the age of twenty were considered to "not yet know right from wrong" (Deut 1:39).

¹⁵³G. W. Morse, "Scripture Questions," *Review and Herald* 65/32, 7 August 1888, 506.

¹⁵⁴Ellen White, *Early Writings* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1945), 278.

¹⁵⁵Ellen White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1948), 1:400.

developmental limitations of children; however, it is important that adults be aware of children's capacity for sin, and, in developmentally appropriate ways, "help them to understand the impact of their actions," and, over time, to "accept growing [moral] responsibility for them."¹⁵⁶ Ellen White concurs, stating that even "very young children may have correct views of their state as sinners and of the way of salvation through Christ."¹⁵⁷ Within this context, however, it is also important to remember that the sinfulness of children cannot be equated with the sinfulness of adults. Children "do not need as much help to love God and neighbor." Neither have they yet "developed [the] negative thoughts and feelings that reinforce [the] destructive behaviors" of adults. Thus children should be treated gently.¹⁵⁸ In conclusion, whenever the sinfulness and moral responsibility of children are considered, it is important to hold these in tension with the scriptural teaching that children are a sign of God's blessing on humanity, as well as sources of joy and delight.¹⁵⁹

Fully Human and Made in the Image of God
versus Developing Beings Who Need
Instruction and Guidance

Children are human beings created in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27). Christian tradition has not always recognized this, and language such as "almost human," "beasts," and "on their way to becoming human" has been used within church tradition to describe children.¹⁶⁰ The Scriptures, however, appear to suggest that children do not "grow up into" the image of God once they reach adulthood; rather, "Everything that the image of God is, every child is."¹⁶¹ Consequently, every child, regardless of gender, race, or social status, has dignity in the eyes of God and is "worthy of respect."¹⁶² While children are fully human and made in the image of God, they are also "developing beings" who are "on their way" to adulthood. Thus there is much that children need to learn from the caring adults in their lives.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁶Stonehouse and May, 17.

¹⁵⁷Ellen White, *Child Guidance* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 1982), 491.

¹⁵⁸Bunge, "Historical Perspectives on Children in the Church," 47.

¹⁵⁹Stonehouse and May, 17.

¹⁶⁰Bunge, "Historical Perspectives on Children in the Church," 48-49.

¹⁶¹Fretheim, "God Was With the Boy' (Genesis 21:20)," 4. Fretheim asserts: "This point is made clear in Genesis 5:1-3, the beginning of the genealogy of Adam. After noting that male and female were created in the image of God, the genealogical structure of this chapter makes God the 'father' of Adam. Genesis 5:3 then states: 'When Adam had lived 130 years, he became the father of a son in his likeness, according to his image, and named him Seth.' Human beings are now the ones who create further images of God. In other words: this first generation of children is created in the image of God (even after the fall into sin)" (*ibid.*, emphasis original).

¹⁶²Bunge, "Historical Perspectives on Children in the Church," 49.

¹⁶³*Ibid.*, 48.

The Scriptures are replete with the theme of adult responsibility to guide and nurture children in the way of the Lord.¹⁶⁴ Accordingly, various theologians in Christian history, including Luther, Wesley, and Bushnell, have stressed the importance of instructing and guiding children. The Adventist perspective, influenced by the writings of Ellen White, also has a rich tradition of emphasizing the scriptural mandate to teach and nurture young children.¹⁶⁵ White writes: “How interestedly the Lord Jesus knocks at the door of families where there are little children to be educated and trained! How gently he watches over the mothers’ interest, and how sad He feels to see children neglected.”¹⁶⁶ White also stresses the value of “the early training of children,” stating that “The lessons learned, the habits formed” during early childhood “have more to do with the formation of the character and the direction of the life than have all the instruction and training of the after years.”¹⁶⁷ This appears to be in line with current research, which suggests that discipleship needs to be intentional in the earliest years, as a child’s worldview is basically established by age nine.¹⁶⁸

Having affirmed the importance of guidance and instruction, however, the theological questions that Adventists need to consider are, How does a child become a Christian? How significant is parental influence? Horace Bushnell asserted that parental influence was everything, and that it was the “bad spot[s]” in parental “morality” that could “more or less fatally corrupt their children.”¹⁶⁹ Similarly, Ellen White writes that children’s “salvation depends largely upon the education given them in childhood,”¹⁷⁰ upon the parental “course of action.”¹⁷¹ Without detracting from the need for and importance of Christian nurture, it is imperative to also acknowledge the work of the Holy Spirit in children’s lives. Children need opportunities to meet God through the stories of Scripture and to experience his love through relationships with the people in their lives; however, ultimately, they must also be “born again” (John 3:3). If, as Bushnell suggests, children grow up

¹⁶⁴See the sections on the biblical perspectives on children, above.

¹⁶⁵This includes the second largest denominational formal education system, as well as comprehensive Sabbath School, Pathfinder, and Adventurer curricula (the latter two organizations are scouting clubs for Adventist children).

¹⁶⁶Ellen White, *That I May Know Him* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 2003), 39.

¹⁶⁷White, *Ministry of Healing*, 380.

¹⁶⁸George Barna, *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions: Why Children Should be Your Church’s #1 Priority* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2003), 47.

¹⁶⁹Bushnell, *Christian Nurture*, 224.

¹⁷⁰White, *Child Guidance*, 27.

¹⁷¹*Ibid.*, 33. White’s understanding of Christian nurture appears in many ways, similar to that of her contemporary, Bushnell. These similarities, however, may have different implications in the framework of their overall theologies. Further study is needed to examine these similarities and differences.

Christian and never know themselves as being otherwise, they may not fully recognize their sinfulness and, thus, their need for grace. In contrast, Ellen White recognized the need for children to experience conversion, suggesting that once parents were “satisfied” that their children understood “the meaning of conversion” and were “truly converted” they could be baptized; however, she continued to stress parental responsibility for the nurture of children, even after this point. She wrote: “If you consent to the baptism of your children and then leave them to do as they choose, feeling no special duty to keep their feet in the straight path, you yourselves are responsible if they lose faith and courage and interest in the truth.”¹⁷² This may be indicative of her recognition that a childhood conversion experience was based on an immature understanding of sin, forgiveness, and salvation, and that ongoing nurture was needed, in order for childhood faith to grow and eventually mature into adult faith.¹⁷³

Although parental nurture prepares children to claim faith as their own, it is also important to acknowledge that “the complex influences” on children’s choices are rarely limited to “parental actions” alone.¹⁷⁴ Could it be that the potentially devastating psychological implications of overconfidence in the parental role contributes to the ambivalence parents feel toward their responsibility for the spiritual nurture of their children?¹⁷⁵ Might not a stronger theology of children and parenting empower parents to provide the nurture their children need? However, it is essential to remember that a discussion of adult commitment to provide children with instruction and guidance must be held in tension with the scriptural teaching that all children

¹⁷²Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Churches*, 6:94-95.

¹⁷³For a discussion of childhood conversion and development of mature faith, see Donna J. Habenicht, *How to Help Your Child Really Love Jesus* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1994), 121-126; cf. Stonehouse and May, 91-106.

¹⁷⁴Donald and Brenda Ratcliff, *Childfaith: Experiencing God and Spiritual Growth with Your Children* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010), 174; cf. Ross A. Thompson, M. Ann Easterbrooks, and Laura M. Padilla-Walker, “Social and Emotional Developments in Infancy,” in *Handbook of Psychology*, ed. Richard M. Lerner (New York: Wiley, 2003), 103.

¹⁷⁵Statistics of Adventist parents may differ somewhat; however, surveys of American Christians reveal that although eighty-five percent of parents believe that they are primarily responsible for the spiritual nurture of their children, over two-thirds of them “abdicate that responsibility to the church.” In an average week, fewer than ten percent of church-going Christian parents read the Bible, pray (other than at meal times), or participate in a service activity together with their children. Furthermore, in an average month, only five percent of families experience worship together, other than at church. Barna, 77-78, suggests that one of the reasons for this “apparent contradiction” between what parents say they believe about their responsibility and their practice is their sense of inadequacy. Feeling ill-equipped to fulfill their obligations to their children, parents have convinced themselves that the best solution is for them to “get out of the way” and allow those “who are more skilled in spiritual matters” to provide the guidance and direction their children need.

are fully human and made in the image of God, and thus “are to be respected from the beginning of life.”¹⁷⁶

Models of Faith and Sources of Revelation versus Orphans,
Neighbors, and Strangers in Need of Justice
and Compassion

Jesus’ teaching that adults should learn from children not only how to “enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mark 10:15; Luke 18:17), but also how to be the “greatest in the kingdom of God” (Matt 18:1-5; Mark 9:33-37; Luke 9:46-48), is as radical today as it was in the first century A.D. Adventist scholar Calvin Rock affirms that children are “teaching partners” within the family.¹⁷⁷ However, the perspective that adults can learn from children is an undeveloped paradigm in the Adventist Church. Generally, adults have considered children as needing to learn from them, rather than *vice versa*. Accordingly, Christian educator John Westerhoff suggests that adults have tended to view children in one of two ways: (1) a “production line,” in which children are seen as “valuable raw material,” who, with appropriate instruction and training, can be molded to a “predetermined design” (the emphasis is on what adults do *to* children); and (2) a “greenhouse,” in which children are “valuable seeds,” which, when cared for and nourished, can grow up to reach their potential (the emphasis is on what adults do *for* children).¹⁷⁸ Neither of these metaphors, Westerhoff suggests, is adequate for construing the relationship between children and adults. Instead he challenges adults to think of themselves as “co-pilgrims” on a journey “with” children.¹⁷⁹

What is it that children can teach adults about spirituality? Westerhoff suggests that although the apostle Paul recommends that adults give up being “childish,” Jesus challenges them to become more “childlike.” By spending time *with* children, adults can learn the spiritual values of interdependence, of “being” rather than doing, and of intuitive ways of thinking.¹⁸⁰ Through shared experiences “in nature, the arts, and communal rituals,” adults and children

¹⁷⁶Bunge, “Historical Perspectives on Children in the Church,” 49.

¹⁷⁷Calvin Rock, “Marriage and Family,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 2000), 732. Citing from the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, Rock, *ibid.*, writes: “It is said of Enoch that he walked with God ‘after the birth of Methuselah’ (Gen. 5:21-22). Though this statement does not imply that Enoch had been an ungodly individual before the birth of his son, ‘with the arrival of a son to grace his home he understood through experience the depth of a father’s love and the confidence of a helpless baby. As never before he was drawn to God, his own heavenly Father’” (cf. *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* [Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1953], 1:246).

¹⁷⁸J. Westerhoff, “The Church’s Contemporary Challenge: Assisting Adults to Mature Spiritually *With* Their Children,” in *Nurturing Children’s Spirituality: Christian Perspectives and Best Practices*, ed. H. Catterton Allen (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2008), 356.

¹⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 359.

¹⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 361-363.

can learn from one another and together move toward spiritual maturity.¹⁸¹ Similarly, in their seminal work, *Listening to Children on the Spiritual Journey*, Stonehouse and May challenge adults to take the time to listen to children's "reflections on life," to recognize "the working of God's grace" in their lives, and to "listen and watch for what God may show us through them."¹⁸²

While Jesus challenged adults to see children as models of faith and sources of revelation, the Scriptures also teach that children are orphans, neighbors, and strangers in need of justice and compassion. In a world where annually ten million children die of "easily preventable" causes, and where "children's sex trafficking, sweatshops and soldiering" have burgeoned,¹⁸³ Christians are not only called to care for their own children, to whom their "devotion is limitless," but they are also called to be attentive to the needs of the children "at the edge of [their] passion."¹⁸⁴ In doing so, they "join Jesus in fulfilling his mission" of bringing good news to the poor and freedom for the prisoners (Luke 4:18-19).¹⁸⁵

Conclusion and Recommendations

The purpose of this article was to begin to articulate a Seventh-day Adventist theology of children and childhood and to explore the implication of such a theology for the practice of ministry with children within a broader Adventist theological context. It appears that the Scriptures and Christian tradition offer rich perspectives on children and childhood that have not been fully explored or clearly articulated within the Adventist theological tradition. Additionally, Ellen White's writings do not appear to have been systematically examined for a theology of children and childhood or parenting. As a result, ministry to children and parents has often been considered incidental rather than central to the mission of the church, with the result that many of the intellectual and financial resources of the church have been utilized in adult evangelism, which has appeared to bring more immediate rewards.

This article is, therefore, an incipient contribution to encourage Seventh-day Adventist thought leaders to build a strong and careful theology of children. More in-depth investigation and analysis of the scriptural and historical material dealing with children and childhood, including that of Ellen White, should follow. Intentional development of a strong Adventist theology could have at least two positive implications:

First, it could empower Adventist parents in their task of building strong, lifelong familial bonds with their children. This, in turn, would provide an

¹⁸¹Ibid., 365.

¹⁸²Stonehouse and May, 12-16.

¹⁸³John Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 2.

¹⁸⁴Walter Brueggemann, "Vulnerable Children, Divine Passion, and Human Obligation," in *The Child in the Bible*, ed. Marcia Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 419.

¹⁸⁵Stonehouse and May, 18.

environment conducive to children growing up in the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ. If indeed, as current research suggests, a child's worldview is basically formed by age nine,¹⁸⁶ empowering parents through a strong theology of children takes on added urgency.

Second, a strong theology of childhood could raise the consciousness of the presence and importance of children, as well as the profile of children's ministry in local congregations. It is a well-established fact that nominating committees in many local congregations struggle to find people either willing or able to minister to children. While there are exceptions, those who eventually agree to take up such positions often feel coerced and ill equipped. A greater regard for ministry to and with children would make it easier to identify and train individuals who could fill such ministry positions. A strong theology of children could result in improved development and dissemination of uniquely Adventist parenting and children's faith-formation resources and could ultimately help close the proverbial "back door" through which the Adventist Church loses so many young people.

¹⁸⁶Thus Barna, 47, writes: "The implications of these findings [that basic worldview is established by age nine] is clear: Anyone who wishes to have significant influence on the development of a person's moral and spiritual foundations had better exert that influence while the person is still open-minded and impressionable—in other words, while the person is still young. By waiting until a person is in his or her late adolescent or teenage years, the nature of influential attempts must be significantly different because the spiritual foundation has already been formed and integrated into the person's life. . . . The older a person gets, the more difficult it is for him or her to replace existing spiritual and moral pillars."